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A Teacher's Plea

Tyler Johnson

Part 1: A World Transformed

Our Brave New World

Modernity surges from change to change.

The last thirty years, after all, have seen the advent of the smartphone, the proliferation of the internet, the democratization of the press, the dawn of social media, the creation of eBay and Amazon, the beginning of Google, and the birth of the post-9/11 world order.

Of course, any thirty-year period would include many changes, but this most recent period constitutes not simply another small advance along the arc of history but the type of epochal, tectonic shift that occurs only a few times each millennium. Depending on your exact comparison, these changes—taken together—rival either the advent of television, the birth of radio and “mass culture,” or—and in some ways this seems the most apropos analogy—the invention of the printing press and the fading of oral history as the reigning mode for the transmission of knowledge.¹

I see this every day in ways large and small. I spend most of my time with digital natives—both my work teaching medical students and my work teaching institute and serving in a young-adult ward bring me into close daily contact with millennials and members of Generation Z. I consider myself not quite a millennial, but very close. In some ways,

1. Among others, Nicholas Carr makes a similar argument in *The Shallows* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

I feel like I've been "adopted" into their tribe. As someone who loves our young people dearly—and who considered myself one of them not so many years ago—I want very much to better understand how we can teach them the restored gospel so that it will lodge deeply in the fleshy tablets of their hearts. In this essay, I convey what I have gleaned as I have pondered on just that idea. I hope these thoughts will prove meaningful to parents, bishops, local leaders, and, especially, those whose special charge it is to teach the restored gospel of Jesus Christ as part of the seminaries and institutes program.

Even as an "adopted millennial," I recognize that true digital natives process the world very differently. For them, the digital cloud extends the scope of their physiological brains. Part of the reason separation from their phones challenges them (us?) so much is because the information they store in their brains and the information they store digitally becomes messy at the borders—no crisp margin partitions them.

This fundamental difference in how information flows defines epistemology for millennials and the youth of Generation Z. It affects not just how they do mundane things like organize events or communicate, but it also creates their very sense of self and their perceptions of the world. For this reason, understanding the digital universe and its impact on young people must dictate how we interact with, minister to, and, especially, teach those of the rising generation.²

We cannot understand teaching if we do not understand how much we have changed. Some of the changes remain invisible because we have never noticed them; others have become so common that they no longer impress us (though they should). Regardless, only an appreciation of the

2. I wonder if a similar change in approach isn't reflected in recent changes that have been made to the curricular design of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For many years prior to 2015, after all, the Church's modus operandi for disseminating knowledge was, in essence, through textbooks and teachers who taught from them. A teacher was supposed to be something of an expert who stood at the front of the class and lectured, asking just enough questions to keep people on their toes. Similarly, for many years previous to about 2005, missionary discussions were memorized and recited verbatim to investigators.

Recently, however, the Church has adopted radical changes on both fronts. The last fifteen years have seen the introduction of *Preach My Gospel*, a study manual that places emphasis on missionaries' personal preparation and on teaching with flexibility to suit the needs of the learner rather than on teaching by rote memorization, nearly word for word. By the same token, the last four years have seen the rolling out of the "Come, Follow Me" curriculum, which, again, emphasizes the role of every member as a teacher. Instead of the official instructor lecturing, she is to sit with the class, facilitating meaningful discussion that ideally incorporates the experiences and needs of every person in the classroom.

scope of the transformation unlocks for us an understanding of how we must adapt our teaching if we are to succeed in conveying the full scope and beauty of the restored gospel.

Let's step back and see if we can appreciate just how dramatically different our new world is.

Thirty years ago, people lived in a particular place, and that place defined their upbringing. By this I mean that unless they had particularly wealthy parents, many young people did not physically travel much beyond the confines of their immediate neighborhood, and beyond such rare physical travel, the only way to escape their immediate locale intellectually was through reading, radio, and perhaps the occasional movie. I do not doubt or minimize the impact of reading and radio but am nonetheless afraid their effects pale in comparison to the digital world's informational onslaught. If nothing else, when people read a book back then, their reaction and its effects were largely confined to the space between those people's ears. Yes, they might have an isolated conversation about the book with a friend, but that's generally as far as such things went.

Similar strictures thirty years ago limited our acquisition of knowledge. Imagine if, in 1990, I had wanted to familiarize myself with, say, the country of Tunisia. I would have started by reading the brief entry in our *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Then, I would have walked to the library, and in order to find anything there, I would have needed to know enough about a card catalogue to find the books I sought. I would then have had to check the books out and cart them home (or briefly peruse them at the library). If I had wanted to record specific information from such a book, I would have needed to either transcribe it by hand or make a photocopy. If, after returning the books, I had thought, *Oh, I remember this one interesting thing from the book, but I can't remember the details: what was it exactly again?* I would have needed to actually return to the library and rehash that entire process.

This is all to say that the acquisition of knowledge carried with it an intuitive price. That price seemed symbolically appropriate; somehow, we sensed that knowledge should be available but perhaps not instantly, almost flippantly, so.

But my, how things have changed.

Now, of course, the price of acquiring knowledge has fallen so far that carrying facts in our brains seems pointless: what good is memorizing anything if Google knows everything and is always available? I see this profound shift in medical students I teach. When I was in medical school—just fifteen years ago—all phones were still “dumb” and Google

was just poking its way into our consciousness. Most systems cataloguing information online felt like digitized versions of musty card catalogs: they existed, but they were clunky, slow, and labyrinthine. Indeed, my first college writing class featured lessons about Boolean search terms—at that time, the internet could give you information but often required coaxing and the whispering of just the right words to extract it.

As a consequence, when we learned things in medical school, it was with the assumption we would *really need to know* those things. There was a possibility that some patient would present to us, somewhere down the road, a mysterious constellation of symptoms requiring a real Sherlock Holmes to recognize them. In such a scenario, if I did not remember that *one key fact* from medical school, that poor patient might be undone on my account.

Now, however, such worries seem not just antiquated, but downright anachronistic, like carrying around a pocket watch to be pulled out of the vest from a three-piece suit. The internet now is a symbiotic parasite on the medical brain. All doctors know this—and, yes, they sometimes look things up on Google (or its medical equivalent, UpToDate) after you leave the room.

This is not to suggest doctors don't know things; most of them still easily access huge stores of knowledge. What has changed, instead, is what it means *to know*. Now, “knowing” may as well mean being in command of finding something on the internet as much as having a fact reside in your own physiological brain. Indeed, the way doctors view themselves now jumps very much out of Star Trek: a large percentage of “my brain” consists of my own physiological neurons, but another large percentage consists of the neurons provided by UpToDate, Google, and PubMed.

What does all of this have to do with how we teach the gospel?

Everything.

It has everything to do with our teaching because the above is not true just for doctors—this reality rules for virtually all millennials (and younger). I recognize that when digital foreigners (like me) teach digital natives, it can be hard for the teacher to understand that it is not just that the natives know different things—it is, instead, that the *very way they know* differs fundamentally from the knowing of older generations.³

3. This contention—that millennials process information differently than their predecessors—has been demonstrated and discussed exhaustively, and many books outline the differences. Two I have found particularly illuminating are Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows* and Sheri Turkle's *Reclaiming Conversation* (New York: Penguin Random House,

Since at least part of teaching has to do with getting a person from “I don’t know” to “I know,” the process by which millennials acquire knowledge matters profoundly.

In some ways, of course, *what* they know also matters. When I was growing up, most members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints knew little about complex matters of Church history and doctrine. For the most part, acquiring such knowledge required quite a bit of effort, and, since many people thought they would gain little (or would actually be materially harmed) by studying such things, relatively few made the effort.⁴

Now, however, knowledge about thorny questions is widely available, and many young people with even passing interest are quite familiar with some of our theology and culture’s most perplexing quandaries. This is as simple as a supply and demand curve. When the price was high, the demand was low; with the price at zero dollars and almost no effort, the demand is much, much higher. Who knows if young people are really that much more interested in such things now than they were a few decades ago? Regardless, it now takes just one common Facebook link, and an entire group of young folks becomes instantly aware of a whole host of questions.

Again, I don’t mean to suggest that information about thorny Church questions has not been available for decades—it has. There are multiple examples, even in Church publications, of articles addressing difficult issues from decades ago. And there have always been those with a keen interest in such things who have explored these issues as an important part of their scholarship and discipleship.

Still, while such information has always existed, the last three decades have seen the information transform from something that is *available* to something that is almost *unavoidable*.

This availability matters a lot, but the change goes far beyond this. When I was coming of age, many members of the Church lived in walled religious gardens. We learned what we learned about religion in Sunday School and within the walls of our homes, and that was often it. Where

2016). The former discusses how millennials—largely, it seems, because of their wired world—think differently; the latter covers how they process emotions distinctly and for largely the same reasons. I also covered this topic in some detail in “Reclaiming Reality,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 7–38.

4. There were exceptions to this rule, of course. Gospel scholars—including invested amateurs—have long been a part of many wards and stakes, but in prior eras even such amateur familiarity required a deeper level of commitment and much more time.

else, after all, would such a thing have been discussed? If religion was ever to have been raised in mixed company back then, we (as Latter-day Saints) often would have been bringing it up, and the conversation would often have been largely on our terms (one less obvious advantage, in some ways, of our well-known evangelical zeal).

Now, however, the walls have all come tumbling down. They no longer exist for most young people around the globe. Religion has been tossed into the hurly-burly of the digital world, and with this change, religion is fair game for discussion by everyone all the time. Indeed, it strikes me that, while direct comparisons are difficult to make, the percentage of the world's inhabitants with access to the internet is fast approaching the percentage with access to clean water and appropriate sanitation.⁵

That is to say, in many places, it may soon be true that everything from Shakespeare to CNN will be more accessible than basic hygiene and something to drink.

While I was writing this manuscript, my wife and I went to see *Fiddler on the Roof*. This play (and later movie) tells the story of a Jewish dairyman named Tevye, who resides in a small Russian village called Anatevka with his wife and children. The play chronicles their lives as they grapple with how to adapt to a changing world while clinging to the values and traditions that define them.

In the play, part of what binds Anatevka together is its insulation from the outside world. When, near the play's outset, a local know-it-all (one of the rare villagers who can read fluently) starts announcing headlines from an outside newspaper, his interlocutors cast aspersions on the dreary news and ask him to read something else instead. It is as if they think that by asking him not to read about what is going on outside their little village, they hope to change the course of those events, or at least make sure such events never affect them at home.

For a time, that ostrich-like approach seems to work, but finally the world encroaches—first seeping, then rushing, then flooding in on them.

This encroachment—and Tevye's response—constitutes the engine powering most of the play's central tensions. When the czar orders his

5. Compare "1 in 3 People Globally Do Not Have Access to Safe Drinking Water—UNICEF, WHO," World Health Organization, June 18, 2019, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/18-06-2019-1-in-3-people-globally-do-not-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-unicef-who>; and *Measuring the Information Society Report* (Geneva, Switz.: International Telecommunication Union, 2016), 77, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/misr2016/MISR2016-w4.pdf>.

troops to drive the Jewish natives from their homes, Tevye and his family load their few possessions in handcarts and leave for America and an uncertain future. The questions lingering as the play closes are these: What will become of Tevye once he emigrates to the United States? Can Jewish religion and culture thrive beyond the walled garden? What will happen to his family? Can their bonds survive without Anatevka to anchor them? Can such a close-knit religious community thrive when they are scattered to the winds?

One senses just how much the walled garden meant to the people forced to leave it as they sing, sullenly, with a hint of irony but a dollop of winsome sorrow: “Anatevka, Anatevka, underfed, overworked Anatevka. Where else could Sabbath be so sweet? Intimate, obstinate Anatevka, where I know everyone I meet.”

As members of the Church, we are leaving Anatevka.

Winsome though we may feel—we must adapt.

We must learn to thrive in a world without walls.

Leaving Anatevka

Our religion can no longer tell its story in isolation. Yes, part of our expulsion from Anatevka is exposure to the writing and thinking of those critical of the Church. (It is not hard to stumble onto overtly critical works online.) But our leaving Anatevka also means that the Church's narratives will be put up endlessly against those of disinterested third parties—as well as against competing narratives that do not directly challenge Church claims but will nonetheless compete with Church claims implicitly and indirectly.

A few examples help illustrate this point.

The first concerns the way we understand Joseph Smith's First Vision. When I was young, we still spoke almost exclusively of Joseph's 1838 account, and many members were not aware of other accounts, let alone of any of the details that differ between the retellings. Now, however, that information is becoming increasingly well-known. Part of this comes from people reading more sophisticated treatments of Joseph Smith's life, such as Richard L. Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling*, but familiarity with the multiple narratives does not require any special academic interest. The Church discusses the accounts themselves in great detail in the corresponding Gospel Topics Essay, the information is found in *Saints*, and the accounts are harmonized and synthesized even in the version of the First Vision that is recounted in visitors' centers. The approach we take to understanding this foundational event in our history now draws

on a good degree of nuance and subtlety and even requires learners to think through how we approach history generally and how this applies to the history on which we base spiritual beliefs.

This demand for increased nuance does not just apply to understanding this single event either—it applies equally to our understanding of religion generally. Growing up in a “walled garden,” I found that the Church’s worldview settled into and around me as surely as Utah’s desert air. This perspective was simply the way the world was because those were the stories I knew.

Now, however, that is true for almost no one.

With the advent of the internet, our religious narrative lives in a frenetic and ceaselessly morphing marketplace of views that uses hyperlinks and idea marketing to ensure almost no one reads a thing straight through. As soon as we try to read anything about anything online, the internet lures us to jump to another perspective or a follow-up piece. If I begin reading a piece about religion A written by author B, and stay online for an hour, I will quickly be taken to where author B wrote about religion C, and then to a piece by a different author about religion C that leads to yet another article by that author about religion D, and on and on and on (or I end up looking at endlessly looping cat videos on YouTube, but that’s a different story).

I may begin by reading about restored Christians only to be instantaneously transported to reading about Muslims, Sikhs, atheists, Pentecostals, Catholics, and the growing group who call themselves the religious “nones.” With the walls all torn down, we must recognize that religious education occurs—whether or not we know it, acknowledge it, or like it—fully in the face of an endless array of competing ideas. Many of these ideas have merit, and we will be required to redouble our efforts if we are to showcase the meaning and cohesion of our life and religious philosophy in their midst.

Where once I found comfort within the confines of Anatevka, now I stare—awestruck and with perhaps a little trepidation—over the entire expanse of humanity’s religious impulses and recognize that any fifteen-year-old with a smartphone has access to virtually all of it. As President M. Russell Ballard observed, “It was only a generation ago that our young people’s access to information about our history, doctrine, and practices was basically limited to material printed by the Church. Few students came into contact with alternative interpretations. Mostly, our young people lived a sheltered life. . . . Today, what they see on their mobile devices is likely to be faith challenging as much as faith promoting. Many of our young people are more familiar with Google than with

the gospel, more attuned to the internet than to inspiration, and more involved with Facebook than with faith.”⁶

So, if the world around us has changed, often almost unrecognizably—what are we to do? Though teaching the restored gospel was arguably a simpler affair thirty years ago, it will do little good to long for those bygone days. We must instead approach teaching restored Christianity with a renewed vigor and nuance. In the section that follows, I will offer my thoughts on eleven recommendations—beginning with those that are simpler and progressing to those that are more complex and demanding—that I have found useful in this regard.

Part 2: Teaching in a World Transformed

1. Embrace the Rushing in of Ideas

Ours is a robust and welcoming faith. We have inherited a philosophy expansive and generous enough to not just tolerate but to grow and learn from the best the entire world of philosophy and religion has to offer. We want to embrace all truth not because we have a monopoly on it but because we believe we can gather it in from the four corners of the earth and because eventually it will all coalesce into one great whole.

2. Teach Our Students about Nuance and the Importance of Knowing Our Sources

It has become paradigmatic in the internet age that who is saying something often matters as much as what is said. We and our youth must understand where to look for truth and that, in terms of seeking for deep eternal truth, the internet offers many mirages. I already discussed how the price of truth used to be more obvious, but that does not mean that important truth can now be had for free. We must make sure our youth know that they cannot discover the meaning of life through hyperlinks or social media.⁷ The things that really matter will open themselves only to those who truly seek by study and also by faith.

6. M. Russell Ballard, “By Study and by Faith,” *Ensign* 46, no. 12 (December 2016): 24.

7. The Church wields an impressive social media presence, but even this can be seen as little more than an invitation to deeper engagement with life’s most probing questions. Even President Russell M. Nelson’s tweets go only so far—not because of prophetic limitations but because of Twitter’s.

3. Recognize What Teaching in the Digital Era Demands of Us

In particular, we must be ready, always, to give a reason for the hope that is within us (see 1 Pet. 3:15)—after all, the ideas we teach compete endlessly in a marketplace of ideas. The unsettled nature of modern religious identity is exacerbated by the fact that belief in anything is declining. Increasingly, we will need to convince students that belief merits effort and that religious belief, in particular, should demand the kind of careful and lifelong cultivation that true discipleship demands. We can no longer teach with an undergirding presumption that our students will understand the importance of religion at all, let alone of restored Christianity.⁸

Many of them do not.⁹

4. Reconsider How We Approach Our Students' Engagement with Faith

The new context within which our youth encounter the restored gospel requires that we approach our students' engagement with the faith quite differently. Because both a bevy of other religions and an increasingly skeptical and secular world now constitute the milieu in which our students live, choosing belief in the restored gospel is rapidly becoming audacious. Whereas even a generation ago, when we still lived in *Anatavka*, choosing *anything else* constituted a breach of startling daring, increasingly—and in spite of being raised in gospel homes—our youth will feel as though they are choosing belief from among a very live set of religious (and nonreligious) options.

8. Jana Riess, among others, has made a similar point recently. Jana Riess, "Dear LDS Parents, It's Not Just Your Children Who Are Leaving Church," *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 30, 2020, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2020/06/30/jana-riess-dear-lds/>.

9. The evidence for this claim abounds. From the rise of the "nones" (see Michael Lipka, "A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing Religious 'Nones,'" Pew Research Center, May 13, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>) to the U.S. reaching, for the first time, the place where more than half of our citizens do not belong to a religious congregation (Scott Neuman, "Fewer Than Half of U.S. Adults Belong to a Religious Congregation, New Poll Shows," *NPR*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/30/982671783/fewer-than-half-of-u-s-adults-belong-to-a-religious-congregation-new-poll-shows>) to, finally, leaked reports that the activity rates of our own young adults (especially single ones) is abysmal (Jana Riess, "Worldwide, Only 25 Percent of Young Single Mormons Are Active in the LDS Church," *Religious News Service*, October 5, 2016, <https://religionnews.com/2016/10/05/leaked-worldwide-only-25-of-young-single-mormons-are-active-in-the-lds-church/>).

We should be little surprised if many consider other paths seriously—such consideration is an understandable response to the intellectual, social, and religious ecosystem in which they make their home outside of Anatevka. Those who choose belief in the restored gospel will do so more fully aware than ever before of the opportunity cost of doing so, and thus each who so chooses merits delight and celebration.

It seems this choosing to believe in—and live according to—the precepts of restored Christian discipleship will become a more and more difficult feat; if we do not equip our students appropriately, it may become rarer still.

5. Don't Simplify the Stories You Tell

Somewhat paradoxically, given all the foregoing, we may need to consider complicating the stories we tell about our history and our faith—even when students wish to keep the matter simple. I recognize that I tread here on treacherous ground, and I assume the maturity and nuance of my readers as I raise this idea. A teacher could teach for the purpose of provoking controversy, bringing up complex matters just to “stir the pot” and get a rise out of her listeners. Similarly, a teacher could probe deeply to flex intellectual muscle. These reasons are spiritually immature and not what I suggest here.

Instead, I recommend—carefully, and as the Spirit directs—probing beyond the comfortable limits of a student's understanding and helping the student embrace complexity.

I can best illustrate this principle by a personal example. My dad is an amateur Church historian and has long cultivated a library of thousands of books about the Church. I grew up with *Salamander* (by Linda Sil-litoe), *The Mormon Hierarchy* (by Michael Quinn), and *No Man Knows My History* (by Fawn Brodie) as part of the backdrop of our home. Once, looking to nibble at my dad's library without needing to really sit down to the buffet, I picked up a slender and little-known volume by Hugh Nibley called *No Ma'am, That's Not History* (more of a pamphlet than a book, really). In it, Hugh Nibley jovially dismisses—with his characteristic wit and twinkle—Fawn Brodie's entire project. The puckish tone of the title conveys the flavor of the enterprise. Having never read Brodie's book, I was happy to encounter Nibley's because it taught me, as I supposed, that her assertions were all libelous and that, clearly, no serious historian would give them credence.

The night after I read the pamphlet, I mentioned off-handedly to my dad that I was glad to know how worthless her book was—and even now,

probably twenty years later, I remember his answer distinctly. Without question it would have been easier, simpler, faster, and more spiritually convenient to tacitly accept my conclusions and move on with his day. My dad cared enough, however—and knew me well enough—to instead stop, sit me down, and enter into a long discussion with me about Joseph Smith and his history. As part of that discussion, he explained that while Nibley was genius-level smart and a first-rate Egyptologist and cultural critic, he really wasn't much of a historian of early American history. Furthermore, my dad said, some of what Brodie wrote was probably right.

All in all, my dad told me, he preferred history as explained by someone like Juanita Brooks—who reportedly loved Joseph “warts and all”—rather than as conveyed in that slender pamphlet, which at least implied a hagiographic view of the Prophet. For my dad, the “warts and all” history mattered not because it stirred up controversy but because truth matters and, ultimately, succors our faith much more deeply and lastingly than easy stories.

Now, to be clear, my dad's approach that night worked only because of how well he knew me and because his motives were well placed. A teacher with ulterior motives could have done something superficially similar to disastrous effect. Similarly, the same lesson to a different student might have come off all wrong. But in my case, that lesson and a thousand others like it proved determinative. When I later encountered complexities on my own late at night in a small apartment in Philadelphia during medical school, I took them in stride *because my dad had taught me how to persevere through complexity to the simplicity on the other side*.¹⁰

Given that complexity is, as discussed above, virtually unavoidable in the internet age, I would argue that we would do well to err on the side of teaching complexity survival skills, because without them many of our students will survive only so long as the narrative remains simple—and in the age of the internet, that is never very long.

10. I acknowledge Bruce and Marie Hafen's recent use of this construction in *Faith Is Not Blind* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018).

6. *Recognize That Some Aspects of Our History and Doctrine Will Challenge Even Devoted Disciples—Affirming That Fact Is Okay*

Even while accounting for the problems of unbalanced sources, we must also explicitly acknowledge the complex, nuanced, and sometimes frankly challenging nature of our beliefs and our history.

A necessary antecedent to this acknowledgment is a matter of delineating what matters more and what matters less among Church truths. We can imagine the Restoration's many truths forming concentric circles around the power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, which constitutes the beating heart of the gospel and the center of this imaginary "target." The closer a truth lies to that central reality, the more it matters. The farther away, the less.

I know that for me, anyway, my teaching resonates and matters more when it hews close to the heart of the gospel—the farther into the outer circles I stray, the less meaningful my teaching becomes. By the same token, sometimes concerns about peripheral gospel teachings matter little, not because the concerns are not valid but because their distance from the gospel's center makes them relatively irrelevant to the gospel enterprise.

Even recognizing this, however, we must also see and become comfortable with this fact: some aspects of our relatively consequential and central doctrine and history challenge even steadfast Saints. Denying this may at first seem helpful, but to many faithful and young Saints, such denials come across as "gaslighting," a term dripping with such cultural opprobrium as to rank, in the eyes of many millennials, as among the most heinous cultural sins.

In this vein, I am brought to think about the way we understand Joseph Smith. Heaven knows that some concerns about the Prophet, his actions, and his calling come from misinformation or from lack of context or historical understanding. Having said that, however, even if students read only the analysis of those who are *faithful* and *objective*, many will be left with probing questions. These questions refuse to be ignored whether we read *Saints*, *Rough Stone Rolling*, the Joseph Smith Papers, or the Gospel Topics Essays.

We might imagine, for instance, a young woman who comes of age with a nascent testimony of the Prophet Joseph. One night, while reading online about other matters, she stumbles on a description filled with disturbing uncontextualized accusations against the Prophet. Frightened, she turns to a beloved teacher for advice, and the teacher directs the student to any of the above-named sources.

Richard Bushman and *Rough Stone Rolling* tidily illustrate the paradox of resorting to faithful accounts of our history in the twenty-first century. While certainly not alone in recounting our history “warts and all,” Richard Bushman symbolizes these complex crosscurrents precisely because he presents what many consider to be the gold standard of faithful history. After all, there could hardly be a better author to turn to; Bushman has been a vocal and lifelong champion of the faith, its history, and its values, and, at the same time, one of the Church’s most decorated and universally admired scholars.

But that’s just the point.

In the course of reading that book, the student will find a great deal of context and nuance but not necessarily easy answers. Regarding Joseph’s polygamy and polyandry, for instance, she may learn that he was married to many women, that some of them were already married to other men, and that many of the marriages were not initially known to Joseph’s first wife, Emma. I do not hereby suggest that the questions raised by these historical findings do not have answers; rather, I mean to suggest that part of the answer we give if a student approaches us with concerns about these facts should perhaps include, simply, “Yes, I understand you; this can be a challenging subject for me, too.”

The challenges our LGBT members and their loved ones face likewise illustrate some of the points I stress above. In my work with young single adults in the Bay Area, I have sat across from many sincere and faithful members who are seeking solace on this issue. Almost all these good members either are LGBT themselves or have friends and family who are. They have watched as the United States and many other places in the world have undergone a remarkable sea change on the issue of LGBT rights in general—and gay marriage in particular—over the last twenty years. These members perceive that many gay members who stay in the Church feel like—and fear they will forever be—second-class citizens. Many gay members feel deeply uncomfortable with the idea of heterosexual (that is, “mixed orientation”) marriage but recognize that without entering into such a union, a gay man cannot, for example, become a bishop or preside over a stake and, similarly, cannot work as faculty at BYU or become a CES-employed seminary or institute teacher.¹¹

11. I have had members come to me at different times with each of these as concerns. If any of them is inaccurate or outdated, my apologies.

Far beyond this, LGBT members and their loved ones look all around them and see gay people in wider society entering into happy homosexual unions. These unions speak to a very deep part of many gay members' hearts. Thus, as has been frequently documented, many gay members feel deeply torn between a gospel they deeply love and their yearning for human intimacy. Similarly, their loved ones feel torn at seeing their LGBT friends and family in such a plight. Beyond even this, gay members may point out that there exists—so far as I am aware—no canonical explanation of what will happen to their homosexual tendencies in the eternities. Many of them feel deeply that these tendencies are part of their eternal being and don't want them to change but still find themselves tormented by the ambiguity concerning their eternal destiny.

No one claims that gay members are the only ones to face significant trials or heartache within the gospel family, but their struggles weigh heavily regardless.

My point is to say that this difficult issue causes deep pain, and this pain declares itself as a clear and present force in the lives of many young Church members. I question whether further teaching, better articulation, and improved explanations will remove this pain.

The pain simply *is*.

We can fully recognize it as such without declaring whether the pain is “right.” We can understand that—for many young people—this challenge is real and weighty. When a young person raises these concerns—whether in class or in a subsequent private discussion—we must carefully draw upon all our intellectual and emotional resources to approach the matter with candor, context, understanding, empathy, and faith.

I acknowledge that explicitly articulating empathy regarding concerns like those discussed here may seem uncomfortable or even unfaithful. My experience tells me, however, that articulating empathy need not be either. Furthermore, when we *do not* do this, it can come off as so puzzling and frustrating to those with questions as to become counterproductive. With regard to Joseph Smith's polygamy, for instance, if we pretend that there is nothing challenging about the historical narrative, young members are left wondering how it is possible their seniors in the Church (teachers, local ecclesiastical leaders, and others) don't recognize the dissonance between the chastity, propriety, and transparency with which we covenant to live our lives and the seemingly problematic nature of Joseph Smith's behavior in this regard. Similarly, when approaching the deep heartache of LGBT members, a

failure to begin by articulating empathy can come off as tone-deaf at best and heartless at worst.

Again, this is not to say that there are no answers to these questions, but I recommend we consider an articulation of empathy as a starting point in these discussions. This allows a struggling member to say, in effect, “Ah, here is someone who gets where I’m coming from,” and it is that very recognition that opens the door for further enlightenment and meaningful discussion. In this sense, articulating empathy is both a crucial end in itself (for reasons I will discuss more below) and an unmissable means to opening the door to further understanding. We should articulate empathy both because we have covenanted to do so (for example, see Mosiah 18:8–9) and because without doing so we cannot help students seek further light or knowledge.

Both the Joseph Smith–polygamy and the LGBT-rights issues afford an opportunity to recognize in all of this an important paradox: the heartache I described above suggests that our religion is succeeding marvelously in some important and weighty regards. I say this because I do *not* believe members who struggle to square their testimonies of Joseph Smith as God’s prophet with a new understanding of the historical record lack faith. Rather, they instinctively yearn for all the Prophet did to be “virtuous, lovely, . . . of good report [and] praiseworthy” (A of F 1:13). When they come up against actions that seem on their face not to fit that description, this troubles them deeply.

By the same token, many of those who agonize over the plight of LGBT members do so not because they don’t trust or have faith in the prophets but rather because their hearts overflow with empathy and they simply seek to succor those they see suffering. As more and more LGBT members have brought their stories out into the open, more and more straight members have grown deeply sensitive to their needs precisely because our religion so effectively weaves us into covenant Christian communities, and thus we cannot ignore the suffering of a fellow parishioner.

A corollary to all of this matters, too: many such questions cannot be helpfully confronted by referring to scripture alone. Scripture—our official canon and the words of modern prophets—dictates the contours of our official theology and of ongoing prophetic direction. Increasingly, however, we recognize that the proper contextualization and interpretation—never mind defense and explanation—of our foundational beliefs relies on a complex interdisciplinary web of interconnected understanding.

In this vein, I'm reminded of Steven Harper's recent book on Joseph Smith's First Vision.¹² The surface-level question many newcomers to the history of the vision have is, "Why do the accounts Joseph gave at different times of his life differ from each other in some seemingly key details?" Harper approaches the answer to this question but does so obliquely. His answer draws together threads from neurobiology, psychology, and history—and does so, I argue, because a satisfactory answer requires this kind of deep and interdisciplinary dive. This kind of answer will increasingly become relevant because our faith increasingly intertwines itself into many aspects of our lives and will no longer confine itself to a neat cognitive box called "religion."

Growing out of this interdisciplinary nature of understanding, our faith comes to an equally consequential truth: we will need to marshal expertise from all walks of life to allow our understanding of our faith to fully flourish. Here, again, President Ballard speaks to the point:

Wise people do not rely on the internet to diagnose and treat emotional, mental, and physical health challenges, especially life-threatening challenges. Instead, they seek out health experts, those trained and licensed by recognized medical and state boards. Even then, prudent people seek a second opinion.

If that is the sensible course to take in finding answers for emotional, mental, and physical issues, it is even more so when eternal life is at stake. When something has the potential to threaten our spiritual life, our most precious family relationships, and our membership in the kingdom, we should find thoughtful and faithful Church leaders to help us. And, if necessary, we should ask those with appropriate academic training, experience, and expertise for help.

This is exactly what I do when I need an answer to my own questions that I cannot answer myself. I seek help from my Brethren in the Quorum of the Twelve and from others with expertise in fields of Church history and doctrine.¹³

This quote strikes me for multiple reasons but most deeply because, in it, President Ballard includes himself (if only implicitly) as both questioner

12. Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); see also Aubrey Chaves, Tim Chaves, and Steven C. Harper, "Memory and the First Vision—Steven C. Harper," March 21, 2020, in *Faith Matters*, produced by Faith Matters Foundation, podcast, 1:21:03, <https://faithmatters.org/memory-and-the-first-vision-steven-c-harper/>.

13. Ballard, "By Study and by Faith," 25.

and expert. On the one hand, though he doesn't specifically acknowledge as much, we can imagine that his brethren in the Quorum of the Twelve (and others in the Church) go to him with difficult questions. Perhaps more telling, however, is that when *he* has questions requiring subspecialty expertise, he goes not only to other General Authorities but also to those with expertise in the appropriate field. That he should explicitly articulate this and invite us to do likewise reminds us that we seek truth wherever it is found—including from our General Authorities but also from professional academics without official clerical roles.

This broad-ranging and holistic approach to understanding and teaching truth will challenge us as teachers more deeply than simply delivering rote points from a prepared lesson. This method of preparing to teach requires deeper engagement and more thoughtful analysis—and sometimes, it also requires a heavier weight on our collective hearts.

7. Become More Alive to Our Students' Struggles

As an oncologist, much of what I do deals with delivering bad news to my patients. Sometimes this news signals a temporary setback, but other times it shatters and devastates. You can imagine that if I am discussing either the return of a tumor (after a patient was apparently cured) or the fact that we no longer have therapy options for a disease that will soon take a patient's life, discussing these developments is one of my gravest and most difficult responsibilities.

Because of this, I've pondered frequently on the best way to deliver this kind of news. What's more, it turns out there is a good deal of research and expertise around this dilemma, especially from important contributors to the field of palliative care such as Anthony Back and James Tulsky.¹⁴

Delivering this news and responding to a patient's resulting reactions requires something of a Goldilocks approach. Of course, it would be both clueless and hurtful to deliver bad news, have the patient respond by being overcome with emotion, and then simply move on without acknowledging the emotion at all. At the same time, however—and perhaps less intuitively—it harms a patient as much or more if I respond

14. These two authors and their colleagues developed a training course known as VitalTalk that helps train doctors in the art and science of having difficult conversations with patients.

to that wave of emotion by saying, "This must be so hard, and I know exactly how you feel."

Both of these responses are problematic precisely for the same reason—because they both evince that I've done nothing to really try to understand what the patient is experiencing. On the one hand, I would never pass by that reaction unmoved if I had really wondered what it must be like to feel that way; on the other, I would equally never claim to know how it feels if I had thought about it—even a glancing analysis would demonstrate that I most certainly do *not* know how it feels.

Given all of this, it turns out the best response to such an emotional reaction is something like this: "I've tried to imagine how this must feel. I know I can't really understand, but I want you to know I can *imagine* it must be really scary and unsettling—and I am here for you while this is hard." Notice what I do and do not say in this response. I do *not* claim perfect understanding, but I *do* evince that I've spent the time and emotional energy necessary to try to put myself in the shoes of the patient.

Note one other thing I do not do: I do *not* respond by unleashing an avalanche of facts, even facts I consider helpful or necessary. To do so is a common misstep in this kind of situation and demonstrates a fundamental error. Providing facts in this setting suggests that I believe the problem is a deficit of knowledge—if the patient only knew more, she would feel better. But of course, assuming the news really is as bad as it at first seems (and that the emotions don't proceed from some misunderstanding), the problem is not a lack of facts but, instead, that the situation is difficult and frightening.

Emotions comprise an expected and appropriate response.

There is a certain parallel between this situation and responding to students (or loved ones) who face fear or sorrow while grappling with complications to their beliefs.

What we often refer to as a "faith crisis," while perhaps proceeding from cognitive questions, very quickly becomes in some large part an *emotional* experience. This fact proves crucial in directing our response. If the problem were cognitive, we would respond most helpfully by supplying information, but if the problem is emotional, we cannot assuage the grief, fear, or trepidation with a boatload of facts or contextual understanding of the scriptures or Church history. Yes, of course there is a time for this, and sometimes providing such information is critical, but to the degree a person comes to us in spiritual extremis, the first response must be to *acknowledge the emotion and then to dwell with the person within that emotion for a time.*

At the risk of being overly specific and didactic, let me illustrate in a spiritual context an approach I have often found helpful in teaching other doctors how to respond to emotional medical situations. Let's consider Sister Hernandez, an institute teacher. She is in her office one day, and one of her students, Michael, comes to her with a problem. Let's consider two ways this scenario might play out after a common first statement of concern:

Scenario #1:

Michael: Hi, Sister Hernandez, could I talk to you about something?

Sister H: Of course!

Michael: Well, a few months ago, a friend recommended that I read *Rough Stone Rolling* because I had been wanting to learn more about Joseph Smith. I started reading, and I found the book to be really interesting, but to be honest, I found out some things that really troubled me. I was especially concerned to learn about Joseph's treasure-digging and a lot of the stuff about that because I had just never heard any of that before. I tried to ignore it for a while or to focus on other things, but it seems like it's just been gnawing away at me, and then my questions about that started to make me want to question other things in the gospel, and before I knew it, well, it just felt like my whole testimony came tumbling down like a castle of cards. I've always loved the Church, but now I feel confused and betrayed and frustrated and dark and kind of lost.

Sister H: Wow, Michael, thanks for talking to me about this. You know, this is a common misconception that people have after reading about Joseph's early years for the first time. The truth is that there is nothing to worry about in all this. You just need to understand a little historical context. Let me explain to you what you probably don't know . . .

Michael: OK, I guess . . . I hope you're right.

Scenario #2:

[after the same first three exchanges]

Michael: [. . .] but now I feel confused and betrayed and frustrated and dark and kind of lost.

Sister H: Wow, Michael, thank you so much for bringing this to me. It sounds like, from what you've told me, after reading those parts in *Rough Stone Rolling*, you're feeling kind of scared, and frankly a

little betrayed. Like you wish you had known about all this earlier. Is that about right?

Michael: That's *exactly* it. I love the Church and totally want to keep believing; it's just that I feel like if the Church has known this all along, they should have told us. Plus, I just feel so confused because my testimony is central to my life, and I need to know how to put it back together to figure out how to keep moving forward from here.

Sister H: Michael, thanks for talking to me so candidly. I can imagine what it must be like to be in your shoes, and I can tell you're feeling confused and anxious. I want you to know that I am here for you and this is a safe place to come with these concerns.

The difference in Sister H's responses in 1 and 2 may seem subtle or relatively unimportant, but experience and a host of data from social psychology tell us the differences matter a great deal. The key virtue of the second response is that in it Sister H recognizes that Michael's main motivation for coming to her is not actually wanting a cognitive answer to an intellectual question, but instead it is that *he needs an acknowledgment of his sorrow and confusion and wants someone to be with him and to help him work through his feelings*. Most often, questions about the Church, while manifesting as intellectual concerns, are, at their core, more about an emotion—or at least contain an emotional element that must be addressed before cognitive questions can be helpfully answered.

Leaders and teachers can do a world of good when they recognize and acknowledge this.

Notice, also, a couple of other facets that differ between the above two accounts. First, the second response requires, perhaps, a measure of bravery because in it Sister H does not instinctively brush away the concern—she does not claim it does not exist or does not have merit. She admits the difficulty. Subconsciously, the first response is a form of self-protection; dismissing the concern out of hand can powerfully reinforce the notion that there is nothing there to see.

Second, the first response sets a dangerous precedent. Because Sister H claims to have a ready answer, she sets herself and Michael up to expect a tidy resolution to a complex problem. This may initially strike us as exactly what she should be doing, but on this issue—and in many others in the Church and in life—the resolution, even if and when it comes, requires nuance, emotional and intellectual maturity, and more than a little faith.

This is not to say that the resolution isn't real, but just that the first response sets up a sort of intellectual poker game where the only way Sister H and Michael "win" is if the response she provides fulfills the expectations she has (perhaps unintentionally) created. With the second answer, however, no such expectations are created. The second answer simply acknowledges distress and promises to confront it together with Michael. Notice also that in the second response Sister H does *not* say that the problem is insoluble or that Michael is "right" to be concerned or, in fact, anything at all about the merit or substance of his concerns.

The *only* thing she does is name and validate his emotions and promise to be there with and for Michael, come what may.

8. Normalize Uncertainty and Valorize Choosing to Believe

An often unspoken—but sometimes explicit—spiritual and intellectual paradigm in the Church suggests that we should expect spiritual certainty early and often along the path of discipleship. This idea appears most obviously in our testimony meetings, which almost universally feature "to know" as the most common verb. It would be one thing to hear apostles and prophets using such a word commonly—in that case it might seem appropriately aspirational—but when the word is used by everyone from Brother Jensen, the otherwise spiritually unremarkable Primary teacher, to little Suzie, the fourth grader who proudly proclaims her testimony every Sunday, it can come to seem as if that is the *only* appropriate, expected, or valuable approach to our religion.

I mention all of this not to question the honesty of those who use the expression "I know" nor to suggest that those who feel such conviction tone their rhetoric down—obviously that's not my place—but instead to observe that the ubiquity of the term can create unfair and scripturally inaccurate expectations. This universal use of "I know" seems to suggest that *any and every* honest seeker should receive certainty as the response to spiritual inquiry. More to the point, the routine usage of "I know" may inadvertently tell our young people that if they *cannot* state "I know," then they are either spiritually broken or are not really trying.

But the scriptures simply do not support this conclusion. After all, even if Moroni seems to suggest something like this in Moroni 10:3–5—the scripture we most often cite when discussing how to gain spiritual confirmation of the truth of the Book of Mormon in particular but also often of the gospel in general—Alma goes to great lengths in Alma 32 to remind us that an immediate, lightning-strike arrival of certainty is *not*

to be expected. Alma's loving description of the growth of a tree constitutes a tribute to those whose knowledge really does come line upon line and precept upon precept. His sermon is a paean to those who do not "know" (notice how often he makes a point of observing what is *not* knowledge) but who continue in faith regardless.

And then perhaps most tellingly of all, in Doctrine and Covenants 46, as the Lord articulates a list of spiritual gifts needed for the proper functioning of the Church, he reminds us that while "to some it is given to know," to others it is given to "believe on their words." Given the way in which this second spiritual gift is painted in relief against the first, it is clear from the context that the Lord is saying that some people's spiritual gift is to *not* know but to walk by faith regardless.

Because "I know" features so prominently in our cultural discourse, we can take care as teachers to emphasize that continuing in belief when knowledge is lacking is *not* the silver prize for subpar saints. No, to press forward believing (but uncertain) constitutes a brave, even audacious, choice to follow our best instincts even though evidence does not inescapably compel us.

Most of us, after all, pass through periods of belief without knowledge as we cultivate the tree of discipleship, and many of us will see periods where we must return to uncertain believing even after we feel we could honestly say, "I know." That confidence in spiritual ideas ebbs and flows in just this way is normal and expected—but our students may not know that. A loving teacher articulating as much can be spiritually life-saving. Let us enthrone Alma 32 as one of our most beautiful allegories when addressing the growth of testimony and the life of faith. And let us lovingly remind our learners who feel stung during testimony meeting when their certainty does not seem to measure up to that of those around them that we are not, in fact, engaged in a race for deeper certainty and that faith without knowledge is its own beautiful gift—one that will allow them to minister to the body of Christ in unique and important ways.

9. Remind Our Youth That Christ Commands and Empowers Us to Minister to the Marginalized

One important reason youth turn away from the restored gospel may be that they feel we as Church members do not really care about the less fortunate. Or, rather, they may sense we care about the marginalized but as a sort of secondary concern, a thing to be done once we've paid our tithing, attended our Sunday meetings, and finished the weekly

Aaronic-priesthood basketball game. Then, if we have time, we will find a way to turn to those society has left behind.

Perhaps it should not surprise us that our youth feel particularly sensitive to this issue. After all, they have come of age surrounded by the stories of the marginalized in a way that never before has been possible. Consider for a moment the protests that erupted after the death of George Floyd in summer 2020. It is not as if Mr. Floyd was the first Black man to be murdered by a white police officer. Part of the difference, of course, was the callous and protracted way the killing happened—requiring sustained action by Derek Chauvin over many minutes. But even that was not unique. Instead, the reason the killing sparked such widespread protest so quickly was because it was recorded and instantly beamed throughout the world. The voice of a marginalized Black man, even after he died, echoed across the globe, calling for justice—and the people of the world answered by spilling out into the streets in spontaneous protests.

That could never have happened before the advent of social media.

Similarly, consider a young man growing up in an ethnically and socioeconomically homogenous neighborhood along the Wasatch Front. Even a few decades ago, that young man might never have encountered the stories of those outside his own immediate social circles. Now, however, that same young man, if he holds social media accounts, is almost certain to be *inundated* with those same stories. The voices of people of all stripes will call out from Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, curated news feeds, and a hundred other sources. And if this does not happen while he is still at home, the same flood will come rushing in once he goes away to college. In the face of this, needs that previously might have seemed removed and theoretical have suddenly become pressing and inescapable.

Given this context, we as Church members and gospel teachers are faced with two pressing priorities. One is a matter of messaging. What an irony and a tragedy that our youth could come away from studying the gospel without understanding that the very most elemental call of Jesus Christ—as articulated, yes, in the New Testament but also throughout restoration scripture—is to minister to the marginalized.¹⁵ What tableau could teach this more poignantly, after all, than the image of Alma teaching those who were asked to build a resplendent synagogue

15. In his new book *Restoration* (Meridian, Idaho: Faith Matters, 2020), Patrick Mason argues this is even one way of understanding what the Lord (and President Nelson) means when he calls us to gather Israel.

only to be cast out of it because their dress and manner of bearing were too humble (see Alma 32)?

But that example—of a church that not only didn't minister to the marginalized but also actively ostracized them—should likewise serve as a warning regarding the second point: we must also ensure that we, as Latter-day Saints, *do the work of centering those who've been pushed to the periphery and of bringing succor to those who society has left behind*. In other words: while part of this is about messaging, another part is about us more fully living up to our creed. We can't just say we welcome people, nor can we pretend—we as Church members need to *actually become* the welcoming Zion our younger members long for us to be.

Indeed, as we think about this, we would do well to reflect on the story in Alma chapter 4 where we read, “Alma saw the wickedness *of the church*, and he saw also that the example *of the church* began to lead those who were unbelievers on from one piece of iniquity to another, thus bringing on the destruction of the people. Yea, he saw great inequality among the people, some lifting themselves up with their pride, despising others, turning their backs upon the needy and the naked and those who were hungry, and those who were athirst, and those who were sick and afflicted” (vv. 11–12).

Alma's observations here leave us with a series of stinging questions, especially as he remarks *specifically about the church*. Are there times when we as Church members ostracize those who most need our help? Are there those we leave on the outside of our nurturing social circles? Are there times inequality creeps into our congregations? Are we turning off those outside the Church—or even our youth within the Church—by either failing to minister to the marginalized or (even if unintentionally) marginalizing some people ourselves? As I ponder these questions, I'm reminded of the words of Professor Ryan Gabriel, who, speaking specifically about racism as a marginalizing force, said in a BYU devotional, “To falsely diminish the impacts of racism on the lives of Heavenly Father's children does nothing to stop racism. . . . To pretend that race is not important does not show compassion for the experiences of others who, by virtue of their experiences with racism, know that it is. Christ Himself asks us to remember and know His suffering—to touch the scars on His hands and feet. He does not ask us to deny another's pain but to know it and touch it.”¹⁶ Gabriel's call is for

16. Ryan Gabriel, “Healing Racism through Jesus Christ,” Brigham Young University devotional, Provo, Utah, April 6, 2021, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/ryan-gabriel/healing-racism-through-jesus-christ/>.

us to first recognize the great harm racism perpetrates on those against whom it discriminates, to seek to understand the pain it causes, and to let that understanding spur us to reckon with how we can “lead out” in abandoning racism.

Furthermore, it is not as if Alma and Professor Gabriel stand alone in their observations or in the call to ensure we reach out to those who may feel they are looking in from the outside. We could turn to King Benjamin in Mosiah 3–5, or to Elder Jeffrey R. Holland in “The First Great Commandment,”¹⁷ or to President Thomas S. Monson in “What Have I Done for Someone Today?”¹⁸ or to Elder Dale G. Renlund in “Infuriating Unfairness,”¹⁹ or to President Linda Burton in “I Was a Stranger,”²⁰ or to the entire joint Relief Society Presidency who centered the words and experience of a self-described queer woman at the 2021 BYU Women’s Conference,²¹ or to President Nelson, who recently reminded us, “The gospel net to gather scattered Israel is expansive. There is room for each person who will fully embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ. . . . Each of us has a divine potential because each is a child of God. Each is equal in His eyes. The implications of this truth are profound.”²²

All of this brings up a great irony: many young Church members stand ready and willing to remind *us* that any church’s truth depends not only on its access to authority or its fidelity to biblical patterns of ecclesiology but perhaps even more importantly on how well it protects and ministers to society’s most vulnerable. After all, if Jesus taught that individuals will be divided into sheep and goats based specifically on how well they care for those for whom society has not provided, then it would stand to reason that churches will be judged likewise. This is all to say, while acknowledging the key role of everything from real priesthood power to authentic scripture, we must also remember that *we as Church members* help to make the Church “true” by the way we care for those who need our help, especially those whom society has placed on its

17. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The First Great Commandment,” *Ensign* 42, no. 11 (November 2012): 83–85.

18. Thomas S. Monson, “What Have I Done for Someone Today?” *Ensign* 39, no. 11 (November 2009): 84–87.

19. Dale G. Renlund, “Infuriating Unfairness,” *Liahona* 45, no. 5 (May 2021): 41–45.

20. Linda K. Burton, “I Was a Stranger,” *Ensign* 46, no. 5 (May 2016): 13–15.

21. See Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Help All Women—Including Queer Members—to Feel They Belong in Relief Society, LDS Attendees Told at BYU Conference,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2021/04/29/help-all-women-including/>.

22. Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” *Ensign* 50, no. 11 (November 2020): 94.

margins. Even a church with appropriate authority, after all, can be hollowed into an empty vessel if its members do not care for those in need.

All of the foregoing leaves us with these two central questions: Do we emphatically articulate to our youth just how much the call to minister to those on the margins defines our restored Christian discipleship? And do we as Church members fully live up to this creed?

10. Help Our Students Unlearn Two Unproductive Ideas

Most Church members acknowledge that Church culture sometimes differs from our doctrine. Some elements of our culture—like green Jell-O—elicit a chuckle and matter little. But other matters, such as the two ideas we'll discuss here, can deeply injure the body of Christ generally and the spiritual lives of our young people specifically. The first idea is that a de facto monoculture defines the body of Christ. The second is that specific political preferences are prerequisites for effective engagement with the gospel or the Church.

Now, let's be frank for a moment. On the one hand, anyone who has been a Church member for very long can recite practically by rote the statement that is read from the pulpit with metronomic regularity each election season stating that the Church remains staunchly nonpartisan and that Church members should determine which parties and candidates best represent gospel principles and vote accordingly. Having said that, however, we all also know that many Church members hear that statement as if a few extra words were supposed to be understood at the end: "as long as the candidates in question are (U.S.) Republicans."

The history of why much of the Church understands itself to be unofficially but definitionally politically conservative is long and complicated, and it is not my intent to attempt that explanation here. But we know that many people have this impression. Recent data, however, demonstrates younger members of the Church skew toward greater political diversity (as one example, a recent poll showed that more Church members under forty voted for Joe Biden in the 2020 U.S. presidential election than for Donald Trump).²³

If those younger Church members continue to confront the tacit (and sometimes overt) suggestion that their political preferences disqualify

23. Jana Riess, "Younger Latter-day Saints Voted for Biden, but Trump Fared Well Overall," *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2021/04/01/jana-riess-younger-latter/>. "The breakdown for the under-40 set was 47% Biden, 42% Donald Trump, and 11% for third-party candidates."

them from Church membership or at least demote them to lesser status in the kingdom of God, it will become increasingly difficult for them to reconcile the political preferences dictated by the leanings of their hearts with the religious inclinations that spring from those same principles.

This problem is as real as it is unnecessary.

Indeed, the deepest irony of this issue is precisely what President Dallin H. Oaks articulated in his striking Sunday afternoon, April 4, 2021, general conference address.²⁴ The idea that Church membership dictates clear and unwavering political allegiance of any kind is, on its face, nonsensical. Political parties and their constituent candidates and principles shift according to the will of the people over time, as they should in a democracy. Different issues come to the fore and then recede. And some issues matter more in one election than they do in another. Therefore, if we have minds and hearts that are, as Elder Neal A. Maxwell once suggested, “furnished with fixed principles,”²⁵ then *of course* we will change political allegiances and find reasons to support candidates of different stripes over time. Engagement in the political process *should challenge* us because the work of applying our Christianity to life in the real world is rarely simple.

President Oaks, again, provided perhaps the most clarion example of this in recent times when he declared unequivocally in a 2020 BYU devotional that “Black lives matter” is an “eternal truth all reasonable people should support.”²⁶ Because this catchphrase has become tangled up in complicated political tussles, many Church members approached it with suspicion or even derision. But President Oaks reminded us that, as a matter of our theology, this is *not even a hard question*. Indeed, the fact that his pronouncement came as such a shock (anyway, many people I know were shocked, and I sensed a similar sense of at least strong surprise more generally) tells us something important and condemning about the backward politics→religion determination that has come to define much of our shared cultural consciousness. Of course, as he also acknowledged that day, the matter of precisely which political initiatives (associated with the *group* Black Lives Matter) should be

24. Dallin H. Oaks, “Defending Our Divinely Inspired Constitution,” *Liahona* 45, no. 5 (May 2021): 105–8.

25. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Pathway of Discipleship,” *Ensign* 28, no. 9 (September 1998): 9.

26. Dallin H. Oaks, “Racism and Other Challenges,” Brigham Young University devotional, Provo, Utah, October 27, 2020, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/dallin-h-oaks/racism-other-challenges/>.

pursued is a question for appropriate political debate, but affirming the fact that Black lives matter is not.

And that brings us to the most important part of this fundamentally important point: we need to help young Church members understand that, often, the very principles that tug at their minds and hearts, inclining them to support a political party or partisan platform, *spring from the restored gospel of Jesus Christ*. The drive for racial justice, the pursuit of economic equality, the prioritization of ecological stewardship, and the longing for a more truly just society—all of these are not tangential political pursuits but find deep, meaningful roots within the Savior's restored gospel. Not only should a student who longs for these things not feel ostracized in our classes and communities, but she should instead learn to articulate why gospel principles drive that very longing.

11. Recognize That to Teach Is to Tread on Sacred Ground

Living in Northern California, we have been blessed (though admittedly sometimes frustrated) to have public health officials who took the COVID-19 pandemic seriously right from the very get-go. As a consequence, from the time we entered lockdown in March 2020, our options for activities were seriously curtailed: no parks, no nature preserves, no school, no rec centers, no restaurants, no playdates, nothing. Like much of the rest of the world, we suddenly woke up one morning that month and found that all three of our boys were effectively grounded for the next many months—it was just the three boys and my wife and I here in our little house.

One of the hidden blessings of this period, however, was the unexpected opportunity it afforded me to watch our second son—then five—become acquainted with nature. Though all official parks and preserves were off limits, we looked on maps of the area and, figuring it might be a good way to have the little boys let off steam, started visiting ponds and wooded areas to let the boys explore. Our oldest and youngest kids never got all that excited about it. But watching my second son will never leave me.

We found a small pond nestled in the woods about twenty minutes from our home. We visited often, he and I, and each time he would descend the small hill to the water's edge and, once there, would silently doff his shoes and then become one with the shoreline. Running his fingers through the loamy sand, carefully shifting small logs and stones to peek at the wildlife beneath, putting his eyes down to ground level to look out at the water, and finding over and over endless creatures—salamanders, newts, lizards,



Tyler Johnson's second son searching for creatures on the shore of a pond near Los Altos, California.

fish, frogs, and on and on—that were invisible to me and, I imagine, to most everyone else. Somehow, he had an eye for little critters and other camouflaged wonders and would silently stalk them through the grass—moving, though seemingly motionless, and through it all he was as quiet and reverent as silent prayer.

That son seemed intuitively to grasp that this place required complete presence—that it must be understood on its own terms. Because he did this without thinking, he was able to connect to the essence of the land in a way that made it sacred.

I mention this here because it reminds me of this fundamental fact: the human heart, like that little pond, is sacred in its essence—but, if we would have access to that sanctity, we must understand each heart on its own terms. Encountering another human heart demands our total presence.

When we teach, what is it we hope for? It seems to me we can hope a student decides to trust enough that she willingly lowers the defenses around her heart to allow some key doctrine or, even better, the love of the Savior in. But when those defenses are lowered, we as teachers are freighted with enormous responsibility. As we enter that sacred space, we would do well to doff our proverbial shoes and then to recognize that we must never allow prejudice to poison what we teach. In these moments, we can remember what Elder Dale G. Renlund taught: “To be Christlike, a person loves mercy. People who love mercy are not judgmental; they manifest compassion for others, especially for those who are less fortunate; they are gracious, kind, and honorable. These individuals treat everyone with love and understanding, regardless of characteristics such as race, gender, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and tribal, clan, or national differences. These are superseded by Christlike love.”²⁷

We can combine this with President Russell M. Nelson’s recent words: “We likewise call on government, business, and educational leaders at every level to review processes, laws, and organizational attitudes regarding racism and root them out once and for all.”²⁸ And finally we

27. Dale G. Renlund, “Do Justly, Love Mercy, and Walk Humbly with God,” *Ensign* 50, no. 11 (November 2020): 111.

28. This quotation is taken from an op-ed published jointly by President Russell M. Nelson of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and three leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: Derrick Johnson, president and CEO; Leon Russell, chairman of the board, and the Reverend Amos C. Brown, chairman emeritus of religious affairs. “Locking Arms for Racial Harmony in America,”

can add President Nelson's tweet that we must "repent" of our prejudice of all kinds.²⁹

When taken together, these quotes tell me as a teacher that it is not enough to simply tiptoe around the subjects of racism and other kinds of bias—be they in our own history and culture or elsewhere. As my children are now often taught in school, I—as a teacher of the restored gospel—must take up the mantle of being an "upstander" and must proactively demonstrate the ways in which the restored gospel of Jesus Christ preaches against racism and prejudice of every kind.

Given our own religion's complex history with anti-Black racism in particular, I must ensure that I leave no doubt that whatever may have been done or said in the past, I belong to a religion that lives up to the creed Nephi articulates, that God "denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female" (2 Ne. 26:33). In my classrooms, I can without equivocation articulate along with President Oaks that, indeed, Black lives matter.

I recognize that engaging our history on these matters may discomfit us precisely because our history as a people with respect to racism features many uncomfortable episodes and words. But when pondering on such examples, we need to remember Elder Renlund's injunction to be "stone catchers,"³⁰ even if those stones sometimes originate from our own history. If ever we are asked about harmful rhetoric from past Church members, or even Church leaders, we can confidently confirm that racism is wrong, no matter whence it comes. As the Church has written, succinctly and without equivocation, "Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form."³¹ We can bring this all together in our classrooms to ensure that we create there sacred spaces of safety and grace, rooms within which students of every skin color, sexuality, country of origin, educational background, socioeconomic status, and political preference feel welcomed and at home.

Medium, June 8, 2020, accessed April 15, 2021, https://medium.com/@Ch_JesusChrist/locking-arms-for-racial-harmony-in-america-2f62180abf37.

29. See Tad Walch, "President Nelson: 'Deeply Saddened at Recent Evidences of Racism and a Blatant Disregard for Human Life,'" *Deseret News*, June 1, 2020, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2020/6/1/21277362/president-nelson-face-book-post-social-media-racism-violence-latter-day-saints-naacp>.

30. Renlund, "Infuriating Unfairness," 43.

31. "Race and the Priesthood," Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 15, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

If we occasionally must confirm this position even with respect to the words of past Church leaders, we can rest assured that to do so is not to deny that leader's mantle specifically nor to question prophets generally. It is, instead, to *heed* the prophets; it was, after all, Moroni who wrote, "Condemn me not because of mine imperfection, . . . but rather give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been" (Morm. 9:31).

Part 3: The Fairy Tale and the Phoenix

In this essay, I have made two fundamental comparisons: of our restored Christian cultural moment to leaving Anatevka and of discussing a faith challenge to discussing impending death with a patient. All of this begs twin questions: What is it we are leaving? And what is the death our students grieve? I ask these questions together because I believe their answer is the same: We are abandoning a fairy tale, and it is the death of the fairy tale we mourn.

When I was coming of age, there was a certain way to understand the gospel that hewed tidily to clear moral boundaries. The Saints in Kirtland and Nauvoo were good; their antagonists were bad. Joseph was a practically perfect saint; his detractors were very nearly devils. The pioneers were the good guys; anyone who opposed them was nefarious. And so on.³²

More complete knowledge has taught us that these facile statements don't stand up to scrutiny. The early Saints distinguish themselves by their valor, faith, grit, and determination—yet they could also be clan-ish, stand-offish, and prone to anger. Their detractors could be antagonistic and even cruel—and some of what they did was inexcusable by any standard—but they were also demonstrating their own tenacity as they tried to eke out a living on the American frontier. Joseph, as it turns out, defined himself by paradox and—his prophetic mantle notwithstanding—recognized himself as far from perfect. And the list of complexities goes on and on.

To be clear, none of the above is to suggest that we abandon ourselves to ambiguity or moral equivalence—to say life is complicated is not to say we cannot identify truth. Rather, the above simply acknowledges

32. I recognize, of course, that part of the additional nuance with which I personally now understand these issues simply reflects that I'm older and have read and lived more. Nonetheless, it strikes me as fair to suggest that on an institutional level we are discussing these issues in more depth and with greater nuance and candor than we previously did.

that the narrative of the gospel unfolds in the midst of a fallen world, and none of the actors within it prove immune to mortal imperfection. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland wryly observed, “[We] are all God has ever had to work with. . . . He deals with it. So should we.”³³

Oliver Wendell Holmes is often attributed with a statement that offers a useful prism through which to understand this shift: “I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity. But I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side.”³⁴ My best sense tells me that many of us individually—and, to my reading, we as a people collectively—are passing through a moment of cultural complexity. My faith tells me that our perseverance will ensure we press on through the fog and find the simplicity on the far side.

Yet, in the meantime, we would do well to acknowledge the fog and to respond without surprise or reprimand when our students come to us mourning the passing of their own personal gospel fairy tale. That version of the story was incomplete, even if it had taught the students its own powerful lessons in its time—but whatever value it once had, if students once understood it to be *everything* and now recognize it is not, the death of that sense that *what they knew was all there was to know* may still feel to them like the fairy tale is dying, and its passing may still leave them rightly sad.

Which brings us to my final and most important point. In the scenarios presented above (section 2, point 7), Sister Hernandez’s second response outshines the first primarily because with it she *keeps her baptismal covenants to “mourn with those that mourn”* (Mosiah 18:9). I am especially sensitive to this issue for three reasons. One is that the Lord apparently knew I would struggle to do this—my patriarchal blessing advises me that I should “learn to listen to understand, and not just to answer.” The second, ironically (and tellingly), is that my wife will tell you how often she has come to me seeking emotional connection and I have offered her instead an intellectual fix. Third, this is part and parcel of what I do at work every day. The conversations mentioned above—“I’m terribly sorry, sir, but what remains of your life will likely only be a few days or weeks”—range from hard to devastating.

33. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” *Ensign* 43, no. 5 (May 2013): 94.

34. This statement is quoted frequently, but always without a solid reference. Holmes also stated: “The only simplicity for which I would give a straw is that which is on the other side of the complex—not that which never has divined it.” Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. to Lady Pollock, October 24, 1902, in *Holmes-Pollock Letters: The Correspondence of Mr. Justice Holmes and Sir Frederick Pollock, 1874–1932*, ed. Mark DeWolfe Howe, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), 1:109.

And yet, difficult as they are and sad as they make me, those conversations paradoxically encompass the most beautiful part of being an oncologist. My team and I scour every resource at our disposal, hoping to find meaningful treatments to extend life. When the moment arrives, however, that no such further treatment remains, we are left, together with the patient, facing the plight of us all: knowing that we must die. Strangely, though, because of cancer's insidious growth, we often see death coming from days, weeks, or even months away and thus discuss its approach, planning, questioning, pondering, and crying together.

What about these moments could be beautiful? I was reminded of their beauty while reading the remarkable *Just Mercy*, a memoir of a lawyer working to free those who have been wrongly imprisoned on death row in the Deep South, often with convictions or sentences apparently arising at least in part from racial animus (this is the book Elder Renlund referenced in the April 2021 general conference). One night, after the author (Bryan Stevenson) has lost an appeal—and as a consequence has to spend the last hour of his client's life trying to soothe the condemned man—and after the patient is executed, Mr. Stevenson returns to his office and, while there, breaks down sobbing, unable to contain himself after years of working for some of the world's most decidedly woebegone prisoners.

As he ponders what precisely brought him to tears that night, he observes:

My years of struggling against inequality, abusive power, poverty, oppression, and injustice had finally revealed something to me about myself. Being close to suffering, death, executions, and cruel punishments didn't just illuminate the brokenness of others; in a moment of anguish and heartbreak, it also exposed my own brokenness. You can't effectively fight abusive power, poverty, inequality, illness, oppression, or injustice and not be broken by it.

We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. . . . We all have our reasons. Sometimes we're fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we're shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion.³⁵

35. Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy* (New York: Random House, 2014), 289–99.

This quote speaks volumes regarding the way we respond when a student approaches us with a deeply troubling question. While our initial inclination may be to cow the question into submission, intimidating it with the strength of our conviction, we will more effectively bind ourselves to our students and cultivate between us a compassionate connection if we respond with vulnerability and empathy, rather than with certainty.

The time for certainty may well come, but empathy must precede it.

All of this reminds me that in almost every case those who have most profoundly impacted my life have done so not by offering advice—but by listening. I can recall a handful of moments when friends took my heart in their hands by listening so intently that I felt the very deepest parts of me were heard. To be known that deeply—and loved despite doubt, pain, frustration, anger, and all my shortcomings—requires a spiritual, emotional, and psychological depth and confidence on the part of the listener.

Such listening will require the very best of us as teachers.

Some aspects of restored Christianity remain stubbornly anachronistic. Where modern life zips from hyperlink to hyperlink, discipleship requires sustained devotion to fixed principles over a lifetime. True transformation into women and men who evoke Christ demands from us sustained belief, faith, and diligence that belie the modern ethos of satisfaction on demand. And Twitter and Facebook notwithstanding, our most sacred connecting moments call for listening, not proclamation. Yet if we wish to teach all this to a generation wired with the internet as part of their brains, we will need to deeply understand that very wiring and then respond with empathy when our students find believing hard.

The glory of the gospel lies beyond the fairy tale. Indeed, the fairy tale was simply that: a mirage. We ought never to have expected a church populated or led by the perfect, nor an unfurling of the kingdom immune from the foibles, difficulties, imperfections, and sins that are the wont of all humanity. The *real* gospel is what remains when the fairy tale falls away. Though we may at first rightly mourn the fairy tale's death, those who persevere beyond that dying will find a magnificent resurrection, a phoenix-like renaissance of belief in something resplendent, enduring, and true.

Indeed, as I sit here writing the end of this essay, it is May 2021. The last fourteen months have seen the world unspool. First, the pandemic took the globe by storm, confining us to our homes, ravaging our

economies, and felling hundreds of thousands across the earth. Then, in summer 2020, we all watched as Derek Chauvin kept his knee on George Floyd's neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds³⁶—murdering Mr. Floyd—and afterward witnessed seemingly endless crowds spill into the world's streets protesting racial injustice. And finally, in January 2021, we found ourselves transfixed by the horror of an armed mob breaching the U.S. Capitol, weapons and handcuffs in hand, roaming the halls like a pack of wolves, seeking the vice president and other political officers in hopes of subverting democracy.

At the end of all this, we have to wonder: Has our world ever been as riven—by race, by income, by origin, by political party—as it is now?

But it is precisely this state of affairs that would render the waning of restored Christianity for all the foregoing reasons particularly ironic and tragic: we preach precisely what the world so desperately needs. At its foundation, after all, our religion is not just about eschewing alcohol and paying tithing and attending Sunday meetings, important as all those things are. Rather, to be a Latter-day Saint is to affirm the existence of a compassionate God and to embody that compassion for the listing world around us.

One of our scriptures' most stunning tableaus, after all, involves Enoch looking down with God on the state of humanity and seeing "Satan; and he had a great chain in his hand, and it veiled the whole face of the earth with darkness; and he looked up and laughed, and his angels rejoiced" (Moses 7:26). There have been moments in the last year when I have wondered if we are not living through the kind of time he may have seen. But what matters is that God responds not by throwing his hands in the air and abandoning us as a hopeless enterprise, but instead "the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rains upon the mountains?" (Moses 7:28).

In the fairy tale we tell ourselves, the one we pretended was the gospel, we might have imagined God assuring us that things are not quite so bad. But what strikes us so deeply about Moses 7 is that God fully owns the overwhelming pain. It is as if he and Enoch survey 2020 and

36. Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, "Prosecutors Say Derek Chauvin Kneel on George Floyd for 9 Minutes 29 Seconds, Longer Than Initially Reported," *New York Times*, March 30, 2021, accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/us/derek-chauvin-george-floyd-kneel-9-minutes-29-seconds.html>.

2021 and are left bereft at, yes, the pandemic but even more so at the tragedy of our enmity—at our racism, prejudice, economic inequality, callousness, materialism, loneliness, and all the rest. The cumulative weight of it all breaks God’s heart and leaves him weeping. Then our Heavenly Parents and Jesus Christ respond by inviting us to join them in metabolizing that ineffable, suffocating grief and using the resulting energy to bind up the world’s wounds.

The call is to build up Zion.

The restored gospel matters so much because in an age of isolation, it binds us into communities; in an age of ambiguity, it offers us meaning; in an age of desperation, it offers us hope; and in an age of the echoing, empty, and careless cosmos, it offers us an empathic, invested, omniscient Heavenly Father and Mother whose hearts beat in sympathy with ours.

It is, without doubt, a heritage worth passing to our children.

I sense doing so will require the very best of us.

As teachers we must offer no less.

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