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Reality through Reflection

Marilyn N. Nielson

The only times I find a chance to write in my journal are those times when I have nothing interesting to write about. I used to write in my journal all the time before I got married, and it's full of all this meticulous detail about the dates I went on, who said what, what we ate, who won the basketball game, and so on. Interesting, in a morbid sort of way, I suppose, but certainly not anything I'd like published in "Inspiring Stories of our Pioneer Forebears." But then in my journals from the time I met my husband, Sam—covering all the fantastic times I had getting to know him, and getting married, and going to the temple, and giving birth to our astonishing son, Abraham, who does something new to amaze me every ten minutes—practically every entry starts with, "Well, a lot has happened in the last five months . . ." and then proceeds to hit a few highlights in absolutely meager prose because I can't replicate or remember or even stir up much enthusiasm for any details at that point.

I suppose I could give up writing in my journal completely, and just dedicate myself to pure "living." But I'm convinced that writing, or reflection, can't be dismissed so lightly. My father the physicist once explained to me that if I were to fire an electron at a screen, I could think of it in terms of a wave before it hit the screen. As long as it was unobserved, it would act like a wave, called a wave of probability. However, as soon as I observed the electron, it would no longer be a wave, but a particle, landing in one precise place. The process works as if some cosmic dice-thrower simply threw the dice to decide which of all the *possibilities* (which, in the wave, make peaks and valleys of *probability*) will actually become reality. The really interesting thing here is that there is no reality until the electron is *observed*. I can

draw no conclusions about an unwatched electron. It is as if my observation *creates* the reality.

Like that electron-bombarded screen, my life is constantly being hit by a barrage of experiences. In fact, so many things are always happening that I run the risk of forgetting to “observe”—to think about, talk about, write about—in short, to *reflect on*—what’s going on. And if I fail to reflect on my experiences, they never become truly real. If I want to live the fullest kind of life, I *must* find time for reflection.

Of course, finding time to reflect is easier said than done. The most reflection-worthy experiences are also usually the most energy-consuming—thus my frustration with journal-writing. And all of us face this dichotomy—between living life, and reflecting on it—all the time. For instance, just this minute, Abraham was standing here holding a duck in one hand and a cup in the other, and he said, “One cup, and one duckie.” And then he sighed and said “*Two* so many things!” So then I had to stop typing this and go write that down in his “cute sayings” book so I wouldn’t forget it. But while I was gone I probably missed three more cute things that he said. So, I’m convinced, there must be a balance. If I give myself totally over to the moment, and never record or reflect on anything, then I’ll either forget it all or it won’t mean anything to me. But if I’m too busy reflecting on life, I’m not really living it, either, and pretty soon I won’t even have done anything *worth* reflecting about.

How can we resolve this conflict between reflection and experience? For God, maybe there is no conflict. He can probably do both at once. I imagine that he can experience everything fully, and completely enjoy it, while at the same time thinking and making connections in his head, about what it means, and how it all fits into the divine pattern, and what his logical next step should be. Maybe that’s what he meant when he said that “all things are present before mine eyes” (D&C 38:2). But, all things *not* being present to us here in mortality; we have to choose, at any given moment, whether to *experience* or to *reflect* on experience. The closest thing to simultaneity I can achieve seems to be a kind of rapid flip-flop between experience and reflection. Maybe if I learn to do it fast enough it will be like those revolving functions you learn about in calculus, which actually could hold a volume of, say, water, even though they’re two dimensional, because they’re spinning so fast around the axis.

I think the difference between the two ways of seeing, between experience and reflection, are paralleled in the difference between running and walking. When I go running, I catch glimpses of things, snatches of other people’s lives. I never really have time for a full examination of anything. But then, while running, I also have plenty of time to think. I amuse myself

by making up stories, filling out the things I've seen. Everything is in pieces: the bloodstain on the street, the blue light of a television flickering at five a.m., the suitcase leaning against a screen door. Everything takes on some kind of significance, and suddenly I'm seeing connections everywhere. Things make sense to me, but in a sort of unearthly, detached way. But even though running is a great time to reflect, it's also a time when I'm not really *part* of anything. I'm just an observer, outside of real life, not getting involved.

On the other hand, when I take walks with Abraham, I'm totally involved with real life. I'm so involved that I don't have time to reflect at all. Instead I'm pointing out stop signs and dump trucks and doggies, and trying to avoid the puncture weeds in the empty lot, and deciding if we have time for just one more trip down the slide before we have to go home and make lunch. I'm experiencing it all, even though I'm not exactly aware of it. The sun on my back, a train whistle, the sound of backhoes digging up pipes on the mountain.

Maybe there's no way to say which way—running or walking, reflection or experience—is more “real.” Of course the experience itself is what all reflection must start with. But I'm convinced that *meaningful* reality comes most often after reflection. In other words, only after writing about it, thinking about it, do the experiences start to mean something. Thinking back on those summer walks I just described, I can almost see it—the shape, the pattern of our summer. Walking, lying on the grass, blowing bubbles. What seemed like merely a collection of sensations at the time has somehow taken on shape, has become “summertime”—which it didn't become, really, until the summer had passed. When I reflect on past experiences, they gain a significance they didn't possess before.

Abraham feels the weight of reflection too. I know, even at age two. We went to the Monte Bean museum and he ran around gleefully, exclaiming about the elephant, running up the stairs, pressing all the buttons to make the animal pictures go on. But that night when we were telling Sam about it, I kept reminding Abraham of things—“And then we saw . . . Remember, Abe? What was the hippo doing?” “Hippo opening big, big mouth!”—and I think he enjoyed *that* even more. Somehow, talking about it was making the experience more real, more permanent, for him. Now he says to me five times a day, “Mommy and Abey talk about Bean Museum again?” And we go through it all over again. As we reflect on the experience, it solidifies in our minds. It becomes a “better,” or a more full, a more permanent, memory.

Even more important, perhaps, is that without reflection, we might not have memories at all. That's why my journal is often so boring just when it

ought to be the most exciting. I was too busy *experiencing* to *reflect*, and by the time I *do* reflect, I've forgotten the little things. Yes, without reflecting on it, I would remember that I *had* a baby. I would remember the hospital and how much he weighed. But the first time I heard his meowing baby cry, saw his blue fishy body, the way the sun came over Timpanogos like hope coming into the world, the way his tiny hands had dimples instead of knuckles—that would all be lost to me if I hadn't reflected on it.

There are probably a million experiences I've never reflected on, and therefore forgotten (and thankfully so, in some cases). But I shudder to think of others that might have been lost in the well of unremarked memory. For example, once my brother Karl and I were at the dentist waiting for my mom in the waiting room. A couple of older ladies walked in and settled themselves in the two chairs next to Karl. "How are you, young man?" said one. (People like Karl. He has an honest face.) Karl murmured a reply and the two old ladies started to converse discreetly. A look of intense pain came over Karl's face as he looked over at me. "Marilyn! I have a problem!" he hissed.

"What?" I hissed back.

"I can't really say!" he whispered.

"Then tell me later," I said, laughing.

"It needs to be solved before we leave!" breathed Karl urgently.

"Then what *is* it?" I said.

Karl leaned closer. "That lady is . . . sitting . . . on . . . my . . . *toothbrush!*" he howled silently. I stifled a snort of laughter. A hurt look appeared on Karl's face. "It's not *funny*," he said.

"You'll think of something," I choked out. The lady rearranged her legs, and Karl winced. My mom finished paying the bill and walked over to us. "Shall we go?" she said. "I can't," said Karl, in what was actually quite a calm voice for someone in his current circumstances. So we sat and waited for the ladies to leave. I read three *Sport's Illustrateds* in the time it took. I don't think Karl was ever quite the same again.

Maybe it wouldn't matter much if I forgot that. Maybe Karl doesn't even remember. But if I hadn't written that down at some point, it would all be lost to me, and I'm glad it isn't.

Of course, we shouldn't *neglect* experience in favor of reflection. I want time to think about the philosophical questions of life, but I don't want to plunge myself into a theoretical haze. If Abraham and I talk about our Monte Bean museum trip for the rest our lives without ever going for another visit, or to another museum, the act of reflection will probably lose its value for us. Anyway, there's no guarantee that my reflections on some experience will necessarily be *more* valuable than the experience

itself. Sometimes I think I see some kind of pattern in my life, and then something happens that throws it all off. I suppose that until we're in the ultimate reflective mode—postmortal life, I assume—we won't really have the whole picture and so won't be able to draw unshakeable conclusions. Our reflection will be limited because our experience is limited, and any inferences we draw will be partially just guesses.

Still, I'm convinced that even those guesses have value. It's like those "Interpreting Historical Data" questions you have to write for the AP history tests in high school. One time I was complaining about them to my brothers; the questions ask you to compare the weirdest things sometimes, and it frustrated me. They sympathized, and I then forgot all about it until history class a few weeks later, when a piece of white paper fell from between the pages of my history book. I picked it up. *Interpreting Historical Data*, it said. I read further:

The Civil War started exactly 77 years before the Bolshevik Revolution. Using the world map, analyze the relationship between the distance between St. Petersburg (Leningrad) and South Carolina and relative latitudes and the date of each historical event. Your answer should take into account the ancestral relationship between John Brown and Karl Marx as well as historical attitudes towards Negroes and Jews.

What does your answer teach you about the historical importance of the Federalist Papers, the Communist Manifesto, and the Magna Carta? Does this apply to the price of tea in China? Hint: $e^{(m77x)}=x+77$.

I started laughing. The paper was in Karl's handwriting, not that I couldn't recognize his hand in it a mile away. The scary thing was, at that point I'd gotten so good at "interpreting the data" that if it had been a real test question, I probably could have come up with something pretty good, and gotten a high score on it too. Sometimes I feel like I'm doing the same thing with my life. It's like an English literature test, and I'm making all these broad, bold statements ("Frost's sparse use of water imagery in the poem symbolizes his anger at Christ, the 'Living Water'") without really knowing if they're true. But the point is, I don't think it's harmful to make those kind of self- or life-summarizing statements, as long as I'm giving them actual thought. English teachers don't usually care about the interpretation nearly as much as the process you used to arrive there. The process of reflecting on my life, writing about it and talking about it and thinking about it, even just *speculating* about it, helps me make sense of it according to my current understanding.

As my life cycles along, bouncing back and forth between the exciting times where I'm so busy living I have no time to think about anything, and the unexciting times when all I'm doing is mentally reliving and digesting

past events, I progress. I experience, I reflect, I draw conclusions. I experience again, and it contradicts my conclusions, so I reflect again. And so on. Ideally, I suppose, the whole cycle would happen each day, so that it could be more substantial, experience and reflection constantly feeding off of and sustaining one another, becoming almost one entity, like that function that holds water because it spins with infinite speed. In this ideal cycle, perhaps the reflection would happen in my evening prayer, or in a time (someday I'd like to actually do this) which I have set aside daily, specifically for writing. But I'm convinced that going through the cycle at all, even weekly or monthly, is valuable. And as we step back and reflect—by writing, thinking about, and talking about our experiences—we will find our lives taking on a new and deeper reality.

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