

A Pillar of Light

Alex Arner

I remember the first time I tried to have my first vision. It had been a normal Sunday at my house. Mom made blueberry muffins to get me and my siblings out of bed so we could make it to church on time. When we got to church, I sat down and quickly lodged my feet against the rough carpet on the back of the pew. Instead of listening to the talks, I began my favorite sacrament meeting game: the fastest foot contest. I'd relax my legs and watch my church shoes slide down the pew. The first foot to the bottom won. It was only thrilling for the first few matches because it quickly became apparent which shoe would be fastest that day.

After sacrament meeting, I went to Sunday School. My Sunday School class was on Joseph Smith's First Vision. I knew the story. Joseph, a fourteen-year-old, reads the scriptures, prays in the woods, and sees God. But this time the story stuck with me. I couldn't get it out of my head. As we drove home, I watched the green Virginia trees whirl past my eyes, meshing into a textured green canvas. It was probably like the forest Joseph Smith had his First Vision in. And that is when I had my idea.

I was going to have my own first vision.

I could barely contain my excitement when I got home. I ran up to my room, got out my thick black scripture set and started to look for the Epistle of James. I knew it wasn't in the Doctrine and Covenants, but I wasn't sure whether it was in the Old Testament, New Testament, or Book of Mormon. I eventually found it on one of my tabs and opened to the first chapter. I read the fifth verse and then waited. I wasn't exactly sure what I was supposed to feel at this point, so after a few minutes of waiting I continued with my first vision quest. I went into my closet,

closed the door, got on my knees, and offered a vocal prayer. Like Joseph, I hadn't prayed vocally before. I started my prayer but felt a little awkward. I was worried my siblings would hear me and ruin whatever was about to happen. Once I got more comfortable speaking out loud, I asked God to let me see him. I told him I wanted to have a first vision. I waited. The only sensation was a growing throb in my knees from my kneeling. I shifted my weight and continued waiting. After a while, my mind began to drift, and I looked up at the lightbulb illuminating the closet. Bright, iridescent, man-made—*a pillar of light, exactly over my head.* . . . Then I heard a voice. It was my mom calling me for dinner.



When I heard our youth conference was going to be held in Nauvoo, I was not excited. Since we had moved to Ohio, it meant at least a seven-hour drive. And since most of the stories I had heard about Nauvoo involved the city once being a swamp, the only image that kept going through my mind was swarms of mosquitoes devouring my sweat-soaked body.

Neither the drive nor the mosquitos were as bad as I thought they would be, and the youth conference quickly became a blur of sightseeing and tours. A stop at Joseph and Emma Smith's Mansion House, a tour through the Red Brick Store, and a night at the pageant. When you add a plethora of testimony meetings and square dancing to that, it pretty much became the quintessential youth conference.

Throughout the trip, I'd often find myself thinking about Joseph Smith. As I walked along the streets or visited the Nauvoo-era buildings, I'd wonder whether he had walked on the same stones or stood in the same building. The thought that there was even a chance that he had been at the spot I was at imbued each place with a reverent aura. I felt like I was on sacred ground.

On the last day of the conference, we visited the Community of Christ's gift shop. I milled around the shop in my bright red "2014 Youth Conference" shirt, and I felt uncomfortable. I hadn't heard much about the Community of Christ before coming on this trip, and being in their shop was a physical reminder that they did exist—that there were people who shared many of my core beliefs but interpreted them differently. It was hard for me to get my head around that.

I eventually found my way to my favorite part in any gift shop: the book collection. As I skimmed through the shelves, I noticed a book out of the corner of my eye. It was titled *Joseph Smith's Youngest Wife: The Story of Helen Mar Kimball*. An image of a woman garbed in a black

dress, presumably Helen Mar Kimball, was on the front cover. Her eyes were steeped in shadows, and I couldn't shake the feeling that they were following me. I took a quick glance around my shoulder to make sure I was alone and grabbed the book. Though the topic of polygamy had been addressed briefly on the trip, I knew little about the subject, let alone Joseph Smith's practice of it. I had always thought the practice began with Brigham Young. For some reason, the idea that Brigham Young had started it was much more comforting to me.

I flipped the book over to read the back cover. It said something along the lines of *Learn the story of Joseph Smith's marriage to Helen Mar Kimball, a fourteen-year-old*. Joseph Smith married a fourteen-year-old? That's my age.

I immediately flipped the book over and shoved it back on the shelf. It must just be some anti-Mormon literature. After all, the Community of Christ wasn't even a *real* branch of the Church. They were probably as much against us as the rest of the world. These thoughts took the edge off my panic, and I quickly left the book section to join my friends. As I walked over, I could feel my heart starting to pound in my chest.



Once I got home from Nauvoo, I tried to forget about Helen Mar Kimball. At night, I'd sit in my bed thinking, and her eyes would come back to me, wells of unresolved questions and unanswered feelings. I remember humming my favorite hymn, "The Spirit of God," over and over until her shadowy eyes receded and I could fall asleep.

I talked to my seminary teacher about the book. She didn't know who Helen Mar Kimball was, and she told me not to worry about it. "The Church is perfect, but the people aren't, Alex. Don't get shaken up by something you read at a bookstore. Besides, it's probably not even true. Didn't you read that book in the Community of Christ gift shop?"

A few months earlier, that answer would have been more than enough. In fact, I had said almost those same words before to friends of mine. Though I agreed with my seminary teacher, I couldn't stop feeling concerned about Joseph Smith's marriage to a teenager. Joseph Smith felt more important than just another "imperfect person" in the Church.

I continued to try to keep Helen out of my mind. I lengthened my scripture studies, prayed more regularly, and listened to conference talks. I tried to fill my life with all the things I had been taught would invite the Spirit. My logic was simple: if doubt is evil, then I will just leave no room for it in my life. I was going to conquer this by sheer righteousness.

It didn't work.

Even as I tried to implement this plan, I felt something was off about what I was doing. I couldn't shake the feeling that hiding from the doubt was—if not wrong—at least weird. Joseph Smith didn't hide from his questions. Why should I?

That night, I hesitantly typed “Helen Mar Kimball’s marriage to Joseph Smith” in my iPod’s search bar. Website links erupted across the screen. I read late into the night.



Voices. Too many voices.

How do I navigate the voices?

I was in church, and it was fast and testimony meeting.

Another man in the ward walked up to the stand. His plaid brown suit was so loose and straight cut I was convinced I could tie a string to him, go out on a windy day, and fly him like a kite. He cleared his throat and began speaking. “I know Joseph Smith was a prophet . . .”

My tie felt like a noose. I could feel it pressing around my neck, only centimeters from crushing the breath out of me. We had been late to church, so we were sitting on the metal chairs at the back of the chapel. I tried to shift my weight, but the chair would creak every time I moved, so I sat still, trapped in my tie. I looked up at the man as he continued to bear his testimony. It didn't make sense to me. How did he know?

There were few things in my faith that I felt like I could say “I know” about anymore. After I began researching Joseph Smith’s practice of polygamy, I found myself in a whirlpool of questions. It was like I was descending into Dante’s *Inferno*, and each new question unveiled a new type of question, one that was harder and more complex. Doubt had seeped into the cracks of my faith and swelled up, leaving something barely recognizable. I couldn’t make out the difference between the voices I heard in my research and the voices I heard at church. Both seemed to be saying “I know,” but their claims were contradictory. Was there really any way to know?

I looked back up at the stand, and the man in the plaid brown suit was still sharing his testimony. All I could hear was “I know . . . I know . . . I know . . .”



“While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of

James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.* Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know . . .” (JS-H 1:11–12).

I would never know . . .



My bishop sat behind his large cherrywood desk. I noticed that the glass jar of candy at the corner of the desk was running low. He must have been having a lot of meetings with the Primary recently.

“Have you started your mission papers yet, Alex?” I didn’t know how to answer the question. It should have been a simple yes or no, but it wasn’t that simple. Had I started them? Yes. Was I intending on finishing them? Not sure. I went with the easiest answer. “Yeah, I started them.”

“That’s great news. I’m so excited for you to begin this journey. How have you been preparing yourself?” Honestly, most of my preparation had been deciding whether or not I should go, not about the mission itself. But I had been attending mission prep with my twin brother, and it seemed like the appropriate answer. “I’ve been attending mission prep.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Continue to prepare yourself for this. I’d recommend reading the first chapter of James as you start to think more deeply about how to get ready. Take care.”

I told him thank you and walked out of the room. I could feel his eyes burning into the back of my head as I walked out. Could he tell I didn’t know if I wanted to go?

Growing up, I had imagined my mission as two years of spiritual transcendence. I thought I would become an Ammon from the Book of Mormon, baptizing hundreds by sheer faith, obedience, and hard work. When I thought about my mission now, I imagined something very different. I saw myself in a lesson with a nonmember, my white shirt neatly pressed and a crisp blue copy of the Book of Mormon on my thigh. The nonmember would ask me a question, and I would freeze. I knew the answer I was supposed to give him, but I didn’t know if I believed the answer. So I sat there, unsure about what to say.

I decided to listen to my bishop’s recommendation. I opened my Bible to the first chapter of James, the same chapter I had read as a little

kid when I had tried to have my first vision. This time, verse eight resonated with me the most: “A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.” Double-minded, unstable, and doubtful.

That was me.



I was driving home from early-morning seminary half-listening to a talk by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland. As I made the final turn into my neighborhood, I heard him say, “If [a person] leaves this Church, it must be done by crawling over or under or around the Book of Mormon.”¹

That was my answer. That was my way out.

I was going to disprove the Book of Mormon.

That Sunday I got a brand-new copy of the Book of Mormon from my ward’s missionaries. When I got home, I ran upstairs, locked my door, and pulled out three colored pencils: red, orange, and green. Red was for what I disagreed with, orange for what I wasn’t sure about, and green for what I agreed with. I told myself that I was trying to read the Book of Mormon objectively, but I knew what I really wanted—I wanted a reason to leave. I knew if I could disprove the Book of Mormon, then I could finally be done. Joseph Smith would be nothing more than a delusional farm boy in the 1800s. Finally, I would have some peace.

The first pages bled. My scribbled notes jammed themselves into the margins, arguing with Nephi, Enos, and Jacob. A mark of orange or green would occasionally adorn a page, but they were only islands in a sea of red.

Looking back, I don’t know when this began to change. The change was so gradual that it almost wasn’t perceptible to me. By the time I was through Alma, the pages weren’t full of red anymore. They weren’t even full of green or orange either. They were just the pages of the text. It was as if I became less interested in dissecting the text and more interested in just reading.

The words of the Book of Mormon began to feel relevant to me. As I soaked in the spirit of the book, I began to see the characters as real people. It was the faith of a real family to leave their home to come to a land they had never seen. It was the faith of real prophets to testify of a Christ they knew they’d never see or hear or touch. It was the faith of real recordkeepers to record their story even though they knew it may never be found.

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Safety for the Soul,” *Ensign* 39, no. 11 (November 2009): 90.

When I finally read Moroni's invitation to pray and ask God if the book was true, I got on my knees. I didn't know what to say. So, instead of asking for something, I just sat there, listening. The only sensation was a growing throb in my knees from the hardwood floor. I shifted my weight. Still nothing.

I cracked my eyes open. No Heavenly Father or Jesus Christ standing above me in the air. Not even a pillar of light.

I got up from my prayer and walked over to my desk. The once-new copy of the Book of Mormon was on it. Its corners were bent from the many times I accidentally left it in an awkward position. My colored pencils and pens were scattered around it.

As I stared at the book, my mind was filled with memories. I remembered feeling the excitement of the sons of Mosiah, the wonder of the people at Jesus's arrival, the sorrow of Mormon at his people's destruction, and the hope of Moroni as he buried the plates. And as I remembered these moments, I felt it. It wasn't a voice or a beam of light. It wasn't two personages standing above me in the air. But it was my answer.

I knew the book was true.

I sat in the feeling, trying to pull it into my porous body. Gradually, the feeling dissipated, and I was left to myself. My face was wet with tears. I climbed into my bed, lost in thought. I felt calm.

It wasn't the answer I was looking for. It wasn't even a moment I couldn't deny. But, although it wasn't what Joseph Smith had, it was my own experience.

It was my first vision.



"I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. . . . When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*" (JS-H 1:16–17).

I hear you.