

THE RESTORED GOSPEL
AND
APPLIED CHRISTIANITY

Student Essays in Honor of
President David O. McKay

2021



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*

B R I G H A M Y O U N G U N I V E R S I T Y

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN VALUES IN LITERATURE

Edward Cutler, Director

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

Jane Della Brady and Rebecca Walker Clarke, Editors

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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 opinions and statements expressed by the authors contributing to *The Restored Gospel and Applied Christianity: Student Essays in Honor of President David O. McKay* are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Brigham Young University, or the editors.

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: Daniel K. Muhlestein and 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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The central role that family plays in our salvation and exaltation is underscored in the Old Testament by the Abrahamic covenant. This blessing is a familial one, passed from parent to child, containing the promise of a family with members as numerous as “stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore” (Gen. 22.17). This covenant that originated with Abraham is intended to bless not only his descendants, but “all the nations of the earth” (Gen. 22.18) through them. As is the Lord’s pattern, these blessings are predicated on obedience to the Lord’s commandments (Gen. 22.18). As Abraham’s grandson Jacob travels to find a wife and begin his own family, he dreams of a ladder that reaches from Earth into Heaven, with the Lord standing above it (Gen. 28.13). In this dream, God ratifies His covenant with Jacob. When Jacob wakes, he acknowledges these familial blessings in awe, and gives thanks for the sacredness of the experience: “this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen. 28.17). We watch as the relationships with God and others in this family help to sanctify one another.

The winners of this year’s essay contest have all written about moments of sanctification, particularly as experienced through family life. Sanctification, or making our hearts and minds holier and more worthy of eternal life (Moses 6.59–60), can take place when we allow the Atonement of Jesus Christ to purify and strengthen us. Like Jacob, these authors recognize that sanctification often takes place for us within the crucible of family experience. In these sacred moments we might feel the presence of family members who have gone before us, or the opportunities for growth offered by those who are still with us. We understand the role that obedience plays in choosing to have these experiences sanctify rather than defeat us, and ultimately, that we must recognize that all children are God’s children—acknowledging that we are one human family.

Those who have gone before us can help us on our pathway to salvation and exaltation; they can help us become sanctified. Haley Hakala, in “God Calls Me by the Name of My Soul,” expresses this truth: “One night I got the news that one of my *aanas* (great aunts) had passed, and I was devastated. I got down on my knees and prayed, asking who was I meant to become and why I felt so alone. In that moment I felt the hands of my ancestors and my *atiijs* on my shoulders. I felt them standing with me, strengthening me. And in that moment, I realized I had never been alone, that I was important, and that I was immensely loved” (5). Alison Linnell, writes in “Passing Tests” of her experience of her father’s passing. “Some friends and family have asked me if I felt his presence, even asking if I heard him whisper answers to me or helped me stroke the keyboard. I did not experience anything like that. But as I have contemplated this day and how I passed

the test and how much my dad helped me or didn't, I have come to understand whether my dad had been dead or alive at that moment, it did not matter. It was his constant example of pushing through difficult things and his unwavering belief in me that told me I could do it" (22–23). These authors recognize the reality of loved ones helping us on our mortal journey, from beyond the veil.

Our living family members who surround us offer us sanctifying experiences as well. Briana Gee notes in "Numb," that the pushing and pulling and even friction of family is sometimes exactly what is needed to keep us spiritually alive. "Somehow the bigger family saves us because more bodies means more heat and we find ourselves surviving from togetherness. . . . Perhaps that's how numbness is prevented. Not necessarily the daily scripture reading or the unfinished prayers, but the human love and togetherness that keeps us alive" (31). Rachele Larsen, in "Octopus Dreaming" proposes that familial examples can help us, but we must forge our own paths to salvation. She speaks of her mother, "She stood tall with impeccable posture as she drew her bow across the strings. In those moments, she was not just my mother, she was a violinist. A strong, confident, beautiful, proficient violinist" (46). Through watching her mother in these sacred moments, Larsen expresses that as she follows her mother in some ways, she ultimately wants to forge her own path, "as long as I'm following God, then I will find myself immersed in the infinite and eternal. I will find myself in the sublime." This willingness to learn from family members who surround us is also found in Abby Thatcher's "The Painter and the Painted." Thatcher writes of her experience with the intergenerational transmission of values, ideals, and even weaknesses—and her role in recording strengths and weaknesses in order to learn from them. "I am my family's archeologist now, though they don't know I do it. I've gathered the scraps of canvas into the upstairs spare room, piled in the corner next to the stacks of paper—Strathmore white with scrawling, spreading black-inked script—I rescued from the recycling bin. . . . The family history work I do is this: the word, the page, the symbol. Though full of pain, I know God will accept my family's book of life, my grandmother's, my own" (64). Family offers us the chance to become more holy through offering us both pleasure and pain.

If the family is the vehicle to exaltation, the fuel the Lord has always required is obedience. The covenant given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the covenant of eternal life offered to all of us, will be fulfilled "because thou hast obeyed my voice" (Gen. 22.18). Jesse Clayton in "Five Paradoxes" explains that this obedience can take different forms. "Anxiety-riddled dedication was never the price that Christ asked me to pay; He instead hoped that I would bring my mistakes, lusts, and fears to His feet. It is my sincerity, and not my perfectionism, that brings me closer to that almighty salvation in the kingdom of God. . . . I have come to lean on his forgiveness and help as if they were the only two crutches supporting my wobbling, weakening steps on this mortal journey. I have come to

obey out of love” (76). Clayton reminds us that our motivation for our obedience matters, because obedience that is borne of love will keep us bound to God.

Ultimately, we must realize that God is our Father, and that membership in God’s family extends to all of humanity. As President Russell M. Nelson expressed, “Salvation is individual, but exaltation is a family matter.” It quite literally forms, as Jacob noted, “the gate of heaven” (Gen. 28.17). Our exaltation depends on this interconnection and the strength of our love for God and our brothers and sisters. Samuel Shumway in “The Chemistry of Light” writes of a Father in Heaven who encourages us to connect with and support one another. “I imagine God took time to master life before He set out to teach it to us. I picture Him sitting in the sunlit heavens, gazing down at me, my wife, my dad, on this wet blue planet of ours. I imagine Him watching as each of us start our first test of life. Number one of a great many tests, experiments, labs, practicums, trials, and internships we attempt in mortality. I can see Him sympathetically smiling at our efforts” (85). Michael Mortenson in “Clock Cycle Heart” tells of his trust in God, and the peace a knowledge of an omniscient creator brings him, “Thinking about infinity has a way of making small things pale and fade. . . . However, more fundamentally, it is coming to terms with the limitations of my perspective and an acceptance that there are more expansive and over-arching perspectives at play” (97).

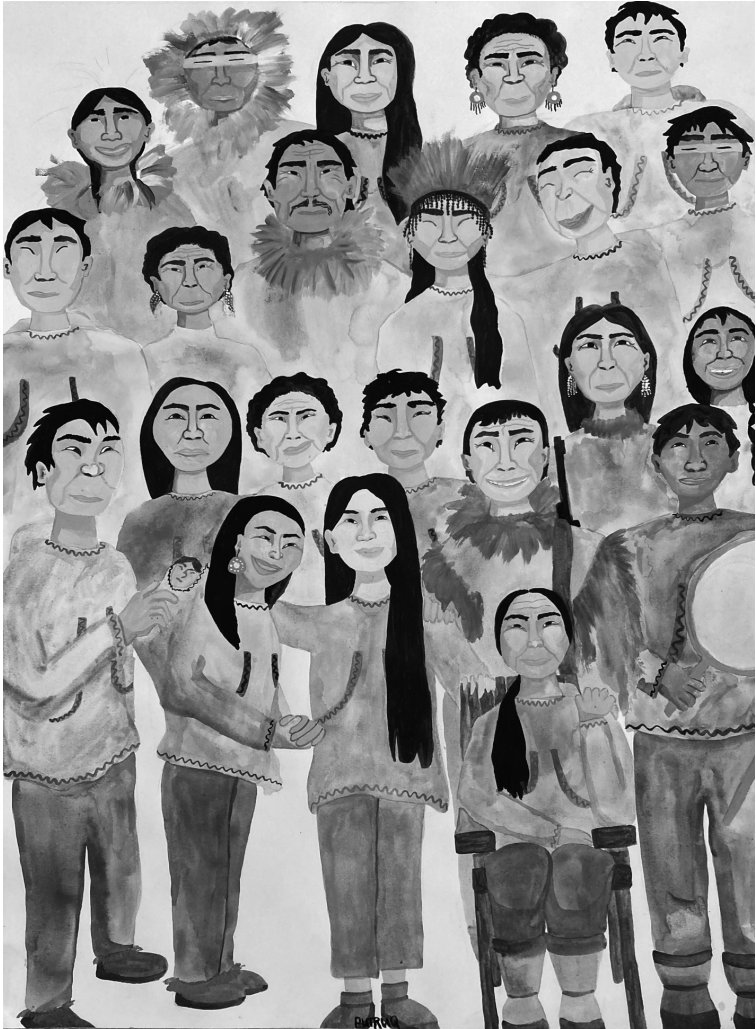
Finally, we must not only love God, but love each other. Rebecca Billings in “And They Love All of Humanity” reminds us, “What can bring the reconciliation, even without the agreement? The God of the universe and His Son ‘love all of humanity’. . . . They love them all. . . . Marvin’s skin is black. . . . Marvin has spent the morning with people with white skin with guns and camouflage at the edge of a beautiful park who are afraid. Marvin has spent the morning telling us the truth. . . . Marvin speaks without fear. He speaks without hate. All of the people in the beautiful park listen to Marvin. All of humanity in the beautiful park in the beautiful town on the beautiful day in the trees” (106–07).

When Jacob wakes from his dream, he says in astonishment, “Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not” (Gen. 28.16). God is with us in our experiences, the momentous as well as the mundane, whether we, like Jacob, initially realize His presence or not. We add our voices to these authors’, who express a gratitude and wonder that God can help sanctify our trials, our relationships, and our familial experiences, and lead us to salvation and exaltation.

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–Jane D. Brady and Rebecca W. Clarke



H A L E Y P U T R U Q H A K A L A

God Calls Me by the Name of My Soul

When I was born, I was given two names. My English name, Haley, was written on my birth certificate and became the name by which most people knew me. My Iñupiaq name, Putruq, was given to me by my *ahna* (grandmother), and became the name that linked me to my ancestors, my Iñupiat people, and our traditional way of life. My Iñupiaq name, Putruq, is called my *atiq*, which literally means “the name of my soul.” In the Iñupiaq naming system, when a baby is born, she is given an ancestral name that has been passed down for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Attached to that name are all the spirits, both male and female ancestors, who held that name before she was born. When that name is given to the baby, those spirits accompany the name. They are there to guide, watch over, protect, impart wisdom, and walk with their *atiiŋ* (namesake) throughout their life. The spirits of that name become intertwined with that baby’s spirit, and the child has many of the same personality traits and characteristics of her *atiiŋs*. Thus, the baby is in fact her ancestors, and the ancestors exist through that child. They exist together.

Growing up, not many people knew I had an Iñupiaq name. This was because the times I did tell people I had another name were often met with mockery and misunderstandings. In one instance, after I confided in a friend my Iñupiaq name, she immediately took to calling me “poop-rock” because that’s what she thought my name sounded like phonetically. In nearly every instance a friend found out I had an Iñupiaq name, they followed up with the question “Well, what does your name *mean*?” These people were asking for a literal meaning. But Iñupiaq names don’t have literal meanings like English or other Alaska Native/American Indian names do. Iñupiaq names hold their meaning through the ones who held the name before you. When I tried to explain that to some of my friends, they either didn’t understand or they lost interest in the conversation and moved on. Eventually I didn’t tell many people my name; I didn’t want my sacred name to be mocked or trampled on.

I grew up eating Native food like *muktuk* (whale) and *puyiktuk* (dried fish/meat). I grew up fishing for salmon and picking berries every summer to make sure our freezers were full for the winter. I was taught by my *ahna* how to clean all that salmon and hang it to dry. And although I wasn’t raised to speak my ancestors’ Native Iñupiaq tongue fluently, I grew up hearing and repeating words and phrases, most of which consisted of me telling my brother *aaqqa* (“you smell stinky”). I grew up singing Iñupiaq songs with my family and hearing stories about animal spirits and the northern light spirits, as well as the stories of my ancestors’ survival. I grew up being taught to respect the land and the animal spirits, especially the animals who gave their lives to feed me and my family. These were the things that formed my Alaska Native identity.

I grew up in a very good way, but I also grew up having to “prove” my Nativeness: I applied to be a member of the village my family is originally from and they first had to obtain blood quantum records; I applied to have shares transferred from my

ahna to me so I could be a shareholder of a Native corporation; friends found out I was Native and asked me what I do that's Native. I often felt I had to "authenticate" my identity. I didn't see any other person of color have to do these things to prove who they were.

I have found that I am generally asked one of four questions once a person finds out I am Iñupiaq: 1) "So you get free health-care, right?" 2) "I get you're Native but *how much Native are you?*" 3) "Ugh, you eat raw whale, that's disgusting. Why do you eat that?" And here at BYU I frequently get asked/told: 4) "Oh my gosh, you're Alaska Native? Did you know that Alaska Natives have the highest rates of suicide and addiction in the U.S. Isn't that so sad?" I was told by peers and adults not to grow up like my "drunk and lazy" Native brothers and sisters I saw on the streets. People apologized to me for the trials of my people, "Oh, I am so sorry the Alaska Natives struggle with addiction . . . that must be so hard." And when people find out my goal is to go back and work with Alaska Natives in the social work sector they respond, "How brave of you! They really need that kind of help." Growing up, I didn't have a response to these kinds of comments. Alcoholism was something that ran in my family, and I grew up knowing I had family members who had lived and died on the street. I always felt uncomfortable responding to people who were pointing out things my family and community struggled with. I didn't understand why I was immersed in a society that seemed to care less about my sacred culture than precisely how many drops of Native blood flowed through my veins. I struggled to understand what being an Alaska Native meant.

Traditionally, among pre-colonial Alaska Natives, identity was shaped through subsistence, Native-land connection, spirit-Native relationships, culture, traditions, and religion (Fast 6). This identity was negotiated in a dangerous world where a person's first mistake was often their last. Climate, large predators, geography, and the spiritual world reigned in the pre-contact

era for Alaska Natives. Unlike today, identity was never questioned. Then, in the late 1800s as the Iñupiat encountered outsiders, identity became politically charged, racism emerged, and Alaska Natives were met with blood quantum requirements to achieve certain rights that they had already had for thousands of years. And while unprecedented acts like the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 were seen as “revolutionary” in the way the government enacted federal Indian law, many Natives now feel that the dilution of shares and blood quantum requirements are another attempt to dilute Nativeness and force Alaska Natives to “assimilate into mainstream population” (Fast 4). Currently, Alaska Natives still configure their identity based on their knowledge of the language, how they practice traditional and cultural customs, and on their relationship with the land as well as their relationship with other Alaska Natives. And for a while, I configured my identity based on these things as well; I don’t speak the language fluently, there were customs I didn’t grow up practicing, and I didn’t grow up in the village. Was I less Native because of these things? For a while, I thought so. And it tore me apart inside.

Then during my beginning years at college, I had something akin to a cultural reawakening happen within me. Funnily enough, my cultural reawakening happened in Provo, Utah, where I have felt the most culturally alone. I came to Provo to attend college and had no idea of the culture shock that awaited me. Within my first few years at college, I tried to connect with BYU’s Multicultural Student Services and American Indian programs. I quickly learned that American Indians and Alaska Natives have many similarities, for instance our love of fry bread, having traditional aunties who carry the gossip of the community, and also our struggle with intergenerational trauma. I wanted to be part of the Native student body and be included in American Indian events and be surrounded by people who struggled with many of the same questions I did. And while I

found kinship among BYU's small but great American Indian student body, I struggled with fitting in that box of being American Indian, until I realized that by doing so I wasn't being true to me and my unique cultural identity. Because I am not American Indian. I am Iñupiaq, Alaska Native. So I stopped trying to fit into a mold that wasn't made for me in the first place. I felt culturally and spiritually alone as I realized that I might be the only Iñupiaq on campus, maybe in the whole state of Utah.

One night I got the news that one of my *aanas* (great aunts) had passed, and I was devastated. I got down on my knees and prayed, asking who was I meant to become and why I felt so alone. In that moment I felt the hands of my ancestors and my *atiins* on my shoulders. I felt them standing with me, strengthening me. And in that moment, I realized I had never been alone, that I was important, and that I was immensely loved. Loved because I had ancestors who brought me to this point, loved because I had a family who prayed for me from all the way in Alaska, loved because I knew that the Great One, God, knew me. In that moment, God called me by the name of my soul, and I realized He had never left me. He had never abandoned my soul, *Putruq*, through its thousands of years of life. And He never will, for the thousands of years to come.

I realized that despite the many factors that go into how an Alaska Native views herself, there is an indisputable fact of Alaska Native identity. We Natives cannot leave or "walk out" of our Native identity. We just can't; it is physically and spiritually impossible. Being Alaska Native is not something bestowed by an institution. It is innate. And it is the same with knowing that I am a daughter of God; I cannot ever leave or "walk out" of being a child of God. And when I realized that, there began my journey of healing. I began to take strength and pride in my Iñupiaq name and culture, and I now celebrate it. I began the lifelong pursuit of learning my ancestral language. I began the

process of returning to my identity, an Iñupiaq daughter of God. It's a process I will continue for the rest of my life.

Through this experience and many more since this one, I have come to feel God's love towards the Iñupiat people. Just as He has never left me, I know He has never left the Iñupiat. In His Word it says, "God is mindful of every people, whatsoever land they may be in; yea, he numbereth his people, and his bowels of mercy are over all the earth. Now this is my joy" (Alma 26.37). It is clear in the scriptures that the Lord loves all His people, and even though there is no detailed account in the Book of Mormon of His interaction with the Iñupiat, He clearly visited and taught and succored them.

We Iñupiat have oral stories that date earlier than AD 1,000, and many of those stories have striking parallels to biblical stories. In *The Epic of Qayaq: The Longest Story Ever Told by My People* (Oman), there is an account of a great sea monster that was terrorizing the village and Qayaq was called by his brother to go to the village and get rid of the sea monster. This account has many parallels to the story of Jonah and the Whale in the Bible. In another oral history with Qayaq, there came a flood so big it wiped out many villages, forcing the survivors to live on the tops of mountains to avoid the whirlpools that had surged up from the sea. The survivors called upon their animal spirit-helpers and a raven came and pulled back the sky to allow for there to be room for the flood to recede. This story of the Big Flood has connections to the story of Noah's ark. In the Old Testament version, Noah sends out a raven to find land, but the raven never returns (Gen. 8). That raven is the one that appeared to the Iñupiat people, saving them from the floodwaters.

The Iñupiat have always been spiritual. Spirituality has always been a part of our identity. And as a Christian Iñupiaq, I have come to realize that my Native spirituality does not contradict my belief in God. There is no "one or the other" for me; there is no "which side of the line do you walk on?"

Because I am Iñupiaq and I am a daughter of God. No matter what I am doing; no matter where I am. My relationship with the sacred land is enhanced and intertwined with my belief that God created all land and all the creatures that walk upon it and swim within it and fly above it. And as I have read through and listened to Iñupiat and other Alaska Native narratives alongside my Book of Mormon and Bible, I've realized how much God loves and is aware of the Iñupiat people.

Understanding my Alaska Native identity has been transformative. And understanding contemporary Alaska Native identity will help Alaska Natives continue to heal and take strength in reclaiming their heritage amid the political wars and racial misunderstandings of today. It's not an easy place to be, but then again, our ancestors never had it easy to begin with.

We Alaska Natives are born with the sinews of our culture embedded in our very being. I believe that as my Iñupiaq people, as with all Alaska Natives, return to our identity and cultural heritage, then we will be able to gather in strength as a community.

For those Alaska Natives who haven't yet taken strength in their identity, may they return to how they are made and gather strength.

For those Alaska Natives who have already begun the process of constructing their Native identity, whether they do it alone or with a community, may they continue to find peace and power from who they are and the ones who came before them.

For those Alaska Natives who have already constructed their Native identity and find strength in it, may they continue to be guides and culture bearers and bring wisdom and tradition to their community and posterity.

May Alaska Native people everywhere take strength and pride in their Native identity. Just as our ancestors thought of us 10,000 years ago, may Alaska Natives now look forward to the next 10,000 years so we can continue to gather in power with our communities and with our Creator.

Now, as a proud Alaska Native who has reawakened to my identity and to my culture, I suggest to the people who are seeking to understand indigenous culture to try appreciating it. Appreciate our culture, our resilience, our traditional ways of life, our connection to our ancestors. I truly believe that when we *piviuttak* (show appreciation) toward each other we will be able to form stronger ties that will not *sirruḡaq* (tear from pressure).

Now, as a proud Alaska Native, as I have seen my indigenous identity evolve and strengthen, when people ask me who I am, I tell them my name.

And if they have time, I tell them a really neat story.

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ALISON LINNELL

Passing Tests

Enigma: someone or something that's puzzling, mysterious, or difficult to make sense of

For the last few months of my dad's life, I often sat at my parents' kitchen table with my books open, studying vocabulary words and math formulas, prepping for the graduate school entrance exam. Dad sat just a few feet away from me in the living room in his maroon recliner in front of their fireplace. His cancer had progressed to the point that we did not leave him alone, so if my mom needed to go to the store or to an appointment, my siblings and I took turns being with him. As I studied, Dad would frequently ask, "What day are you taking the test?" Our conversations about my test were always the same.

"December thirtieth," I would reply.

"You are going to take it no matter what. Right?"

"Yes, Dad."

"You promise?" He would say this with a sense of urgency, as if he knew I might be conflicted about where I needed to be. As if he might be in the hospital again.

"I promise."

“No matter what happens, you promise you’ll take the test.”

“Yes, Dad, I promise no matter what happens,” I sometimes said too sternly.

“Okay. That’s what I want you to do.”

At the time, I did not understand why he was so insistent. Because of the timeline we had been given by his doctors, I assumed we would have him through at least the end of January, and besides, Dad was a fighter. I could never imagine him dying.

But now, as I write this, I wonder if he knew. If he knew when he was going to die. And knew it would be December 30.

I do not know if we can know when we will die—the exact day, the exact time. My dad certainly understood the pain he was experiencing, had heard the doctors’ timelines, and could make assumptions, like I did. Yet, his persistence in making sure I knew he wanted me to take the test on that day makes me believe, even if he did not fully understand at the time, that somehow he did know.

compunction: anxiety arising from awareness of guilt

I spent the last few years of my dad’s life in school, working on my undergraduate degree. I returned to school in my late forties, and I struggled to balance my homework and my family’s needs. Most often, I let homework take priority. During my last semester of undergraduate work, I took five classes, and often times, when I felt overwhelmed, several weeks would pass where I wouldn’t stop by or even call to check on my dad.

When I did call, he always started the conversation by asking, “How is school going?”

“It’s busy. Sorry I haven’t been by lately. How are you doing?”

“Get your homework done,” he would say. And then add, “You know, I can’t live forever. I want to see you walk.”

I felt conflicted about walking at my graduation. I was fifty-four. I knew it was a big achievement to go back to school after being out of school for so long. During those years I raised five

kids, cleaned up messes, and rarely had time to crack a book. Going back to school had been my goal for a long time, but it was challenging. I felt stupid, at times, competing against such young, bright students, and always a little out of place, and graduation just seemed like another reminder of the regret I felt for not doing it when I was younger.

I wonder if Dad felt some regret about it too. Years ago, while one of his friends was at our house chatting at our kitchen table, I came home from high school, with a load of books, and my dad began bragging about how smart I was. This friend would eventually offer me a job after high school. But if that job did not keep me from college, it probably would have been another. I didn't know then how much I needed the experiences—taking risks, achieving goals, doing hard things—college would give me. I'm wondering if my dad knew.

After he passed, my mom told me about how my dad had wanted to start his own printing business, but she talked him out of it. She worried about the risk. When she was a child her own father had tried to do the same thing and had lost everything. My mom said my dad did not talk about his regrets. He seemed to accept life as it came. But she believed he did regret it. Perhaps he did not want me to experience the *what if* that possibly occupied his thoughts toward the end of his life.

munificent: extremely liberal in giving; very generous

I decided to walk at my graduation, mostly for my dad, but I'm grateful I did. As I proceeded into the arena, even though I had little chance of locating them, I looked around to see my family. My husband, my children, and my parents were there to cheer for me. I knew my dad would be clapping louder than anyone, and I wished I could have been by him to see the smile on his face as I walked across the stage to receive my diploma. After the ceremony, when I met up with my family, my dad offered his typical "I'm so proud of you" high five, and

then pulled me in for a hug and vigorously patted my back. We went to breakfast afterwards, and of course, he told anyone who would listen—the server, the hostess, the other families in the lobby—about how his fifty-four-year-old daughter just graduated from BYU.

Sitting on a shelf in my home office, I have a picture of him and me taken after the ceremony. I'm in my blue cap and gown. He's got one arm around me and the other holding a cane. He looks older and frailer than I remember him being that day. I believe it is the last picture we took of the two of us.

tacit: understood without being openly expressed; implied

My acceptance letter to the creative writing graduate program at BYU came two months after Dad died. When I opened it, the first thing I felt was relief. Everyone—my husband, my kids, my mom—had expressed confidence in my getting in, and I didn't know how I would tell them otherwise. The next emotion was sadness. I called my mom to tell her, and she said, "I wish your dad was here. He would be so proud of you." I felt the same.

Yet, even without him being with us, I knew he was proud.

sanguine: marked by eager hopefulness: confidently optimistic

On his eighty-first birthday, October 30, two months exactly before his death, my dad was in the hospital. As I entered his room, I held up a birthday hat and decorations and playfully asked, "Whose special day is it?" Perhaps he had spent other birthdays in the hospital, I don't recall. My dad often joked he'd been a patient in every wing of the hospital, except the maternity ward. My dad had type 1 diabetes for as long as I remember and many complications because of it. He was in the hospital this time for an infection in the sores on his feet. Several years back, he'd had open heart surgery and many follow-up procedures; now he had problems with his hands and struggled to

hold things, his right foot no longer had any feeling, and because of his cancer, he used a bag to collect his urine.

“How’s the studying going?” he asked as I put the hat on his head. Then he insisted, “You don’t need to stay too long. Get your application done.” It was typical of him to be concerned about others no matter what he was dealing with.

I was always torn between spending time with him and working on my application for graduate school. I had purposely taken a year off from school to be with him, and help with the doctors’ appointments, and do all the things I had not done for him while getting my undergraduate degree. But the application process was more involved than I had anticipated, and no matter what I was doing, I felt like I was constantly running vocabulary words through my head so I could get an acceptable score on the GRE. If I did not get into the program on the first try, I had decided I would focus on other things, and would not apply again, so I felt an added pressure to perform well. I do not know if he knew something I did not, or if it was simply his optimism and enthusiasm that were the force behind his convictions.

“I have time. Besides it will do me good to take a break from studying,” I told him.

“If you can stay a while, do you mind if I run home and shower?” my mom asked.

“Of course. I need to make sure the birthday boy behaves himself,” I joked. My dad not only knew how to behave in a hospital, but did it in a way that showed both grace and humor.

“You did that gentler than last time,” he would grin and say to the phlebotomist as they drew his blood. Or to the orderly, he’d say, “Thanks for cleaning up my mess in the bathroom. Don’t blame my mother. She did teach me better.” On more than one occasion, when a nurse would ask if he’d swallowed his pills, he’d pop his head up, open his mouth, and stick out

his wiggling tongue to show the pills had been swallowed. He'd laugh as the nurse said, "Oh, Ron! You startled me."

I knew this would be my dad's last birthday, even if I was struggling to accept it. I questioned the other birthday celebrations I had cut short with him because I was writing a paper or working on a project, worrying too much about my GPA.

When I was alone in the room with Dad, we chatted about how he felt, how Mom was doing, what he planned to do when he got out of the hospital, and my kids. He always asked about each child by name.

"You know, Dad, if someone had told us thirty years ago that you would be alive and in the hospital on your eighty-first birthday, we would not have believed it." I didn't need to remind him of all of his health issues, or the many times we wondered when we told him goodbye before a surgery if it would be our last goodbye.

"I know, Alison, but I'm still not ready to die." In his old age, my dad rarely said anything to me with any hint of harshness in his voice. But for some reason, I remember his voice taking on a different tone in that reply. I don't know if it did, or if I only remember it that way. I believe I was trying to assure both of us that we had had more time with him than expected, but now, I wish I would have taken the chance to tell him how much I was going to miss him and that I would have been okay crying about it together.

ameliorate: to make or become better, more bearable, or more satisfactory; improve

He was still in the hospital on Halloween, the day after his birthday. "I've got your Halloween costume," I told him. I brought bunny ears and a homemade Energizer Bunny tag for him. No matter what illness or surgery he had, he always seemed to bounce back, and keep going, and going, and going, so I couldn't resist dressing him up as such.

“Bring it here, and put it on,” he laughed.

I pinned the Energizer Bunny tag on his hospital gown, and placed the bunny ears on his head. All day, as each nurse or assistant would enter his room, he would puff his chest out, grin, and say, “Look at my costume my daughter brought me.” And then he would laugh his contagious laugh.

When he got out of the hospital, the bunny ears and tag were put on their fireplace mantel. I’m not sure if Mom put them there, or if Dad insisted they be where he could see them, willing him, reminding him he could bounce back.

inexorable: not to be persuaded, moved, or stopped: relentless

After he was discharged from the hospital, my dad required five more doses of antibiotic IV treatment, and so we took him back to the hospital as an outpatient on those five days. “Do you want your cane, the walker, or a wheelchair?” I asked him as I pulled into a parking stall.

“I can do the cane.”

As we entered the hospital door, it became clear he needed more than the cane, but he insisted he could make it. Several times, I braced myself to catch him, but eventually, cautiously, he did make it. When I got him situated in his chair, ready for the infusion, he suggested I go get the walker. I wanted to get a wheelchair, but knew he wouldn’t have it.

When I came back, he was asleep in the chair, the IV in his arm, with several warm blankets on his lap. I sat in the chair next to him, pulled out my phone, and opened the app to study some more vocabulary words. Words such as *factious* (produced by, or characterized by internal dissension) and *fractious* (irritable and is likely to cause disruption) or *malapropism* (the confusion of a word with another word that sounds similar). Words I would likely forget after the test. Yet, many of the words I studied during those months described the feelings I had both in the moments with my dad and now as I grapple with the choices I made in those moments.

I now wish I had asked him more questions during our time together. Questions I didn't even know I had until he was gone. *I heard that when you were a teenager, you snuck into the hotel Willie Mays was staying at and talked with him. Did meeting your idol live up to your expectations? I heard your high school English teacher told you she would pass you if you didn't come to class anymore and disturb her teaching methods. Do you wish you would have applied yourself in school? I didn't know you wanted to start your own printing business, had the loan, and then Mom wouldn't let you do it. Do you regret that? Mom does. What can I say to her, to reassure her after you're gone?*

As I reflect on the stories my dad's friends and family told me after he passed, I have wondered why some of the best stories seem to be shared after a loved one dies. Maybe we simply treasure those stories more, holding on tighter to any part of them after they are gone.

When my dad's treatment was done and he woke up, he asked, "Did you get some studying done?"

"Yes, Dad, I did."

"Good. Good. That's good."

deference: respect and esteem due to a superior or an elder

On a day in mid-November, my parents and I sat crammed inside the small patient room for my dad's monthly exam. When the doctor entered the room, he asked, "How's my favorite patient doing?"

I believed his greeting. My dad was a favorite patient of most of his doctors. I don't recall my dad answering him. Instead of replying about himself, he said, "See my daughter right there!" pointing at me, beaming. I rolled my eyes because I knew what was coming next. "She's fifty-four and just graduated from BYU." I doubt Dr. Maxwell, with his twelve years of schooling and his successful practice was impressed by my four-year degree. But lately, my dad did this at every doctor's appointment, or with his

neighbors, or his physical therapist, whomever he introduced me to. I often felt embarrassed by this, and yet completely adored by my dad at the same time.

After reviewing my dad's records, Dr. Maxwell said, "Ron, I want to talk with you about hospice care." With those words, I watched my dad glance at my mom. His eyes conveyed he wasn't ready to go, but knew he would be leaving her soon.

"How long do you think I have?" Dad asked, wanting it straight. I don't know what answer I expected. I did not want any answer. I did not want an end date.

"It's hard to say, but hospice can prolong life and help you be more comfortable." Dr. Maxwell shuffled some papers. "I'd say three months."

We did not do hospice then. Dad saw it as giving up.

indomitable: that cannot be subdued or overcome, as persons, will, or courage; unconquerable

The week before Christmas we had a family party at my brother's house. Months before the party, my mom and dad made arrangements for Santa to come. My dad had not left his house for at least a week. The sores on his feet would not heal and walking was almost impossible for him, but he insisted on going. He wanted to see his great-grandchildren with Santa. As my nephews carried him into the house, my dad yelled, "Watch the feet! Watch the feet!"

I had seen those feet and the deep sores that would not heal. Most of the time, if I was present when a nurse or my mom removed the bandages from his feet to clean the wounds, I would look the other way.

The week before the Santa party I asked Dad what kept him going through all the pain. He said he made goals to be with his family for the Santa party, for Christmas Eve, for New Year's Day, for my mom's birthday (March 18) and their anniversary (March 25). I hoped he would make it to my mom's

birthday, but I was beginning to believe it would not happen. However, I was certain he would make it to the new year.

presage: a warning or omen of bad things to come

It was three days before his death when he said, “If I can’t brush my teeth I’m done,” as he pushed my hands off the toothbrush. He kept hitting his chin and getting the toothpaste on his face, and I was trying to steady the toothbrush and guide it into his mouth. I didn’t understand why holding his toothbrush was a problem. We had been helping him walk, getting him into and out of bed, feeding him pudding, and holding his cup as he would drink.

Just that week, I was in the bathroom with him, unsure how much to help and how much dignity to leave him, and he sensed my uneasiness and whispered, “I’m sorry, Alison.” I thought that might be his giving up moment. But it wasn’t.

As I watched him lose his independence, I often wondered what my breaking point would be when I was nearing my death and what dignity I would be willing to give up to be with my family. When does the pain one is experiencing and the discomfort of your child taking care of you in the bathroom outweigh the desire to celebrate another birthday or an anniversary? I know my dad did not want to die. I know that. But I believe his body could not fight any longer.

He stopped eating that day.

vacillate: to waver in mind or opinion

The day before my dad died was a Sunday, and I spent most of the day at my parents’ house. Family, friends, and neighbors shuffled in and out of the house all day. I fielded the “Are you still taking the test tomorrow?” question too many times. I hated that this became the topic of conversation. Yet, I wonder if it was easier for people to talk about that, with me in the kitchen, than watch my dad dying in the next room.

I did consider taking the test another day. But my application was due January 15. I didn't have much time left, and it took two weeks to get the score back. I recalled my grandma living a week after she stopped eating, so I worried I would postpone it and wish I had not.

I don't remember if my dad was still talking that day. I don't think he was. It must have been the previous day he asked if I was ready for my test.

As I left my parents' home that night, my mom reassured me, "Go home. Get some sleep. You go take the test tomorrow. You know that is where your dad wants you to be. It is where I want you to be."

I do not believe anyone in my family feels like I was in the wrong place when my dad died. But I do. And I wonder if I will always feel some regret about it.

inculcate: to fix beliefs or ideas in someone's mind, especially by repeating them often

When I got up the morning of the test, I knew I could not call my parents and be told my dad passed during the night, or worse, if I heard his death rattle in the background, I knew I would need to go be with him. I was just praying he'd hang on until the test was done.

Somehow, I drove to the testing center, checked in, and sat in front of the assigned computer. When the first essay prompt came up, my mind felt numb; I felt overwhelmed, unsure, and like I was in the wrong place, and I didn't know how I could hold it together for a four-hour test, let alone get a score adequate enough to put on my application.

The test consisted of two essays, two math sections, two English sections, and an additional experimental section. And that experimental section could be either English or math, but it didn't count against one's grade. However, I would not know which of the three sections did not count, so I had to assume

every section mattered. When I finished two math and two English sections, I prayed and prayed the final section would be a math. If it was, I knew I could hurry through it. I was an English major; a bad math score would not likely hurt my chances. If my dad was with God at that moment and had any influence with Him, I am grateful he made that happen.

I finished that last math section early, not rechecking any answers. I needed to get out of there, get to my parents' home. I knew the average test scores of those accepted to the program. I had set a passing mark for myself from those averages. As I clicked submit, I hoped my preliminary scores would be close to those scores. They were. I hoped Dad would still be alive, to tell him I had passed.

As I raced out of the testing center, I saw my husband's car parked next to mine, and I knew. I knew my dad was dead. I was mad. Sometimes, when I think about it, I still am.

My husband told me my dad had passed before I left for the test, but no one wanted to tell me. My dad wanted me to take the test that day, and they were honoring his wishes.

When I arrived at my parents' home, the house was filled with family. As I walked toward my mom, several people asked how I did on the test. I vaguely remember muttering, "I passed." When I hugged my mom, all I could say is "I'm so sorry."

They had kept his body there, in his bed, for me. For me, to cry with them, to hold his hand. I sat for a long time, talking with him, telling him how much I would miss him. Thanking him for how he had loved me, had believed in me.

As I reflect on that day, I still am uncertain how I took the test or achieved the score I did. Yes, I studied and prepared for months, but I struggled to focus, and I felt like my mind was blank, and my thoughts kept turning to my dad. Some family members have suggested my dad was with me. I want to believe that. But I'm not sure. I have wondered if spirits can help their loved ones with things like this. Some friends and family

have asked me if I felt his presence, even asking if I heard him whisper answers to me or helped me stroke the keyboard. I did not experience anything like that. But as I have contemplated this day and how I passed the test and how much my dad helped me or didn't, I have come to understand whether my dad had been dead or alive at that moment, it did not matter. It was his constant example of pushing through difficult things and his unwavering belief in me that told me I could do it.

malleable: capable of being extended or shaped

During the seven months after my dad passed until graduate school began, I checked on my mom daily either stopping by or calling her if I didn't visit in person. Once school started, my mom told me she was fine, that I didn't need to worry about her. I did not know if I would once again let school take priority.

During my second week, as I walked to my car after classes, I called to ask my mom if I could bring her lunch on my way home. She conveyed the same sentiment Dad had often expressed during my undergraduate work when she asked, "Don't you have schoolwork to do?" *I did*. "Are you sure you have the time?" *I didn't*.

Even by the second week, I felt overwhelmed. Not only was I taking four graduate courses, but I was also teaching a freshman writing class. I had hours of reading to do, lesson prep, grading, papers to write, and even though I was exhausted, I wasn't sleeping, waking in the middle of the night, panicking I wouldn't be able to manage it all, that I wouldn't be able to find any balance.

I showed up at her house an hour later with her favorite soup from Village Baker and listened to her talk about how much she missed my dad.

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B R I A N N A G E E

Numb

I hate cold feet. And hands. And a chin that feels detached from your face. And the way hot water stings when you wash your hands after playing in the snow. But I love snowmen. And I love rolling around in big piles of marshmallow fluff—that clings to your clothes and changes the texture of your hair. I love snowball fights and building forts and making snow cream. But those things I love only bring me joy for a limited moment. As soon as my feet get cold, I think about running inside. As soon as my hands get cold, I'm done.

It's kind of weird how your body does that. Goes numb. I heard that when you lose feeling it means blood isn't circulating to that part of your body. It's what your body does to keep more important parts of your body warm. Body parts that matter. Like your lungs and stomach. I don't know much about it. I'm not that scientific. What I do know is that nothing is scarier than when you should feel something and then you realize you can't.

I should've felt something when Sister Oliva told me that she couldn't go to church on Sunday because their fish is their only income and they didn't have enough money to make ends meet. Or when I walked into her home and saw her kids on

their phones and her husband passed out on the floor while she scrubbed, by hand, all their laundry in the bathroom. I should've felt something when Jomela asked me for money because she only had enough to get to church but not enough to get home. I should've cried. I should've had some sort of moving compassion in my heart. I was supposed to pray for them and express some sort of sadness. But week after week, and month after month, and each Sunday that I walked into their home and saw them not dressed and ready for church with dripping laundry on the line, which meant that they had nothing to wear that day, I felt nothing. Not anger. Not frustration. Not love. Not any sort of sympathy. Simply nothing. I would look at them and say, "Next time na lang," and walk through the mudded pathway, clinging to the bamboo siding, slipping all the way to the next house on the list. Numb to it all.

I wasn't always numb. I was a good missionary, I promise. There are some experiences that I felt to my core. Feelings that electrocuted me and awakened every part of my soul. Healing Nanay Chavez on Christmas Day was one of those. She was sick, something to do with her heart. She let us in but just because we said we would only sing carols. We grabbed a hymn-book covered in mildew and with pages that had thickened from the wet air and I rubbed her back as we belted out into song. I'm not much of a singer, but the smile on her face as we would sing each line stirred me. Tears streamed my cheeks. I was spewing pieces of my heart into that cement shack of a home, allowing the coconuts above the palm-leaved roof to catch each note. And then whatever I was feeling, this stirring in my soul transferred to Nanay and before we knew it, she was hugging us and saying, "You healed me! I'm better!" Nothing was numb. Everyone in that room with dusty floors and framed black and white pictures was alive. Until they weren't.

I can never trace back to the exact moment when my hands begin to lose all feeling when I am playing in the snow.

It's not until they are already frostbitten that I notice. Perhaps that's where I am now with my testimony. Just beginning to recognize that I'm numb without being able to pinpoint when I lost all feeling. I read six pages from that little blue book every day trying to finish before next conference. I keep three different colored highlighters in hand, marking promises and things I just like. But nothing. No matter what I do, I don't feel it. I pray morning and night, but nothing. I'm on my knees thinking about my day and my blessings and before I know it, I'm asleep without an "amen." I wake back up and say sorry around 1:00 a.m. and close my prayer and go back to sleep. Perhaps this is what Nephi meant when he told his brothers they were "past feeling" (1 Ne. 17.45). If you asked me what was in those six pages I read last night I couldn't tell you. I also couldn't tell you what I prayed for before I opened my fast last Sunday. Or when I took that bread. Nope, nothing.

There are ways to combat frostbite. My mom would bundle me up before I went out into the snow: usually with a scarf that wrapped around my ears, two pairs of pants, and double gloved. Sometimes even three pairs of socks. She would kiss my cheek and say, "It's fun until you're cold." Then I would wobble out the door imitating those penguins at the zoo and roll around in the snow with a red nose, but warm hands. Eventually, though, I had to go inside.

What prevents a frosted soul? Or is it inevitable, like my pink nose on a cold day? I can journal and pray and do everything right but still somehow it always comes. I have started to worry that maybe the feelings will never come back. I worry because the feelings sometimes come when I don't want them, when the world is crashing down and the pain of it all is too much and I can't get the feelings to stop. And before I know it, I'm in my dorm room crying and pleading for it all to go away. I can't seem to control when the feelings come back or when they leave; and I can't seem to control the numbness either.

Maybe that's okay. Maybe I'm not meant to control the numb. Maybe the trial is whether I will push through it and still live even when I don't feel alive.

If you stay in the cold too long and ignore frostbite you'll die. Everybody knows that. You'll start to freeze and the next thing you know your cause of death is hypothermia and people are at your funeral are crying and saying what a great person you are but deep down they are all wondering why you were ever stupid enough not to go inside when you knew you were freezing. Why not get handwarmers? Why not sit by the fire for a bit then go back out? Why not accept the warmth offered to you? And then they think maybe hypothermia wasn't the cause of death. Maybe it was suicide. Because you knew how much it would hurt to put your hands under that hot water and you hate the feeling of moving a leg that has just fallen asleep. You preferred to stay numb. You wanted to avoid the pain that would make you better.

That's why my grandpa stopped going to church. The thought of his ex-wife in the pew next to him with the guy she remarried was too much for him. Thirty-five years of marriage ended and now she teaches Primary to his grandchildren while he sits at home watching HGTV and telling stories about how he is going to build another cabin up in the woods. He talks about how free he is but when I walk up to his house the first week in April he doesn't know that I can see that his channel is on BYUTV and he is listening to the Prophet who sent him an excommunication letter a few years ago. And he mumbles and sounds like a Weed Eater when you talk to him about coming back to church, so you just stop bringing it up and the missionaries stop helping him on the farm. He's just too afraid to defrost.

"If you're ever cold in the woods put your hands in your armpits." That's what Tracy told us at Young Women Camp. Something about how they are the warmest part of your body.

They can also be stinky and never seem to get tan when I'm at the beach. I guess you could say they never see the light. It's interesting to me that you're supposed to put your hands in the darkest place in order to make your hands feel something. Maybe that's why God had that breakup trigger my depression. It took me to a dark place for three months so I had to get therapy and call my mom three times a day to get through the loneliness. The FaceTime screen that displayed her smile, a face tattooed by wrinkles from the rising of her cheeks, beat against my heart. Each time she answered, her words, and that smile, rammed into a part of me that had callused over. Not just from being dumped by the boy that kept my ring size on his grocery list, but callused by all the abrasions that had built up over time. Until finally all the calling, all the beating, caused the wall to fall. It dissolved into my bloodstream, leaving my heart exposed. Exposed to love. Exposed to feeling. Vulnerable. And I found myself telling my therapist, "You healed me! I'm better!" Like singing carols to Nanay Chavez on a muggy night in December, that dark place brought feeling. And before I knew it I was thanking Him it didn't work out with the boy that He told me was the one. He shoved my hands right into my armpits and somehow saved my life. And I think that's why I still kept all ten of my fingers after that experience. Actually, I might be more whole now than I was before it.

When an ice storm hits my home town my family members all sleep in one bed. We make our bodies our personal heaters and never does human warmth feel so nice. Somehow the bigger family saves us because more bodies mean more heat and we find ourselves surviving from togetherness. The embraces we once denied are the ones that we cling to when the snow creeps in.

Perhaps that's how numbness is prevented. Maybe it's not necessarily the daily scripture reading or the unfinished prayers, but the human love and togetherness that keeps us alive. My

feet never go cold when they are tucked under my mother's bum at night. And my fingers never lose feeling when they are intertwined with my sister's. And my chin stays warm when it is tucked against my little brother's head and I give him kisses and he wraps his arms around me and says that he has a secret and then tells me I'm his favorite. And when my dad's arm stretches across all of us at once, squeezes us tighter together, then there is no room for the cold. Maybe that's the solution. So much love every day, all the time, snuggles through phone calls and sealed promises, with heated discussions crafted into warm compromises.

My dad used to get mad at us for not taking spiritual things seriously. We would get the giggles at church and he would give us this look of embarrassment and disappointment from the stand. But eventually we would get him cracking up and before you knew it he too was covering up his face with the hymnbook to avoid disrupting the service. He'd want family home evening to go just right but then someone would always end up crying and the activity turned into a wrestling match. Family prayer would end with someone "pouncing" the other and nudges from my brother while I was just trying to make it to amen without bursting into laughter. Nothing was perfect. Actually, it was chaos. And perhaps it was this movement, the friction of it all that kept us from being numb. They say you shake when you're cold so that the movement of your muscles can heat up your body. Maybe that's the benefit of a family all over the place. Maybe it is all the love intertwined with frustration and disappointment and embarrassment—all the feeling—that makes us so alive. We couldn't be paralyzed even if we wanted to. Because no one can lie depressed in their bed for a week when someone is jumping on top of you at 9:00 a.m. and screaming breakfast is ready and hanging a loogi over your face making you scream until you're forced to get out of bed and chase them down the hall. Maybe I'm numb now because

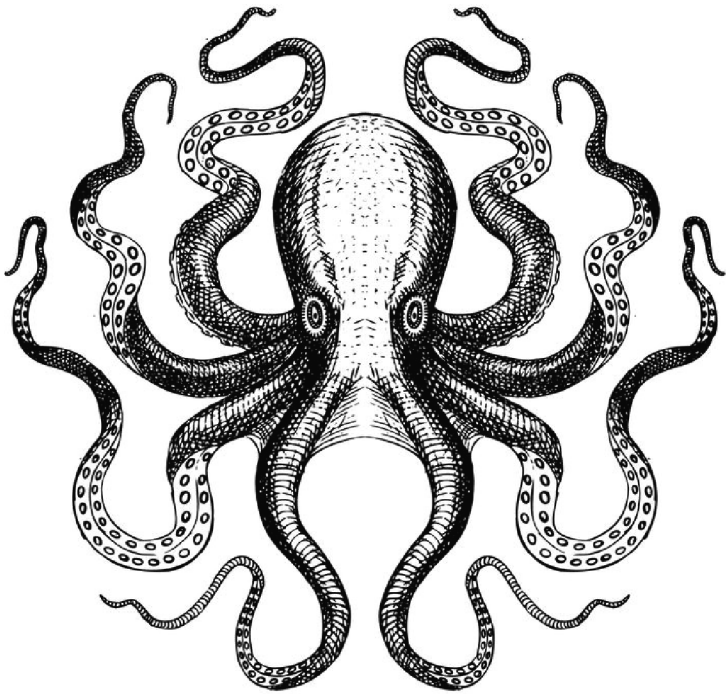
I'm alone. Maybe I'm numb because I'm so far from a home where heat is generated through closeness, and that kind of warmth can't be put on a utility bill.

Home. I'm so far from home. My real home. My heavenly home. And I'm pretty sure it doesn't need heaters. Even though it is apparently "above the clouds" and the top of the mesosphere averages -130 degrees F. We talk about how Heaven is paved with gold roads and the entrance is a pearly gate, but no one ever talks about whether or not the clouds we float on are heated and give you a warm body like those seat warmers in my sister's new Highlander. I don't think Heaven needs heaters, clouds don't need seat warmers, because Heaven's got too much love. With that much family in one place how could you not be warm? With that much cuddling, that much shared space, and that much proximity? I'm not saying that God wants people to join Him in heaven because He wants to keep His natural heating system functioning, but because He wants us to be comfortable. He wants us to feel like we are sitting next to a woodstove in the middle of a winter storm, sipping on hot chocolate and playing Jenga with our little brother with an audio book on 2x speed. He wants us to be at peace. And that warmth, that comfort, that peace only comes when my blood is next to yours, and our hearts are beating in the same room. So every day I hang on to this Heaven. And it is this daily thought of hugging Heavenly Father and the warmth of Christ's embrace and my family, my whole family, I'm talking cousins and grandparents and all the in between, up there together that gets me to feel something again.

Suddenly I have something to feel.

Something I want to feel.

And my soul . . . well . . . my soul . . . is warm again.



RACHELLE LARSEN

Octopus Dreaming

As a teen in seminary, I was once required to analyze myself by identifying my spirit animal (we didn't know about cultural appropriation), and announce it to the class. I listened to the other teenage girls announce their identities with little prompting: kitten, puppy, dolphin. Their reasonings tended to follow the same vein: these animals were playful, social, and cute. I vaguely remember categorizing the boys' responses as more aggressive animals, but I don't remember which ones specifically: wolf? Jaguar? One boy stood out for identifying with a puppy—decidedly cute and nonthreatening. When it finally became my turn, I said something different. “Octopus.”

My classmates quieted, and my teacher inspected me closely for my extra six arms. “Why?” she asked.

I shrugged. I didn't exactly know why. I had an image in my mind, not reasons: at least, not sufficient ones. I knew I didn't relate to the other girls, and therefore didn't want to choose an animal that had already been picked. The isolation I felt from being different—quiet, serious, bookish, unfashionable, always observing, always at a distance—led me to think of the ocean. And in that ocean, I saw an octopus.

At the time, I didn't know it was a creature that could weigh up to hundreds of pounds, measuring over thirty feet in length, but could also squeeze through a hole the size of a quarter ("How an Octopus"; Jones). That it could blend with its background not only in color but in texture, even though it could only see in black and white (Montgomery 42–43). That octopuses are wired to die shortly after they reproduce (Hanlon et al. 146). That the octopus would come to represent my questions about traditional gender roles. I only knew what I imagined an octopus to look like: a creature floating deep in the water, sunlight above fading to darkness beneath, arms reaching out into the endless empty, large eyes seeing beyond, body so tiny in the vastness that the only appropriate feeling was the sublime.

• • •

Five years ago now, I was engaged to a man I didn't want to marry.

Josh was a good man. His favorite children's book was *The Giving Tree*, a picture book about a tree that gives up everything for the needs and wants of a little boy (Silverstein). *At the end of my life*, Josh said, *I want to have nothing left. I want to have given all of myself*. He worked hard, looking forward to providing for a family. He was kind to others and even kinder to me. Ever the gentleman, he served me as best he knew how, by doing my dishes, making me dinner, holding me patiently through panic attacks that became increasingly frequent.

"You can drop out of school now," he told me as our wedding date approached. "That's what my mother did." The sacrifice that he expected from me was not just time and effort, it was ambition, education, and even intelligence to a certain extent. Generations back and back, that's the way his family has been. Though we both would sacrifice in marriage, it felt like tradition took for granted that I would sacrifice everything while for Josh, sacrifice was still a choice.

I remember disagreeing, at least internally, with his sentiment. I didn't want to drop out of college. But I also don't remember what I said, or if I said anything at all. My responses back then were faded, unimportant even to myself. I'd always had a vague sense that what I wanted didn't matter—only that I fulfill the cultural expectations that I felt were placed upon me—and when Josh and I got engaged, something in me was snuffed out. When he proposed at a park near my childhood home, I told him that I was worried I wouldn't progress as an individual if we got married, and he asked me if I could overcome my concerns. I gave in. When we got back, my father congratulated us both. Josh relaxed into our reclining couch, and my mother watched me from a distance as I dutifully curled against his shoulder, my face expressionless for the rest of the night.

"So you're settling," she told me later when we were alone; her face was expressionless too.

I nodded slowly. "He's a good person."

"He's dependable. And he'll take care of you," she said tersely. I got the sense that she wanted something better for me, but that she couldn't protest my decision. She looked at the ground, and after that, I can't remember if she left me alone or if I left her alone instead. All I know is that there was mutual isolation, a feeling of being similar in our aloneness.

I knew that I was "settling" in the sense that I wasn't happy, and I wouldn't become who I wanted to be on a personal level; I also didn't think that my happiness mattered. "You can't be too picky," I was reminded by various people in my life. Marriage was the next stage in my life, and Josh was a good person; he would be a financially stable, engaged father. I didn't think anything else mattered. I didn't think about marriage back then in the way that I do now. I didn't think it was about me and my spouse becoming happier, better people while also having a family. I thought it was entirely about making the next generation. Quantity over quality. Evolutionary success was the goal, and

Josh and I were both suitable means to an end. It just felt like I got the raw end.

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I place my mom on a pedestal. In part, it's because it's difficult to objectively view someone who has poured so much of herself into you. It's also difficult to separate her from my understanding of myself as a woman, and so in my eyes, she's similar to an octopus too.

In some ways, we are different. She is beautiful and slender with eyes the depth and color of amber sea glass; I'm more solid and understated, except for my eyes, which are noticeably bright blue-green. Although physically striking, she is more likely to watch from the background of any group or room; now that I'm an adult, in most situations, I meander through groups of people, unafraid to converse with strangers and friends alike. My mom is ever conscious of social tensions in the room, and she withholds her thoughts and feelings (even from herself) to avoid contention; I am more likely to say what I think, even when it displeases others.

But in other ways, we are also similar. From her, I learned to love music: often we played together when I was younger, she on the violin and I on the piano. From her, I imbibed self-sacrifice, and maybe even the tendency to conflate it with self-improvement, regardless of cost.

"Make sure that your husband actually asks you to marry him," she ordered me when I was young. As the story goes, she and my father were sitting on a park bench—she was nineteen and he was twenty-four—and he asked *what she would say* if he asked her to marry him. She said that she would say yes, and that was that. There was no official proposal. They were married within the year. I'm not sure why my mom hangs onto this nuance of being asked directly versus hypothetically; maybe it's

because it feels like she never really made her choice, like she was cheated of the chance to finalize such a life-altering decision.

My parents love each other, and they are committed to each other, so I don't think my dad himself is the reason that my mom feels like her life could have been more. I think it stems from the fact that her whole life she has been unduly constrained. She has always been pressured to bend to the needs of others, regardless of her own welfare. As one of ten children in a dysfunctional family, she learned to repress her own feelings in order to make dinner, resolve conflicts, clean the house, do the dishes. Shortly after going to college, she married my father, and in their marriage, she did the same thing. Repression helped her to take care of her children even when she wasn't okay, and even when my dad wasn't readily available for support. Currently, she is approaching a time where there are fewer demands to crowd out her wants and needs, and after years of stacking up, there are so many. She is realizing that needs left unfulfilled often manifest as personal growth left unrealized.

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As soon as octopuses reproduce, they begin to die via a process called senescence. For males, it begins after they mate. Their behavior becomes self-annihilating. They wander around the ocean bottom aimlessly in the open, unconcerned with predators and generally falling prey to them. Some males have even been shown to swim upstream into fresh water, which is toxic to them, or flop into open air to eventually suffocate (Hanlon et al. 146–48).

For females, it begins as soon as they lay their fertilized eggs, and it ends shortly after the eggs are hatched. A female will tend her eggs, help them hatch, and once her eggs are all gone, will typically die within days. This death has been linked to the optic gland—the octopus equivalent of a pituitary gland,

located between the eyes—which when removed from infant female octopuses, renders them infertile but doubles their lifespan (Hanlon et al. 147).

For both males and females, senescence is characterized by lack of eating, fading to a sickly gray, and developing skin lesions that never heal, all of which leads to death: the complete, unsustainable sacrifice of self for the future generation.

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Growing up, my professional future was always framed in terms of sacrifice, in terms of not having it. My father suggested that I go to school to become a teacher because when I got married I could easily not work for years in order to raise my children, or if my husband failed to provide at times, I could get a job to pick up his slack. As wife and mother, I would be the one to fill in the extra needs, whatever they may be; I was the amorphous glue that could seep into every crevice, every crack, and keep the family afloat. My husband would always know his role: provider. But even though it was implied that I could do his job and mine too, if necessary, it was never really implied that he could be the back-up for me if I somehow failed as a mother.

I love our culture and religion because family is prized so highly. We don't believe in "until death do we part," we believe that relationships extend into the eternities. But relationships are only as healthy (and enjoyable) as the people in them. Shouldn't the emotional and spiritual well-being of the child (often placed on the mother) be just as important as the physical well-being (often placed on the father)? And since parents are children of God too, shouldn't we emphasize their spiritual progression over the specific role they play?

When I think of Josh telling me that I could drop out of college, I feel frustrated. It's not a painful memory—no harm came of it since I didn't marry him and I stayed in school—but

it still resonates with some aspects of the culture that we live in. It assumes that as a woman, as long as I have a man to take care of me, I can shelve my education. Some women do this, and I don't blame them; if this is what optimizes their happiness and the happiness of their family, then it's a good thing. Personally, I feel cheated when I think that my professional skills are meant to be thrown away when I get married and have children. It makes me feel like the majority of my interests are, at worst, disposable ways to bide my time while waiting to marry, and at best, only for the profit of the children that I will not have anytime soon.

When I told my mom about my desires to go to medical school, she asked, "What about your husband?" In other conversations that are less distinct in my memory, I've been reminded that it might be hard to have kids in medical school, at least with the assumption that as the woman, I would be the one primarily spending time with them and caring for them.

Why should I be haunted by this husband that I do not have? Why should my career choices be constrained by someone I probably haven't even met? By someone who might remain a fiction for my entire life?

And yet, I hesitate. Whether or not it's true, there's a part of me that believes I am caught between two deaths, and both are deaths of self. If I embrace my freedom, pursuing my dreams that don't match traditional gender stereotypes, I fear I will never find a man devoted to our faith—something that is important to me—and therefore I will be the end of my genetic line. Evolutionarily unsuccessful. At my physical death, I will not have poured my love into my own children, and all memory of me will be gone in a generation. But I also fear that if I give up on my dreams, whether in my singlehood or as a mother, I will lose myself. I fear that if I sacrifice ambition, I will die before I am actually dead.

Neither of these paths sound like happiness.

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As of a few years ago, my mother has been preparing for the status of empty nester. My youngest brother is in high school, and all the other children are gone from the house. There is simply not as much to do because those who have needed her need her no more.

At the same time, my father's health has been questionable. A work-a-holic of many decades, the muffin top of his younger years has multiplied and replenished itself, wreaking havoc on his blood pressure, cholesterol, and general well-being. I know that he fears dying prematurely. If he does, he will leave his wife to live on her own, and if his kids can't support themselves, he will not be able to help them. In my life, he has been the one to encourage gender roles the most, but he's realizing more and more the danger of this specialization. It has led to his own kind of gradual senescence: he has sacrificed all else for providing for his family, and it's killing him, which means that in the end, he might fail to provide.

The concurrence of these two scenarios—my mom's extra time and my dad's fears—led to my mom teaching middle school. My dad reasoned that the extra money and health insurance would be useful and that my mom would be happier if she were busier (not to mention that it prepared her for his worst-case-scenario of widowhood). My mom didn't want to do this; her bachelor's degree, earned almost thirty years ago, was in electrical engineering. She couldn't teach science, and she definitely couldn't be an engineer. After all these years as a homemaker, she was ill-equipped for the workplace. Although she is a skilled violinist, she didn't like the idea of teaching it in public schools where kids had dubious levels of commitment.

With persistent encouragement from my dad, she entered the work force anyway.

I spent two years waiting for my mother to quit, one way or another. We had more than one conversation where she would

say, “I wish I could go to sleep and never wake up again.” There were variants of this phrase. Whenever I would call, and the call would go to voicemail, or she’d end the call without answering, I’d pray that she was okay. That her expression of depression was not indication of intent. That in her process of finding herself beyond her children, she would find happiness. Recently, she did quit her job, but she has yet to find a self that she truly values. She’ll soon be finished raising children, and she doesn’t make money, so what is she worth?

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What do octopuses want? It’s hard to say. Want (instead of need) is a dangerous word in animal studies. Historically, one of the biggest sins—if not the biggest sin—that an animal behaviorist can commit is to anthropomorphize their subjects. Other animals are not humans and should not be explained by using human motivations because animals are (supposedly) exclusively deterministic creations: living cells relying on cause and effect, every reaction pre-determined by genetic code mixed with environmental conditioning. In recent years, however, scientists have realized that there is a sliding scale; generally speaking, the more intelligent the animal, the more complicated its behavior, and in some ways, the more human-like (Riederer). The less deterministic a species is, the more room it has for diverging choices.

Octopuses have individual eccentricities that are absent in less intelligent life forms. In terms of personality, octopuses can be bold, cowardly, easy going, high-strung, adventurous, or a combination. In terms of aesthetics, some octopuses build up homes out of rocks while others prefer burrowing into the sand, and still others choose coral reefs, errant bottles, shells, or broken coconuts. Some octopuses prefer multiple entrances to their dens, while some only prefer one (Hanlon et al. 113–22).

It's significant that octopuses modify their homes to fit their preference. To me, it implies desire. It implies the ability to imagine something better than what they see.

So what does an octopus want? Here's my guess. Stimulation. Intriguing experience. The octopus can taste with every inch of its skin like a giant, eight-pronged tongue. In a video, I watched two aquarists feed a giant pacific octopus. Gilligan (that was her name) met them at the surface of the water, arms reaching into the air over the edge of the exhibit until she found her caretakers. She explored their skin, their taste, by wrapping around their wrists and curling up their arms. Her suckers sounded like bubble wrap as the aquarists repeatedly peeled her off, and yet she continued to explore them curiously—lovingly? With recognition?—as the female aquarist commented, "We must taste really good to her." When handed half of a fish, Gilligan slowly pinched the food between her suckers, rippling it to her mouth, savoring the taste, but continued to curl around the humans with a few of her other arms. Savoring their taste too, even though she didn't try to eat them ("Playing").

Beyond the desire for experiences, I wonder about the desire for connection. Octopuses are solitary, scientists say. They live free from social obligations, no attachments to their species. They say this because octopuses spend most of their lives alone. But I wonder: do octopuses ever get lonely? There are snippets of behavior that indicate a need for social companionship: photographs of between six to eight female argonaut octopuses holding on to each other's shells, almost like people holding hands (Hanlon et al. 27). Or even fruitless intercourse with different, unviable species of octopus trying to mate (144). Perhaps the octopus, even as it maintains independence and curiosity, desires companionship.

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Like Josh, I love *The Giving Tree*. I resonate with sacrifice. I want to do it. I feel a sort of heady delight when I read stories of Mother Teresa serving the poor and Bryan Stevenson defending underrepresented inmates. Most significantly, as a Christian, I believe in a God that lived and died for all humans—including the selfish, brutal, ungrateful ones—in order that we can all live again, be happy, and become better people. He is my role model, and I want to be like Him. Swallowed up in the service of my fellow men, and therefore the service of my God, I feel the sublime.

I love *The Giving Tree* because I love sacrifice, but I could not marry Josh. The kind of sacrifice I want will not diminish me. I feel close to God when I develop myself and my abilities because I become more like Him, more capable. I also feel close when I love and help others. To do both sustainably, I need to sacrifice in a way that makes me a more well-developed person while also enabling others to become more well-developed people. Quality *and* quantity. Sacrifice and self-improvement without sacrifice of self. A well ever flowing instead of a well that runs dry.

It sounds like having your cake and eating it too. I believe that I can do what I love as well as find someone to love, someone who I can support and who supports me, someone who loves God and believes I don't have to sacrifice my divine gifts to love Him too.

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In my childhood, I was most entranced with my mother when she played the violin. I'm told that as a baby, I could sit for hours and watch her play Vivaldi, Bach, Paganini. As a child and teenager, I remember seeing her play in the practice room. Often, it was night with the glass door shut and the hall light off, and so she seemed to be playing in a warm, glowing

cube of solitary, beautiful sound. She stood tall with impeccable posture as she drew her bow across the strings. In those moments, she was not just my mother, she was a violinist. A strong, confident, beautiful, proficient violinist. I'd stand there unnoticed, and often leave unnoticed, because it felt wrong to interrupt something that felt sacred.

And of course, there were those times when I would interrupt because it was time for dinner, or the phone was for her, or my dad was asking for her, and she would put down the violin and come; she was still beautiful. Perhaps even more so because she had shown that she still had something left to sacrifice. Something that she chose to sacrifice, but at the same time did not sacrifice; she put it down for a moment, but her talent was a gift in and of itself, one that she could share as well as keep. A well ever flowing.

Violin was what got her through a difficult childhood. It's what got her through mine, a time when my dad was often gone and she was deprived of adult connection. It's how she somewhat rejuvenated after days of completely sacrificing herself to the needs of her family. So when she taught orchestra in a Title I middle school, she was offering up her refuge. I know that some of my mom's students appreciated her knowledge. Others didn't. Overall, it was a profoundly negative experience for her.

Since quitting her teaching job, it has been difficult for my mom to play violin. She now associates it with being trapped instead of being free, and I understand. Her music is a gift of self, a kind of sacrifice that is for others as well as herself, which is why it keeps on giving. Ideally, that's what marriage should be as well: something perpetually sustainable because it supports both you and your spouse. My panic attacks during my engagement were for the same reason that my mom cried every day after work; an extorted gift is a theft, and when you are what is being stolen, how long is it before you're gone?

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Recently, evidence has been discovered that octopuses may dream. Eyes shut, curled in the corners of their cages, they flash between red, brown, orange, white, gray, checkered, cracked, flowered, spotted, blotched, blushing. It's like watching a kaleidoscope that twitches and breathes, changing under stimuli we can't see, and I wonder, what do these dreams entail? Sometimes, the color changes indicate the octopus is dreaming of hiding in different backgrounds, of sand, or coral, or rock ("Octopus Dreaming"). Other times, like when the octopus flushes dark red, it is angry or excited, and when it flushes white, it is submissive or calm (Montgomery 43). We know this because when octopuses want to fight, or when they see a crab (their favorite food), they turn red. When de-escalating a fight, or interacting with non-enemies, octopuses tend to be white ("5 Things"; Hanshumaker).

It's interesting to think that as a mood ring, the skin of an octopus can't tell us positive versus negative emotions, but it can tell us if it is taking charge of its fate or succumbing to it. After all, anger and excitement push us to action, but passivity and tranquility allow us to be acted upon by others without protest.

Balance between acting and being acted upon is how we build a functioning society: we allow law and government to dictate aspects of our lives even as we make individual choices. This is also how we build healthy relationships, but I'm less clear on what this looks like in day-to-day life. In my childhood, it was implied that women should be flexible and that men should exercise righteous dominion, that men should work and women should raise children, but this is too simple. The God I love is creative, compassionate, and empowering. I believe that when I marry, He will be able to help me and my spouse sacrifice in a healthy way that is specific to us. He will help us maximize the good that we can do for our immediate

family as well as His other children. It may or may not follow traditional gender roles, but as long as I'm following God, then I will find myself immersed in the infinite and eternal. I will find myself in the sublime.

When I (apologetically) say that my spirit animal is an octopus, I don't mean that I'm an octopus. Yes, I'm intelligent, curious, and introverted. But senescence is not my fate, merely a possible outcome. I have dreams that are better than what I see and better than what tradition has led me to expect. The metaphor only goes so far; I can't be reduced to something less than human, but I can become something more. I can become like God by following Him and exercising my agency, reaching my potential not just as a woman, but as His child with a variety of abilities and ways that I can sacrifice.

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