Journey of the Soul

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When AMCAP was still in its infancy, I was a young mother just finishing an MBA and still confused about what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrestled for many months trying to decide among several options. Then one night I was reading an account of early Church members who knew no better than to call down the powers of heaven to heal one another, and I knew with a spiritual certainty that cut through all my ambivalence that I wanted to be a healer—a healer of the heart. I promised God that night that if he approved my desire I would do my best to learn to be a good healer, but I did not have then the slightest notion of how healing occurs, either as a gift of the spirit or as a clinical reality. I only knew that I wanted to participate in this mystery, and that I believed God was offering to teach me how. I have learned a few things about healing over the last fourteen years, but for me, healing still partakes of mystery. Relatively little of any import have I learned from textbooks or teachers, as necessary as that training and discipline have been to get me started. God has kept his promise to me in ways that I could never have anticipated, for what I have learned about healing I have learned mostly by healing, from ailments I did not even know I had.

As I stand before you today I reaffirm my desire to be a healer.

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That is a goal so presumptuous as to still cause me some embarrassment to admit, but in that desire to learn the gift and art of healing I believe I stand on common ground with many of you here. This is why I come to AMCAP, why I believe in it, why I serve it.

A colleague once commented that he appreciated my holding out for healing in a discipline that speaks mostly of coping. Actually I hold out for both. God's promise to those who want only healing is that they can learn to cope, to get along in a tent in the wilderness even though they prefer a house in the city. His promise to those who want only coping, because they fear the surgeon's hand, is that they can also heal, although true healing will never return us to precisely what we were. It will always change us. In fact, most healing worth its salt is an act so radical as to partake of dying, and of being born again.

The initial ordinances of the Church reiterate these lessons to me. Baptism reminds me that I must die if I am to be reborn, and I must be reborn to enter into the kingdom of God. I believe with all my soul that if we want to be healers for others we must be engaged in these same healing processes of dying and being rebirthed. My own healing has taken me on a strange journey, and it has been a journey toward salvation as much as wellness, convincing me that God saves us by healing us, healing us from the inside out. For this reason I believe the spiritual journey of mortality is ultimately a healing journey. Whether we battle depression, addiction, anxiety, personality disorder, psychosis, or post traumatic stress, LDS Chaplain Paul Williams reminds us, "Hygiene-oriented psychologies cannot heal hearts and guide soul-pilgrims whose "mental illnesses" are God's dispatching of . . . soul[s] to their journey" (personal correspondence, April 19, 1995). True healing requires us to leave behind the false comforts of home and civilization to wander through an inhospitable wilderness in search of our inheritance as children of God. We must take the healing journey ourselves if we want to help others find their way.

The scriptures are replete with stories of such healing journeys.
The lessons of these epic tales emerge when we look beyond their historic truth to contemplate what they may contribute to the meaning of our life today. Ultimately each of our journeys is unique, and so each of us will be drawn to different scriptural tales for guidance in our own lives, or as we attempt to help our clients find the journey to which God calls them.

Personally, I like Nephi’s story. When my children were little I taught them a little verse I heard somewhere, although the author and the exact words are lost to me now:

Nephi made a bow when he didn’t know how.
Nephi made a ship when he didn’t know how.
Nephi made a temple when he didn’t know how.
But he knew how to listen and how to obey,
And when God commanded Nephi said, “Okay!”

When I told my husband I was planning a talk about Nephi’s journey he had a great time with this little verse, adding lines like: “Nephi had intense sibling rivalry and he didn’t know why,” “Nephi interpreted dreams when he didn’t have proper Continuing Education Credit,” and even, “Nephi had a dysfunctional family that makes your wildest clients look tame.” Chapter One in Nephi’s journey to the promised land might be entitled, “Nephi’s father has a crisis and he has to leave NOW.”

Come with me on a journey.

... the Lord spake unto my father, yea, even in a dream, and said unto him: Blessed art thou Lehi ... and because thou hast been faithful and declared unto this people the things which I commanded thee [that Jerusalem should be destroyed], behold they seek to take away thy life.

“And ... the Lord commanded my father, even in a dream, that he should take his family and depart into the wilderness. ...

“And he left his house, and the land of his inheritance, and his gold, and his silver, and his precious things, and took nothing with him, save it were his family, and provisions, and tents, and departed into the wilderness.

(1 Nephi 2: 2, 4)
Thus begins Nephi's journey away from Jerusalem, a city steeped in the "traditions of the fathers" as the scriptures call those habits of unrighteousness that pass from one generation to the next unless someone makes the deliberate choice to dismantle them. Usually my own spiritual journeys have begun less dramatically. The crises that push me to abandon familiar paths and question the traditions behind past choices have more often taken the form of a threat to my soul life—to my growth and potential as a human being. When the defenses I have learned have outlived their usefulness—when they can no longer protect me from my enemies of fear and depression and anger and guilt—it is time to leave the pseudo-security of a familiar order and depart into the wilderness.

My departures seem momentous to me, but they are actually pretty small-scale. What must it have been like for Nephi to change an entire lifestyle and abandon all that was familiar? How radical a departure for Nephi even to accept that Jerusalem—venerable and timeless and God-favored secure—was but an illusion of well-being, doomed by its own indifference, to fall. How crazy to walk away from the familiar securities of wealth and home and status that keep at bay the wolves of one's own mortality and walk out into the deserts of Arabia with one's little tent in hand. In the face of crisis, how often I, like Laman and Lemuel, cling to the familiar even while I profess to leave it, blaming others for my losses, longing for escape from the rigors of the journey and a return to familiar comforts. But when change is called for, we have only two choices: we can hold on to our illusions of Jerusalem's invulnerability and go down with her to the destruction and captivity of the soul, or we can leave the city, sometimes to wander for years in desert wastelands and vast uncharted waters, following the unlikely direction of a still, small voice.

I never like this part. Dream images of burning houses and vicious tornados mark the beginnings of my journeys, reminding me that change always entails destroying the familiar in order to create the future. My old defenses may well have been God's protective gifts to me in childhood, but when they have become simply weak and inef-
ffective walls, restricting my agency without protecting me at all, it is time to take them down. Nevertheless, it is a hard thing to watch Jerusalem burn, even if it is only in the visions of the night.

In my role as a healer, I appreciate that when clients first come to me in response to that prophetic voice crying that Jerusalem is doomed, they want most to hear that the prophets lie—that repentance and change are not necessary. They ask, in essence, why the old defenses do not work any more and how to kill the prophets with their disturbing cries. They insist, “Change someone else, change the rules of life itself, but don’t change me.” That failing, their plea may become “Change me then, but don’t let it hurt.” They are right to be afraid; healing change shakes the very assumptions under our feet, brings down our walls, knocks out the lights. Funny how when I read 1 Nephi, I always imagine it happening in the dark.

One of my clients in the midst of some deep personal change recently reported a vivid and disturbing dream in which a woman she believes to be a dear friend is murdered and dismembered by a group of bandits. Somehow my client knows it is her task to put the pieces of this woman’s body in a bag and dispose of it, but she is horrified by the prospect. For a time she focuses her energy instead on building a fortress to protect her village from these marauders who will surely return. In the process she tries to stop a passing train, loaded with lumber she hopes to use for her walls, but she only derails the train. Unable to build her stronghold she reluctantly returns to the task of disposing of this body. With great anxiety she forces herself to look at the face of the victim. She learns with relief that the woman is not who she thought, nor is the clean-up task, however unpleasant, as abhorrent as she had feared.

As we processed this dream my client decided that the dream represented her therapy, her soul journey. Even though she has come through some painful issues to a better place, the dream reminded her that some aspects of herself—tightly held ways of coping in the past—have died. That death feels violent and frightening and only she can pick up the pieces. Horrified to stare such a loss in the face, she prefers
to turn to the more familiar and reassuring task of building walls of defense against a hand of change that feels only malicious. But we can never build enough walls to protect us from the death that is always a part of the journey of the soul. We only derail the train out of town when we try. Ultimately, whatever dies is not really our friend, but our illusion.

Nephi's losses are hardly illusory, however. At least in my book, power and wealth and home feel real enough to merit a backward glance or two. How shocking it must have been for Nephi to see his wealthy father living on the run, a vagabond. Nephi records simply, "And my father dwelt in a tent" (1 Nephi 2:15), but I feel a world of meaning in this briefest Book of Mormon scripture. As I contemplate my own journey, living in a tent feels like an appropriate metaphor for the temporality of a sojourner's life: staked to the earth, but ready to move. Tent life bespeaks transition, vulnerability, having no room for what we do not need, making good use of a few well proven tools.

The difficulty in adequately planning for a journey of the soul becomes apparent when I see this little family's fits and starts as they take off, go back for the brass plates, leave again, again return for Ishmael's family. These round trips to Jerusalem, however circuitous, seem a necessary part of getting our bearings, learning what is important, and building stamina for what lies ahead. The trip between Jerusalem and Lehi's camp down the coast of the Red Sea runs through one of the most God-forsaken stretches of desert imaginable. I can hardly envision making such a trek on foot, let alone making it five times in a short period as Nephi did. Apparently God's goal in all this does not simply entail expedient arrival at the land of promise. Instead he uses the journey to make them a people of promise. How we travel is more critical to making us holy than our arrival at a holy destination.

I, too, travel in a spiritual wilderness, searching for a more authentic, if more risky, life. Like Nephi, sometimes I must make several return trips to the same old issue before I have gathered everything I need in order to leave the rest behind. Here in the wilderness I have
come to believe that my only safety is to acknowledge that I must live in a tent, and to get in the right one. Zion is a tent, for we are her stakes, and Zion is the tent I seek. Only by being in covenant relationship with God, by being one of a Zion people, can I access God’s healing power on behalf of myself or my clients.

Beginning with Abraham, God’s covenants with his people as they travel in tents have always included three things: priesthood, posterity, and promised land. In addition to their literal import, each of these promised blessings symbolizes to me the features of God’s face that mold my countenance, the images of what my travels may help me become. Beyond simple definitions that might exclude me, priesthood symbolizes God’s promise to empower me, to teach me how to turn my righteous intentions into realities. Beyond the children I may or may not have, God’s promise of posterity suggests that he can perpetuate my loving relationships in both time and eternity and share with me his capacity to receive and engender spiritual life. And as one who already lives in a “promised land,” I have come to see God’s offer to lead me to such a place as a metaphor for his sure guidance on the journey of the soul toward a new home, a new peace, a new life. These three things—spiritual power, life-engendering relationships, and the promise of new life and inner peace—are obtained while we live in the “tents” of our lives. Let us look at how Nephi’s experience in a tent illuminates the process by which God heals us, leading us from our old walled cities to the New Jerusalem of spiritual power, relationships, and peace, in Paul’s words, a “city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11:10).

As Nephi lives in a tent, his first return trip to Old Jerusalem in search of the brass plates provides two essential lessons in the acquisition of spiritual power: knowledge of our sacred history, symbolized by the brass plates; and the principles of spiritual discernment, symbolized by the sword of Laban.

The brass plates become a powerful symbol of knowledge of our past, our own sacred history. The history of their fathers found on the brass plates empowered Nephi’s people with new potential to both learn from that history and reclaim its promises. In my journey, going back for my personal history allows me to make explicit the rules by
which I have lived, the culture that clothes me, and the relationships that have forged me. This knowledge of my history enhances my agency to change by making explicit the implicit rules by which I live. Increasing my consciousness of my past increases my capacity to choose in the present. When I see accurately the patterns of my ancestor’s lives I understand more clearly the patterns in my own. I begin to discern choices within those patterns that previously I have missed.

Learning about the choices, feelings, thoughts, and desires of family members can be a formidable task, however. Going back for our history can produce as much anxiety as facing Laban, a captain of fifty with his sword in hand. A client contemplating an invitation to visit his heretofore combative brother wanted only to stay far, far away from this now more mellow sibling. He completely rejected my suggestions for using the trip to learn more about this brother. His reluctance to engage his former enemy is amazingly common. Had he been a member of the Church I might have talked to him about the work of gathering brass plates. We can do this gathering by asking simple questions of ourselves and our family members about what our life was like, what we believed and felt, what we learned. Such brass plates provide essential context for psychological work.

Like Laban clinging to brass plates he does not even value, family members who are abusive, neglectful, or addicted sometimes interfere with our knowing what is real about our lives. These Labans insist that they have exclusive access to what is true. Refusing to acknowledge our right to our own reality, like Laban they may deny us our truths even though they do not value truth themselves. When staying in relationship means jeopardizing our trust in our own voice and experience, when the soul-life is in danger, sometimes the Spirit may prompt us that our only recourse is to take our truths and run.

In order to acquire his brass plates, Nephi is prompted to kill an interfering Laban with Laban’s own sword. This sword has become a symbol for me of God’s ultimate power to turn all that Satan would use to destroy me to the service of my soul. God does not promise us that our lives will not be in danger here in this mortal wilderness, but
he does promise us that he can turn to our blessing every device that threatens our soul life. The sword of Laban becomes a symbol of God's power to use the opposition that could destroy me to teach and empower me instead.

Although Nephi initially returned to Jerusalem exhorting his brothers that “the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 4:3), when Nephi realizes that he himself is to be the instrument of that destruction, he is not a little hesitant. He must think it out in his mind, examine his motives, and listen carefully through multiple spiritual promptings before he feels sufficiently confident of his discernment to take such drastic action. Personally I would be wondering why God couldn't just give Laban a change of heart, or a heart attack. Instead God requires that Nephi scrutinize his own heart and sort out all its motives.

Like Nephi, as I examine my heart it has been as critical to learn the voice of the adversary as to learn the voice of God. As a missionary I taught investigators to identify the peaceful, comforting presence of the Holy Ghost. As a soul traveler I am also learning to identify the voice of the adversary: loud, mocking, accusatory, and manipulative. Satan's voice conveys consistent messages. He insists that there is no other way to escape the tension of ever-present temptation except to yield to it, while God promises comfort and further instruction when I have reached the limits of my ability to resist sin. Satan proclaims that if I surrender to him he can protect me from anyone who would hurt me or make me afraid, while God asks me to humbly submit to others' agency and life's uncertainty in order to learn good from evil by my own experience. Satan promotes my all-or-nothing thinking, contending that if I am not perfect I will be in his power, while God offers the atonement on the assumption of my inevitable imperfection.

Accurately discerning the deceptive voice of Satan is especially important if we are to liberate within ourselves the power of what Carl Jung has called the Shadow, an archetype for those tendencies, desires, and characteristics we have condemned and disowned. Nephi's capacity
to take another life is probably firmly relegated to his Shadow. Who among us would want to admit ourselves capable of such an act? He avows that he has never shed the blood of man and that his heart shrinks from such a task. Yet at this critical juncture it is just such a heart, a heart that can kill, that is required. Usually we think of Satan as the Destroyer, but the story of Nephi and Laban reminds me that the God we seek to emulate destroys what is already spiritually dead in order to foster new spiritual life. When Nephi ascertains that the power of his Shadow is being harnessed by God and not by Satan, he can afford to unleash it. To paraphrase Jung, such spiritual certainty does not come by contemplating visions of light, but by facing the darkness within.

I have been working with one LDS client for some time on identifying the voices that speak in her head. During a previous session, careful exploration of these dark inner voices had led her to conclude that confusing feelings of same-sex attraction merely masked the plaintive Shadow voice of a small child yearning for the affection of her emotionally absent mother. This Shadow voice spoke important truths that helped her meet her needs in legitimate ways. By the next session, however, she was certain she had made this whole scenario up just to get my attention. As I scrambled to make sense of this development I silently prayed for help. Suspecting the internalized voice of a critical parent, I asked her whose voice this was, so judgmental of her motives. She fumbled with her answer for awhile, and then she stopped. She looked me in the eye for the first time that day, and I, too, suddenly understood. “That is Satan, the Accuser,” she said, “and he is a liar from the beginning. I need not worry about his opinions of me.” Like Nephi, we can increase our spiritual power by learning to distinguish the inner voices of God, Satan, and self.

Having acquired the brass plates and the sword of Laban, symbols of spiritual power, Nephi’s next experiences bring him more essentials for tent travel: the companionship of men and women. Nephi gains the trust and loyalty of Laban’s servant, Zoram, who later becomes his friend, and the willing companionship of Ishmael’s daughters, one of whom becomes his spouse. From these two loyal companions, Nephi
learns about life-engendering relationships according to God’s second covenant promise to preserve us in such.

Like Nephi, I feel good friends are worth a long desert trek to acquire. We live in an inherently lone and dreary world, but none of us can traverse the wilderness of self-discovery alone. Like Christ, we need companions to witness our heart work, sustain our mission, and help us provide for our temporal needs. True intimacy occurs only when we take the risk of being known—when we take off the robes of an imposter, reveal ourselves and our purpose, and give promise of fidelity to each other—as Nephi did with Zoram. This risk is both easier and more worthwhile when we believe that our relationships can last. I believe that my primary relational task is to build relationships worth perpetuating for eternity.

LDS concepts of sealing family ties seem to emerge from an earlier understanding of the “everlasting covenant,” in “token or remembrance” of which friends saluted friends “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,” receiving one another “to fellowship, in a determination that is fixed, immovable and unchangeable to be your friend and brother through the grace of God in the bonds of love, to walk in all the commandments of God blameless, in thanksgiving, forever and ever” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:133). Who of us can imagine eternal felicity without friends? Surely it is only because my husband is first my friend that I desire his companionship for eternity. Can we imagine a sweeter outcome than for our children to consider us their friends?

Learning to receive from my friends has been essential to my own soul work. I have learned that when I feel overwhelmed by the needs of others, often I am simply projecting outward my own overwhelming neediness. In the past I grew accustomed to giving as a way to circumvent my needs, justify self-neglect, or act out old scripts of self-deprivation. When I first allowed myself to feel the question, “What do I need?” I found the answer floating in an unnamed fear that felt as big as outer space. Convinced that my needs for nurturing, tutoring, and help were limitless and selfish I felt them bearing down on
me like some malicious primate with inevitable intent. But as I turned to face this monster I saw that my needs were actually very simple, very basic, and that behind my dark fear were only sadness and hurt, not evil. Some of us find “dark nights of the soul” in the simple work of learning to trust enough, hope enough, and humble ourselves enough simply to receive. I commend these lessons to others who become mired in giving.

Lessons in tent travel continue as Nephi leaves Jerusalem this third and final time, having found a companion among the daughters of Ishmael. Fully severing his past, Nephi’s desert experiences now begin to prepare him more fully for God’s third covenant promise of a new home of peace and safety. Alone in the wilderness, Nephi listens as his father recounts his dream of the tree of life, prompting Nephi to seek his own vision for the journey ahead. He tells us,

... I had desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord... into an exceedingly high mountain, which I never had before seen. ... And the Spirit said unto me: Behold, what desirest thou? (1 Nephi 11:1-2)

The importance of this question is reiterated when we recall that God “will judge all men according to their works, and according to the desire of their hearts.” (Doctrine and Covenants 137:9). One of the best questions I have learned to ask myself and others is, “What do I want?” Sometimes I don’t feel safe acknowledging even to myself what I want, having spent too much time trying to please others or avoid disappointment. Once I determine what I really want, I must then face the often challenging task of negotiating for it, making plans, and sometimes accepting disappointment. I have spent months, years of my spiritual journey learning to probe deeply and then trust deeply my heart’s answers to the question, “What do I want?” Answers to this question provide both treatment plans and progress reports for our healing journey. I believe God asks us some version of this question whenever we approach him at the mortal veil. God probes our
heart for our truest desires, but if we will ask him, he will also educate our desires to fit us to live with him. Learning to want what God wants is the surest path to becoming like him.

Once Nephi tells the Spirit that he desires to see what his father has seen, he is asked, “Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?” (1 Nephi 11:4). “Do you believe?” It seems like an odd question in the midst of an open vision, until I remember that Laman and Lemuel also saw visions, but did not believe. I am not so different. God gives me testimony, direction, personal revelation, and as good as they sound at the time how quickly I fall into my doubtful, Lamanlike ways. Like the disciple who said, “Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief,” I find that belief and doubt vie for my allegiance. My mission president once wrote to me that our beliefs are more important than our doubts, though we will have some of both. I have come to understand that belief is ultimately a matter of choice—not reason, not relationship, not analysis. Christ does not answer his disciples about when he will come again, and he will not answer all my questions either. The point always comes at which I must choose whether to trust in God’s goodness, power, and love for me.

The importance of believing God is reiterated with the discovery of the Liahona, a wonderful instrument that guides Nephi and his company according to the “faith and diligence and heed” they give it—a most practical and concrete manifestation of how the Holy Ghost submits to our desires and beliefs, and of how we must submit our desires and beliefs to God if we are to end up where he would have us go. To me, the Liahona is a marvelous symbol of the gift of the Holy Ghost.

The Liahona plays a vital role in Nephi’s journey when he breaks his steel hunting bow and the food supply quickly diminishes. After days of floundering, the camp dissolves into complaining against God and blaming one another. Finally Nephi makes a new bow, a single arrow, and a sling for stones. Armed with these new tools he has created in the wilderness from the materials available, he asks his father’s counsel about where to hunt. A penitent Lehi prays for direction, and the Liahona again points the way to food for the camp.
On my soul journey I frequently reach this point where the old tools for getting what I need do not work any more. When my addictions and defenses and manipulations break down, I often cling to them like a child with a broken toy, refusing to let go. Withdrawing in a pout no longer gets my husband's attention? Then I'll withdraw in a bigger pout. Racking up a long list of tasks no longer placates my anxiety? Then I'll rack up a bigger list of tasks. Yelling no longer whips people into shape? Then I'll yell a little louder. Pouting and obsessing and yelling . . . broken bows that have lost their spring. How difficult to let go of my fractured strategies, stop complaining and blaming, carefully analyze the situation and the resources at hand, set myself to solving the problem with new tools from new materials, and seek others' help and God's direction.

When I see myself cling to strategies that no longer get me what I want I have learned to ask, "What false hope am I clinging to so tightly that I cannot put it down?" It may be a present-tense false hope that I really don't have to do this hard task life has handed me, that if I throw a big enough tantrum God will say, "What could I have been thinking? Of course this is too hard. Go back to Jerusalem and let's put an end to this ridiculous camping trip." Or it may be a past-tense false hope that if I hold out I will finally get the help or care or approval I once needed so desperately and did not receive. Stubbornness and resentment can be a way to hold on to a false hope that we can rewrite history, bypass legitimate mourning, or change other people instead of changing ourselves.

In the final chapter of Nephi's journey away from Jerusalem, Nephi builds a ship to take him to his promised land. This is an act of extraordinary independence, for he does not build after the manner of men. Rather he must trust in his spiritual discernment and power to resolve all problems of design and construction. Nephi determines that, if Laman and Lemuel will not help, he will work with those who will. If he has no pattern, God can teach him. Ultimately Nephi risks his own life and the lives of his family on the soundness of his own vision and skill when he boards this ship and takes to the high seas.
Nephi takes his ship across the great uncharted waters I associate with the unconscious.

On my soul journey to my promised land of inner peace, God requires me, as he did Nephi, to stand for what I believe regardless of the opinions of others. The healing ship he requires me to build sometimes does not follow traditional designs. As I endure the storms of internal raging and terror, or the death-still seas of personal or familial resistance, I find that, in the words of Paul Williams, "My frightened ego is only a harbor pilot. The great pilgrimage is across the rage, hurt, brokenness and unspeakable longings at the heart of mortality to the hope that remains at the bottom of Pandora's box." The harbor pilot is of little value in crossing the great waters; I must turn to God to teach me to build a suitable vessel. Perhaps not everyone needs to cross such oceans, but when we need a new homeland, sometimes we must go out into the deep. I find that traversing the ocean requires willingness to feel my feelings, not simply understand them, to let someone else see them and not merely hear about them, to claim all that my body—my faithful tutor—knows. Having been out in the deep myself, how grateful I am that Nephi does not just give us the record of his victories and strengths. He also asks us to know his struggles and weaknesses:

O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.
I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.
. . . my heart groaneth because of my sins. . . . (2 Nephi 4:17-19)
My heart weep[s] and my soul linger[s] in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste[s] away, and my strength slacken[s], because of mine affections.
. . . I yield to sin, because of my flesh. . . . I give way to temptations, that the evil one ha[s] place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul. . . . I am angry because of mine enemy. (2 Nephi 4:26-27)

On my healing journey, how grateful I am for people who willingly know of my pain, my anger, my sorrow, my grief. Personally, I
cannot do strenuous and challenging tasks for long without people around me who will accept, even cherish, the wounded, needy children who still live in my heart. If I want to be strong, I must find people with whom I can be weak. My critical task, as I ride out the storms and stills of life, is to search out the lesson inherent in each experience about both my strengths and my weaknesses. In victory, or banality, or defeat, I pray that I will not miss the lesson.

As we reach our promised lands of new hope, like Laman and Lemuel we can focus our attention on the heartaches of the journey, or, like Nephi, we can focus on the extravagance of God’s love in bringing us so far and supplying all we have truly needed. Whenever I reach something that feels like I have arrived at last, I am reminded that Nephi’s story ends much where it began: his enemies seek his life, “and . . . the Lord did warn me, that I, Nephi, should depart from them and flee into the wilderness, and all those who would go with me. . . . And we did take our tents, and whatsoever things were possible for us, and did journey in the wilderness for the space of many days” (2 Nephi 5:5, 7).

I want it to be different. I want my enemies to stay defeated, my doubts to stay resolved, my hungers to stay sated, my choices to stay chosen, my journey’s end to stay the end. But I know in my heart that I must learn to trust the process and not merely hold on for the end of the ride. As Nephi takes to the road again his record does not focus on the gold and silver and precious things he left behind, but on the tokens he can take with him of all God has taught him:

And I, Nephi . . . brought the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass; and also the ball, or compass, which was prepared for my father by the hand of the Lord. . . . And I . . . did take the sword of Laban. . . . I did take my family, and also Zoram . . . and all those who would go with me. . . . And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of . . . precious ores. . . . And I, Nephi, did build a temple . . . and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine.” (2 Nephi 5:12, 14-16)
Having struggled for the brass plates, Nephi can now make the gold plates, leaving his own history and witness for future generations. Having wielded the sword of Laban, Nephi “after the manner of it did make many swords” (verse 14), using them to protect the new life God is giving him. Having accepted the visionary dream of his father, Nephi dreams his own dreams, becoming the prophet and spiritual leader of his people. Having made and kept relational promises, he takes with him family and friends into the next generation of his journey. Having hearkened to the directions of the Liahona, he learns to internalize the voice of the Spirit to direct his life. Having learned the skills of making a bow and building a ship, he is ready to build a temple. Having survived one improbable journey to arrive at the promised land, he takes the hope of that promise with him to journey again. Out of these capacities, Nephi arrives spiritually at the promised land he has already attained physically, an inner peace so profound as to be unassailable by his enemies and unrenouncable by his friends, just as God has always promised Zion would be.

Nephi is not left as one who does not know how. He knows how to make a bow; he knows how to make a ship; he knows how to make a temple; he knows how to make a life, for God has taught him.

I conclude with the testimony of Nephi, which I hope to claim as my own:

I know in whom I have trusted. My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions in the wilderness; and he hath preserved me upon the waters of the great deep. . . . He hath confounded mine enemies . . . he hath heard my cry by day, and he hath given me knowledge by visions in the nighttime. . . . Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say: O Lord, I will praise thee forever; yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my God and the rock of my salvation. (2 Nephi 4:19-20, 22-23, 30)