Irony and Grace

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My wife's and my son, Alex, passed away almost four years ago. He was away at college in North Carolina. One morning, just after accepting a mission call and only a few weeks before he was to return to Utah for Christmas, he woke up with a rare bacterial infection. He died later that same day, less than twelve hours after he went to the health center. I was lecturing in Italy when he died; Nicea was at the airport, trying to get on a flight. He was our oldest child, and our only son.

In the years since Alex died, my thoughts have repeatedly dwelt on a story from the New Testament. The Gospel of Mark describes a man who brought to Jesus his son who was "afflicted with a dumb spirit." It appears from the description that the boy suffered seizures—he probably had a form of epilepsy. After telling Jesus that the boy had suffered this condition from birth, the father begs Jesus to heal him: "If thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us." Jesus says to the father, "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." The scripture tells us that immediately "the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief." Jesus healed the son (Mark 9:17–27).

While I was serving as the bishop of a BYU campus ward some years ago, one of my ward members was killed in a car accident not long after the semester started. Although he had grown up in the East, this student's family had recently moved to Centerville, north of Salt Lake City. The day he died, his father called from Centerville and asked if I could bring up some clothes and other things from his son's dorm room, which of course I was happy to do. When I arrived, the father invited me in, thanked me for bringing the clothes, and asked me to sit down at the dining room table. He pulled out a cardboard box filled with pictures and trophies and certificates and spent about twenty minutes explaining some of the things that his son had done in his short life. It was a wonderful experience, but even so, I remember leaving the house just slightly puzzled that he should have taken the time to explain these things to me, someone he hardly knew.

When Alex died six years later, I remembered this experience. I thought about writing that father a letter, explaining what I know now that I didn't know then. And then, at the viewing on the morning of Alex's funeral,

there he was, with his wife, waiting in line. When he had read Alex's obituary in the newspaper, he had remembered me as his son's bishop, and he and his wife had driven down from Centerville to mourn with us for our son, whom they had never met. When I embraced this father, the world seemed to recede for a long moment, leaving him and me by ourselves, holding onto each other.

The common definition of irony is "a state of affairs or events that is the reverse of what was . . . expected."[1] Most popular literature lacks irony. It is a common experience to be sitting in a movie or to have worked one's way into a best-seller and realize exactly how the story is going to end. Irony is one of the devices that separates literature from cliché.

There is another, darker definition of irony. An irony may be a result that is not simply unexpected but "opposite to and . . . in mockery of the appropriate result."[2] Elder Maxwell calls this kind of irony a "disturbing incongruity" that "violates" our expectations.[3] This, I think, is closer to what I have felt since my son died. A friend suggested that the death of a child upsets the order of the world; children are to bury their parents, not vice versa. By mocking our ideals, irony upsets the order of our worlds, so much so that we may question our deepest beliefs. Richard Rorty says that ironists are never sure of themselves.[4] C. S. Lewis agrees. "You never know how much you really believe anything," Lewis wrote, "until its truth and falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you."[5]

After he died, people often commented that Alex must have been an exceptionally valiant young man to have been called on an "early mission" to the spirit world. I know they meant well, and I do not begrudge the strength that some people draw from this idea. To be able to call upon one's faith in the face of devastating loss is a gift of belief.[6] For me, however, this idea brought no comfort—to the contrary, it made me angry. What kind of a God is it that rewards a good life by snatching a child from his family without warning? Perhaps, I have thought, the same kind of God who would command Abraham to tie Isaac to an altar and slit his throat. Lewis, struggling with the death of his wife, wrote that what he dreaded was not, "There's no God after all," but rather, "This is what God's really like."[7] There is no good way to lose your child, but to have him taken so suddenly, with so many things to do and left undone—this seems unspeakably cruel.

I have tried to avoid blaming God by giving up Alex's death to the impersonal randomness of a fallen world. Bad things happen to everyone in this world, and this was just a bad thing that happened to Alex and to us. But this strategy doesn't lead to any place very comforting either. I can

hardly sit through a testimony about the power of the priesthood. My son had a priesthood blessing barely thirty minutes before his heart stopped beating; if he was not appointed by God unto death, then why did God not intervene to save his life? I may have lacked faith, but I know that his mother and sisters didn't. One of my daughters has written an account of the day Alex died, of how she pled with God, desperately, for her brother's life. When I read her words for the first time, I felt my soul twisting, wrung out like a wet rag. How unfeeling must God be not to have answered that prayer?

I know the ways in which we typically try to make sense of this contradiction. I know exactly the answers called for when this contradiction is raised in church—I've even given talks on them. I envy those for whom these answers are adequate, because for me they are not. That suffering may be necessary does not make it into something else, like joy or laughter. That Jesus suffered infinitely worse than I did just adds guilt to the pain. That this all makes sense from some other perspective is not very helpful when that perspective is barely imaginable.

Rorty points out that "the opposite of irony is common sense,"[8] and this, I think, is the beginning of wisdom. Sense cannot be made of this situation—not now, perhaps not ever. Reason and rationality are human attributes, not divine ones. Unlike Roman Catholics, Latter-day Saints do not believe that reason is a reflection of the divine law written in our hearts; to the contrary, our scriptures suggest that God condescends to human reason because we can't seem to understand him in any other language (D&C 50:12).

Nevertheless, Latter-day Saints do not believe that reason or sense of any sort is a necessary prerequisite to truth, as the story of Abraham and Isaac exemplifies. I must confess that I find this story barbaric. Of all the craziness in the Old Testament, this is surely the worst. God gives Abraham and Sarah the gift of a son in their old age—Isaac, through whom will be fulfilled God's promise that Abraham will bless all the nations of the earth. And then, not only does God tell Abraham that Isaac must die, but he commands that Isaac die by Abraham's own hand. One could forgive Abraham if it passed through his mind that this God was, in the end, not very different from all the others.

The conventional reading of this story is that God tested Abraham's faith, but if that is so, it was surely a pointless test. If Abraham had failed, what would it have proved? That his faith was not perfect? That he lacked "perspective?" That he was not God? And isn't it just a little troubling that Abraham was prepared to kill his own son?[9] Kierkegaard could not understand Abraham,[10] but it is Abraham's God whom I cannot understand. If this really was a test, its irrationality renders it senseless.

But not meaningless. For even in the ethical wreckage of this story, there is a truth that forces its way up through a corner of the rubble. God saves Isaac—and Abraham—at the last moment, and then says to Abraham (in wonder?), "Thou hast not withheld thy son, thine *only* son, from me" (Gen. 22:12; italics added). Thus is Abraham linked to God as father to father, like no other person in the world, not even Jesus himself.

In the dominant Western tradition, we think of truth as a relationship between an idea and a thing. We grasp truth, so it seems, when we succeed in accurately conceptualizing some idea that corresponds to some thing that exists outside of ourselves.[11] Some of the scriptures even read like this: "Truth is knowledge of things as they are," states Doctrine and Covenants 93:24. No modernist could say it better. This idea of truth, while useful in its place, can nevertheless lead us down a wrong path: Truth is not just a static relationship between an idea and a thing; it is a developing relationship between one person and another—as they were, as they are, and as they will be. Looking for the former relationship often obscures the latter one.

I am reminded of this error every four years when the Gospel Doctrine class studies Genesis. Someone inevitably makes a comment about evolution or carbon dating, and in microseconds the class is off on an indignant, science-trashing search for the "truth" of the creation, "how God really did it," as if this were somehow an important thing to know. This focus tragically misses the point. The significance of the creation is not *how* God did it, but *that* he did it, for it is the creation that puts us into our present relationship with him, that makes God our father and we his children. Insisting on the "facts" of the creation blinds us to its truth.[12]

If truth is a relationship between people, then it is not static. Perhaps this is one reason why, when the scriptures contrast the worship of the God of Israel with idol worship, they often call God the "living" God—even the "true and living" God (Alma 7:6). So also modern revelation refers to the "true and living church" (D&C 1:30). Our relationships with people change as we come to know them. In the Bible, the verb "to know" is often used to signify intimacy. This usage is preserved in all of the romance languages: to know someone is to be intimate with him or her, to live with that person. This is why eternal life is to know God (John 17:3), to be intimate with him —not sexually intimate, of course—but intimate nonetheless: to live with him, to be at home with him, to be eternally bound together with him.

One image haunted me on the long flight back from Italy to North Carolina: that of my son, surrounded by strangers in a hospital emergency room, knowing that he is dying, by himself. What comforted me was being

told that his friends went to the hospital with him; finding out that he was conscious for that blessing before he died; reading in his journal that he loved his parents and knew that we loved him; feeling, as I do now, that someone surely came to help him through the veil between this life and the next; knowing that he is not, and was not ever, alone.

Toward the end of the Book of Mormon, Moroni steps out of the text and speaks directly to the reader. He worries that he is "weak in writing," that people will make fun of what he has set down in the plates because, as he puts it, God has made "our words powerful and great, even that we cannot write them; wherefore, when we write we behold our weakness and stumble because of the placing of our words; and I fear lest the Gentiles shall mock at our words" (Ether 12:25). And he was right to fear. Mark Twain joked that the Book of Mormon is "chloroform in print," that if the phrase "and it came to pass" were edited out of the Book of Mormon, it would not be a book but a pamphlet, that it is, finally, a "stupid and tiresome" story.[13] These are only the gentler criticisms leveled at the Book of Mormon over the years.

In contrast to Moroni's worrying over his inability to capture in writing things that he knew and felt, the Lord himself is remarkably unconcerned. "My grace is sufficient for the meek," he says,

> that they shall take no advantage of your weakness. And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them. (Ether 12:26–27)

I have a good friend who teaches at a law school in the East. We met over ten years ago, almost by accident, when someone suggested that I invite him to speak on a law and religion program I was putting together. We have a great deal in common but not religion; he's not a Christian, and I'm not even sure he's very religious, because we've barely talked about it. He does, however, love golf, as do I, and if you play golf, you know that it, by itself, is more than enough for friendship.

About a year after Alex died, my friend was out in Park City during one of those dry Decembers when you could actually play golf in the valley, so we did. It was the kind of day that makes me glad I live in Utah. There was snow on the mountains, and the sky was a deep, cloudless blue. By the fourth hole, we were playing in shirtsleeves.

While driving back to my house after the round, we got to talking, and he asked where Alex was buried. I told him it was less than two miles from our house, which was good, because I go there a lot. "What do you do when

you go there," he asked. "Do you pray?" I paused for a moment and then told him, a little embarrassed, that I "sort of talk to Alex." He reacted with enthusiasm, saying he does the same thing when he visits his father's grave, although it's so far away that he doesn't get there often.

The cemetery was on our way, so we stopped and walked out to Alex's grave. There was this late-afternoon light that cast long shadows and tinted everything in a muted half-orange. My friend walked right up to the grave, squatted down, and began to talk to Alex in the most unaffected way, as if he were sitting right across from Alex at my dinner table and was just talking to him about his college major. "Well, Alex," he began, "I've never met you, but I've heard your dad talk a lot about you . . ." He just kept talking. I don't remember anything he said after that, but as he talked to my son, my heart warmed, until it seemed that all the afternoon light was inside of me, shining back out towards the sun.

We know truth when we experience it in relations with other people. Truth is an event; truth happens, shining forth in the darkness, just like the scriptures say it does (John 1:5; D&C 88:7). To live in truth is to live in these relationships. And sometimes, when we live in them well, God will tell us.

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1. *Webster's Third International Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1993).

2. *Third International Dictionary*.

3. Neal A. Maxwell, "Irony: The Crust on the Bread of Adversity," *Ensign* 19 (May 1989): 62.

4. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73–74.

5. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1961), 34.

6. For a beautiful expression of this kind of faith, see Nicea S. Gedicks, "These Are the Things We Know," in *Mourning with Those That Mourn* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 15.

7. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 19.

8. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, 74.

9. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling,* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Enda H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 30.

10. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling,* 10.

11. See, for example, Martin Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected "Problems" of "Logic,"* trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994), 9–16; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 10.

12. See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained,* 18: The modern subject's "mastery over the objects generated by contemporary science and technology does not bring greater freedom, more public education, or greater wealth more evenly distributed. It brings an increased reliance on facts."

13. Mark Twain, *Roughing It,* ed. Harriet Elinor Smith and Edgar Marquess Branch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 132, 133, 142.