On Criticism, Compassion, and Charity

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I am deeply humbled by this invitation to share my journey as a scholar of faith. I have wrestled with my feelings these past few weeks because I am not sure how much of my experience is applicable to others, nor am I entirely sure that I have enough answers. I do know that I want to communicate honestly, and, most importantly, I want to edify and strengthen your faith. The challenge is that my journey is idiosyncratic. However, I take comfort in two things. Although your story is different from mine, yours is just as idiosyncratic. There are as many ways of reaching Christ as there are people in this world. As Elder Bruce Hafen has said, "Nothing brings the Spirit into a conversation or a classroom more than hearing people bear honest testimony, not so much by exhortation as by just telling the story of their personal experience."[1] So I seek to speak candidly, but also in love and respect for the dignity of every person here.

This is part autobiography and testimony, but it is also an argument. And here's my thesis. I believe that the humanities are not just an adornment but are essential to our spiritual lives, and by that I also mean that

1. Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), xiv.

intellectual and spiritual growth need to occur in at least some relation to one another. However, neither religion nor the humanities can have the greatest impact and best influence in our lives without three crucial ingredients: criticism, compassion, and charity. These three things often work together but sometimes they get separated, and when they do, the quality of our intellectual and spiritual lives suffer.

Let me start by explaining that what scholars refer to as criticism (or critical thinking) is not the same thing as contention. Contention isn't what happens when people disagree. It is what happens when they lose trust and respect for one another. Criticism, on the other hand, is the means by which we protect ourselves from deception and by which we strengthen our autonomy as moral agents. It implies that we can see ourselves in a context of difference and plurality. In critical thinking, we distance ourselves from an experience or from some idea enough to assess and judge its value and interpret its meaning. Without such criticism, we are swept up by the whims of opinion; we parrot what we read or watch or listen to.

Compassion is an important companion to criticism. If we never allow ourselves to feel what others feel or see through another's eyes, our critical judgment will become centripetal and self-reinforcing. We will end up talking to only those we already like or identify with. It can lead to cynicism and categorical mistrust of others. Compassion, which means to "suffer with," can trigger learning and change. And as our own baptismal covenant implies, it is what we owe everyone, both those most different and those most familiar. It helps us not to overgeneralize or bypass the particular circumstances of individuals. Of course, compassion without criticism runs centrifugal risks, something akin to gullibility where we feel impressions, attractions, and distractions at every turn.

Charity, I want to suggest, is the means by which we learn to live with the tension between criticism and compassion. And I want to make it clear that wherever charity emerges, there Christ is also. We know its characteristics: longsuffering, believing, trusting, not easily offended. As the Mexican poet Octavio Paz says, it is akin to what a metaphor does: it holds differences together in a meaningful relationship without collapsing those differences. It helps us not to be driven by emotion, to weigh things in the balance, both the good and the difficult, and it recognizes that there is a gap between our thoughts and God's thoughts that we must seek to overcome by a perpetual search for more truth. In this way, it helps us to avoid polarized and polarizing conclusions. This

is why a personal commitment to repentance and humility, a steady practice of submission to God's will, and a constant plea for Christ's pure love are essential to thinking clearly.

The humanities are a wonderful training ground for charity. They teach us how to imagine communion. They are methods for experiencing reconciliation, for imagining beauty and meaning in the wake of chaos and suffering, and for connecting us to one another and to the cosmos. Reading great literature, learning languages, listening to music, watching live theater or great films, or participating in religious ritual—these are all experiences that are aimed at reinvigorating and expanding our sense of self and belonging in the world. Nothing captures the way literature can teach charity more beautifully than this statement by C. S. Lewis: "Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. . . . In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. . . . Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do."[2] Without the experience of charity, we are prone to the allures of mass emotions, which obliterate particularity, or, perhaps worse, we face what some have called balkanization—the abandonment of the quest for community and the retreat to our own like-minded camps.

Sometimes I have experienced charity in the arts and sometimes in religious contexts. I don't think God is as interested in the distinctions we like to make between the sacred and the secular. Like the time a few years ago when my son Sam and I flew out to Los Angeles to visit my brother, and we sat listening to Mahler's Second Symphony with the Los Angeles Symphony. We all wept as we listened to the words, "*What was created/Must perish,/What perished, rise again!/Cease from trembling!/Prepare yourself to live!*" I was both transported and grounded, purely loved and invited to change. Or the time when, on a research trip to Chile, I sat in the celestial room in the Santiago temple by myself at a particularly desperate and low point for me, and I imagined what it would be like to have my deceased brother by my side. Suddenly I felt the real presence of his arms wrapped around me. I felt guided in my research from that moment. Or the time—just two months ago—when I was called into my stake presidency and Elder Marcus Nash asked me

2. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 140–41.

in an interview to imagine what I would say if Jesus were in the room alone with me. At that moment, Christ's presence became unmistakably real and I was overcome with tears and could only mumble, "Thank you." I felt forgiven, accepted, known, and loved. And called to serve. It was empowering to discover how much I loved Christ.

I have also had this experience when listening to Church leaders, which gave me a foundational witness of their calling as his special witnesses. I can still recall as a missionary in the MTC the way my hair felt blown back (short as it was) by sheer force of testimony of the living Christ from Elder Oaks and Elder Maxwell. Similarly, with Elder Eyring when he was a Seventy and visited my stake in Oakland when I was in graduate school, with Elder Christofferson when he was a Seventy and visited my stake in Flagstaff when I taught there before coming to BYU, and twice with Elder Ballard here in Provo. In each case, I have felt the unmistakable presence of the Savior and experienced and received their witness of his living reality. These experiences have anchored my hope and faith in the restored gospel. In each case, God's love healed me of doubt, hurt, pain, and discouragement. Doubts sometimes benefit from answers, but most often doubt springs from fear, anxiety, abandonment, or from lack of self-confidence. For this reason, doubt is best resolved, not with knowledge per se, but in loving relationships and with experiences of God's pure love. Nothing is more important to experience than this.

What I want to suggest is that aesthetic and spiritual experiences teach that understanding matters and it comes, but it doesn't matter most and it doesn't come first. As the great Spanish poet Miguel de Unamuno says in his inimitable masterpiece, *The Tragic Sense of Life,* "The primary reality is not that I think, but that I live." Thus, "the end purpose of life is to live, and not to understand."[3] In other words, truth is to be lived more than it is to be apprehended. The most painful and challenging times are invariably the most transformative, even and especially when we don't understand. If we refuse to absorb contradiction and instead rush to premature or shallow explanations, we may end up shielding ourselves from Christ's experience of the matter. It is the same principle in marriage. Amy and I might not always love each other as we should, and we don't always understand or agree with each other, but as

3. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 41, 129.

we strive for unity and loyalty in the face of those differences, not despite them, our experience deepens and our character changes.

My first experiences with criticism, compassion, and charity were in family life at home. As Mormons, we lived as a very small minority outside of New York. We were taught to love human diversity and that God must too. Dinner table conversation at my home was free-flowing, covering politics and culture and the Church. We went to concerts and museums in the city, and we hosted friends of other faiths at our home. I was the youngest of three brothers, and the older two were exceptionally bright and observant and full of strong opinions. They read serious literature at young ages, they loved and played classical music, and they knew how to have a meaningful experience in a museum. Even though neither of my parents would have considered themselves experts, they remain among my most important adjudicators of taste. They have always been amateurs in the best sense of the word: lovers of all good things, consistent with the charitable work, as Mormon describes it, of "lay[ing] hold upon every good thing" (Moro. 7:19).

I enjoyed the conversations, but I was intimidated a bit by this at first. I didn't feel that I had a good vocabulary, and I couldn't express myself well, and when I looked at a painting or listened to a symphony, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to feel. I preferred sports, rock and roll, and goofing off. And honestly, I was really, really good at that. My goofing off was innocent at first, but it led me into a struggle with keeping the Word of Wisdom and prolonged spiritual doubts. The good thing was that my parents never seemed overly impatient with me, even though my brothers were much farther advanced in their critical skills and life skills. My parents thought going to church was generally a good idea, but it wasn't the most important thing. In fact, when we asked our dad why he occasionally decided to stay home or go home early from church, he explained, with a wry grin, that once you went to church three thousand times, it was optional. What mattered most to my parents was being a good person. The most painful conversations I ever had with them pertained to situations where I was struggling to be inclusive or kind to difficult personalities. They were adamant that I not become selfishly attracted only to like-minded or similar personalities, but that I branch out. I watched my parents reach out to extended family, many of whom grew up in economic and cultural circumstances far less privileged than my own. I admired how they could talk to the very poor and the very rich without changing their tone. I am especially grateful for the fact that whenever the conversation got too critical

of people or leaders, my parents always helped each other and us to remember to be charitable.

I suppose according to some litmus tests, they weren't exactly the most active or model Mormons, but anyone who knows them knows them to be profoundly Christian. They didn't follow all the rules exactly, nor did they seem particularly worried that I do so. I don't remember my parents ever getting on my case about grades, about scout advancement, or about going on a mission. I think they trusted me and trusted that their example of good living would pull us through. They were loath to reduce the pursuit of a good life to a rat race or a checklist. My mother often expressed frustration that the formal practices of religion just didn't seem to work for her like it did for others. My father was never entirely satisfied by answers he was given to his questions, but neither of them ever allowed anger or hatred or despair to rule their own hearts or to govern their approach to life. They had better things to do and to see and to understand in the world. They aren't perfect, but I wish more people were like them.

Maybe they didn't feel they could be the ones to plant the seed of the restored gospel in its entirety, but they were careful not to trample the soil of my faith with their own overstated doubts. As we have been taught recently by Elder Holland and President Uchtdorf, doubting our doubts can be an expression of faith. Without my parents' forbearance, I don't believe I would have had the freedom to discover my own testimony of the restored gospel. Criticism or disagreement is not an enemy to faith and belief. What seems to undermine faith and belief is distrust and fear either directed at ourselves, others, or at God, and it can lead, paradoxically, to inflexible and dogmatic thinking.

Elder Maxwell warned, "We can also meekly let our ideas have a life of their own without oversponsoring them. Rather, let the Spirit impel our worthy ideas."[4] I think he means that we should be careful not to assume we have arrived at the proper conclusions about reality. Thinking is an experiment, not a test. Sometimes I am embarrassed for football players who celebrate a sack on second down, only to be burned by a touchdown pass on the next play. I have learned that on the most sensitive and the most divisive issues, instead of tightening up and prematurely interpreting the meaning of a situation, we should be more careful to listen to all sides. Such listening puts us in the position to do

4. Neal A. Maxwell, "'Repent of [Our] Selfishness' (D&C 56:8)," *Ensign* 29 (May 1999): 23.

our most creative and best thinking. Derek Walcott insists, for example, that great poetry can never be based in revenge, anger, or nostalgia but only in acceptance and assimilation of the facts of experience. If we truly wish to "enlarge the place of [our] tent" (Isa. 54:2), we must not chase people off by shaming them for their questions. They need a refuge, as they are, while they wait upon the Lord.

Many years ago, during a job talk I gave at an eastern university, I was faced with a room full of scholars. During the question-and-answer session, someone asked my opinion about a book that was related to my research. I hadn't even heard of the book, so I couldn't even give a half-baked answer. I just said in front of everyone, "I don't know the book, so I can't answer the question." Afterward, one of the members of the search committee expressed admiration that I had the courage to say, "I don't know." He said, "I wish more of us had that kind of courage." That may have been the only time in my academic life when ignorance was a virtue, not enough of a virtue to get me the job, mind you, but it was nice for once to be congratulated for being ignorant. In his marvelous essay, "The Way of Ignorance," Wendell Berry insists that the burden of the gospels is to "accept our failure to understand, not as a misstatement or a textual flaw or as a problem to be solved, but as a question to live with and a burden to be borne."[5] We might know some things. We might even be in possession of some fundamental truths, but truth is no trophy you can hold up. Its value isn't in possessing it. Its value is the love we muster to build relationships in its pursuit. This is why we need God, each other, even our enemies, to teach us truth. Paul made it clear: you can talk truth all the day long, but if you don't have charity, you have nothing (see 1 Cor. 13:1–3). There is something truer than truth, and it is love.

So my parents didn't pass on knowledge to me so much as they allowed my experiences to be deep, authentic, and my own. They insisted I do with my life what I most wanted. They told me to go to the school and major in the field of my choosing. This is particularly marvelous when you consider their burdens. They were in the midst of striving to help their firstborn, Kenny, through terrible depression that eventually led to his suicide; helping their second son, Bill, deal with the intensity of coming to terms with his homosexuality; and helping me, their youngest, to emerge from the fog of a misspent adolescence. They never pointed fingers at each other after the death of their son, and they

5. Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance and Other Essays* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005), 131.

worked through the process of Bill's coming out with grace and care, managing to keep their own marriage strong, their relationship to both their sons locked in even as we took different paths, and their relationship to people of all persuasions and to the Church open and fair. Their example of thoughtful criticism, compassion, and charity is perhaps the most heroic and most Christian example I have in my life, even though it isn't tied formally to institutional life in Mormonism. I love the Church. It is where I belong. It is where we all belong, in my mind, but I have never hesitated to love and admire them or anyone else who does good work in the world outside the walls of my church. I believe Christ would expect nothing less from me.

I wouldn't have gone to Stanford, majored in comparative literature, or taken my career path as a professor without my brother Bill's example, encouragement, and brilliance that lighted every step of the way for me through my education. He was and is my intellectual soul mate. My freshman year at Stanford included a yearlong dorm-based intensive course on the Western tradition, perhaps the single most valuable educational experience of my life. In the hallways and in class, we debated the meaning of Greek tragedies, the value of biblical wisdom, and the very nature of the universe. We wrestled with the theories of Darwin, the meaning of grace according to Luther, the root causes of poverty, and the legacies of the Holocaust. I was debating with atheists, with other Christians, with Muslims and Jews and Hindus. This, for me, was heaven! The experience that year was enough to convince me I wanted to make a career out of reading, discussing, and writing about great ideas. What was especially exciting was that we could explore ideas without restraint, without preestablished conclusions, and in the company of a wide diversity of viewpoints. I learned that part of criticism is listening to the criticism of others, something central to scholarly work. I felt comfortable saying something that I might later decide was utter hogwash. I was often told my ideas were, indeed, hogwash, although my friends used other words for it. Sometimes it meant I got stinging and hurtful criticisms of my beliefs, but more often than not such exchanges helped me to recognize my own sexism or racism or naiveté about the world. I sensed my professor—an atheist, a Jew, and a Marxist—was not thrilled with the idea of me wanting to serve a mission, but he also had a respect for and an interest in Mormonism. He had already read the Book of Mormon but wanted to read more, so I gave him a collection of essays by one of my most influential models of a Mormon scholar in

those days, Gene England, which he enjoyed. When I got too worked up in my criticism of a writer, whether it was Marx or Nietzsche, he would ask me if I was reading carefully enough to understand their point of view. I figured that if he had bothered to read about Mormonism, I should bother to be as curious about other ideas.

I was fortunate to have spent my summer before and after my freshman year with another pivotal model for me, Lowell Bennion. I worked as a counselor at his boys' ranch. Lowell was a man who balanced criticism, compassion, and charity better than anyone I knew. I also devoured his books in those days, as I did the books of another important influence, Elder Maxwell. Both were men of learning and of careful and bold judgment, but they also devoted their lives not to thinking brilliantly, as brilliant as they were, but to service. Lowell took time to treat my wounds in the wake of my brother's tragic death, and he helped me keep things simple when looking at the Church and thinking about the gospel. He had lived with his questions, particularly about blacks and the priesthood, and he never stopped asking them openly and honestly, but he also never let such questions overshadow his life or lead him to anger. For him, life always boiled down to "What can I do to help?" What a gift that man was.

My one semester at BYU after my freshman year and before my mission exposed me to many more professors and peers who modeled lives of integrity, intellectual curiosity, and deep faith. It was an embarrassment of riches. Indeed, Brigham Young's vision of education sunk deep into my soul and ultimately drew me back here to teach. As I think about it now, it was as if I always knew I would be here. Since my arrival here almost eighteen years ago, I have taught, recreated, researched, worshipped, mourned, and rejoiced with my exceptional peers, women and men who are among the most remarkable people I have ever known. Our conversations together on complex and difficult topics have been the most exciting and soul-fulfilling conversations in my life. And I cannot overstate how much I admire and love the students at BYU. I will always defend this place and believe in it as the most exciting and important experiment in higher education. We don't always get things right here at BYU, of course. We sometimes prefer to coerce consensus or to micromanage it. We are overly anxious about differences of opinion. I think it probably comes with the territory of engaging in an unusual but essential experiment. Elder Holland says, "In this Church there is an enormous amount of room—and scriptural commandment—for

studying and learning, for comparing and considering, for discussion and awaiting further revelation. . . . In this there is no place for coercion or manipulation, no place for intimidation or hypocrisy."[6] I hope we can work harder to create an atmosphere for honest conversation and exploration as brothers and sisters. Since faith is strengthened more by relationships than by ideas, this is vital.

We can do better than what at Stanford and at Berkeley was a conversation limited to a hermeneutics of suspicion, that is, a method of interpretation that starts and ends at a position of distrust. Don't get me wrong. I believe in the worth of such suspicion. I believe it can keep at bay a whole host of evils. I believe it has helped me, for example, to keep my distance from the allures of capitalism, from the seductions of propagandistic punditry, from the sometimes false illusions of our own national innocence, and from the glossy appearances of a mythologized past. I think it was useful for understanding the kind of persecution we suffered as Mormons, which I think is why I found myself drawn to minority discourse in graduate school. I was suspicious of the ways in which majority cultures and hegemonic discourses forge and perpetuate their own authority by means of denigrating, ignoring, or otherwise oppressing minority voices. This is perhaps why I became a comparatist. It helped me check the norms and assumptions of one culture against those of another.

But a hermeneutics of suspicion can lead to a categorical suspicion of the centers of power and of all kinds of authority. It can motivate us to be more cynical, less trusting, and more angry than everyone else. As Alan Jacobs brilliantly described it, it is an attitude of distrust that "would rather suffer anything than the humiliation of being fooled."[7] Ultimately this leaves us feeling utterly and totally self-satisfied with ourselves and our own like-minded crowd. After listening to a particularly tiresome rant against Republicans by my colleagues one day at Berkeley, I remember asking if any of them actually had any Republican friends. I was met with blank stares. Liberals don't have a corner on paranoia and mistrust of everyone else, however. During my one semester at BYU in the fall of 1984, I once said to my friend as we crossed campus, "Sometimes it feels around here as if people believe a good Mormon can't be

6. Jeffrey R. Holland, "A Prayer for the Children," *Ensign* 33 (May 2003): 85.

7. Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2001), 88.

a Democrat." Just as I said this, a student passing us turned and yelled, "You CAN'T be a good Mormon and a Democrat!" I guess apparently you can't have a majority of like-minded people without your share of chauvinists either. Suspicion today is the ethos of government, the ethos of public discourse, and the ethos of civic duty.

I prefer what scholars have called a hermeneutics of love, or of recovery, a way of interpreting that uses criticism to complete or fulfill or restore. It is the difference between looking for the faults of others in order to justify mistrust and using those faults as a way to measure how the Spirit nevertheless moves through weak human vessels. To my mind, it is Christian to see what it is an author or artist aspired to, even if they didn't quite achieve it. This is what I learned from Caribbean novelist and theorist, Edouard Glissant, who admired the white southern writer William Faulkner but also suspected that his representations of black characters and of women were perhaps a symptom of his own biases. Faulkner's racism mattered, but Glissant decided it was better to imagine and work to complete the vision of a postslavery world of which Faulkner was first to catch an essential glimpse. In other words, the most appropriate response to limited human instruments through whom inspiration comes is not deconstructive cynicism or condemnation but the creativity to help build on the inspiration offered. Similarly, when I was ordained as a bishop, the stake president told me to listen for what his blessing was trying to say. I thought that was good advice for any Sunday.

The other day, two young friends from my ward asked me how I reconcile a belief in the universal claims of the restored gospel with the diversity of the world. What a great and important question. I suppose I would say that the challenge of doing so is itself so much more meaningful than giving up on the possibility of truth. It is an illusion to believe that belief of any kind, even belief in a universe of absolute relativism, doesn't involve a wager of faith of some kind; categorical suspicions about belief in God or in revealed truths that do not recognize their own wagers about what is ultimately true seem to me to be both hypocritical and impotent. A mind that only knows skepticism and suspicion abdicates the risk and the responsibility of discernment, along with all of its benefits. The benefit of a belief in God, especially one grounded in humility and acknowledgement of our human weakness, is that we make ourselves answerable for our sins and we remain vigilant about the dangers of creating and worshipping a worldview made after our own whims and appetites. And most importantly, once we begin to trust

in the living God, we make ourselves more available to experience his love, which, as Nephi teaches, is enough to keep us on the good path even with unanswered questions.

As I started college, I knew at least the meaning of God's love. When my oldest brother, after a prolonged battle with clinical depression, took his life in the middle of my senior year of high school, I was comforted one night when I experienced the living presence of my brother in my bedroom and where I received confirmation that he was at peace and that he loved us. I knew then that God was involved in the details of my life, not to the degree, of course, that he will always arrange things to my liking or prevent terrible things from happening, but that he will respond to our experiences with genuine compassion and mercy.

I still want to know why biology seemed to have betrayed my brother. I still want to know why anyone should have to suffer severe mental illness. But God's love took me one step further. My patriarchal blessing told me there were things I could still do for my brother. Later, I realized I needed to perform the ordinances of the temple for him. I did so and afterwards had a dream in which he told me with great excitement that he was learning so much from the best teachers. You had to know his insatiable curiosity for learning to appreciate what that meant. I knew then that the ordinances of the temple were effectual for life after death, that the powers of the Atonement reached beyond the grave, and that my brother was progressing beyond his earthly limitations.

On my mission a few years later, I read in the writings of Joseph Fielding Smith that he felt a member of the Church should never go through the temple for someone who had committed suicide. This was disappointing, to be sure, but I didn't bristle at this or feel inclined to judge. I have never said anything about it publicly until now. I don't recall that I said anything to anyone about it. I want to be clear: I don't share this to undermine trust in the leaders of the Church. I say it because maybe it is helpful to someone who might be struggling to realize that such contradictions shouldn't cancel out your knowledge of God's love. The general consensus of the General Authorities over time on the essentials of the gospel is what matters most. Styles, personalities, isolated statements, and even policies can change, but the fundamentals of the gospel—such as obedience, service, repentance, and faith—do not. Our challenge and responsibility is to hold fast to the iron rod, especially in the mists of darkness when we can't see clearly. Keeping ourselves committed to the fundamentals will not always provide answers to our questions, but it will provide the strength to live with the questions. If that consensus still conflicts with your beliefs,

be like Lowell Bennion. Still look for and uphold the good and truth of the Church, keep your covenants, love and serve generously, keep asking questions, and wait on the Lord. The important thing is to maintain access to Christ's healing power and keep yourself open to the possibility of more understanding.

Like many of you, I suppose, criticism and compassion can sometimes create sparks of tension. Church life is a source of great joy, but it can also be a source of sorrow. I am fiercely loyal to the Church, but I struggle to agree with everything that is said or done by Church leaders. I admire so many in the Church who stay and thrive, and I miss and long for so many good people who have gone, people I fear we who stayed didn't make enough room for. I love my temple marriage to Amy and all that it has given us, but I also deeply love and feel great compassion for my one and only remaining sibling, Bill. Given what happened to our oldest brother, perhaps you can understand the anxiety it causes me to know that I might be the cause of any more pain.

The policy change last week was an acutely hard challenge in this regard. I love the leaders of this church. I trust them. I know they pray and act on behalf of all God's children. It is important to remember, as a believing gay friend of mine says, that there are no bad guys here. It is certainly true that my difficulty is because I am not valiant enough. But I believe that in my sorrows and my contradictory feelings, I share something of the contradiction it was for Jesus to feel abandoned by his Father and friends just at the moment when he fulfilled his Father's will and suffered everything for all of us. Christ suffered even this moment, you see. Because of his charity, no one's feelings are unknown to him, no one's perspective is incapable of finding a basis in an important truth. If you feel tempted to leave, please reconsider. We need you. We need to hear your pain. We need your questions. We need your gifts. We will all be better for working this through together.

It would be, I think, a colossal mistake not to mention hypocrisy of the deepest order for any of us to refuse to offer charity to others just because we perceive their actions or views as uncharitable. So look around you. There are others who are hurting. We are all members of the same body. As the humanities teach us, there is something fundamentally healing about listening compassionately to the stories of others. Let's listen together. In this regard, the way that the Church makes us responsible and answerable to people different than we are is an opportunity to offer our charity widely. I have heard some people say that this is a "sifting" moment in the Church, a time for "thinning

the herd." Church leaders might occasionally be called upon for compassionate judgment on behalf of individuals whose life choices have placed themselves or others in serious spiritual danger, but let's be clear: you and I are repeatedly warned about the dangers of judgment and condemnation of others in our hearts. We have no right to be sifters. We are commanded to be gatherers, one by one.

I still don't understand all things, but I know God loves us and that we should love one another. As I have prayed over my family's situation, the Lord has never revealed why things have happened the way they have in my family. Instead he has repeatedly told me, almost to the point of redundancy, to love, love, and love some more. He has told me to relieve the suffering of others. That's it. To have charity. When I have instead focused on wanting answers or on trying to explain or justify things, I find it can make me a bit crazy, and sometimes I get filled with anger. Then there is the temptation of finding someone to blame and feeding an anger addiction. The Internet is good for that. How I wish people of faith would learn to defend their faith with love, not with vitriol. How I wish critics too would exhibit even a modicum of the kind of love they claim the Church doesn't have. Even wounds of love can spread hate like toxic pollution if we don't have charity. God is gentle with us, he sorrows with us, and he absorbs the reality of the world day by day with charity and forbearance. Knowing that should give us more reason to be gentle with others.

In answer to my young friends' question, I would say that I have lived long enough to see that the gospel has worked and borne good fruit. When I had finally decided after a few years of Word of Wisdom abuses in high school to keep the commandments, I noticed a remarkable peace come into my life. I felt strong. When I prayed and studied the scriptures, I felt deep longing and connection. All through my challenging and stimulating years at Stanford and at Berkeley, I learned that obedience to the commandments is a low-risk/high-yield proposition and that to deliberately drop God's commandments until my mind could sort everything out was, on the other hand, a high-risk/low-yield proposition. I have sinned and repented often in my life—honestly I think I am somewhat of an expert. I don't say that to be cute or funny or falsely humble. And it has taught me how easily my mind and worldview shift according to my level of obedience. It has been tempting to change my worldview rather than to change my life. While I am not proud of my mistakes, I will never, ever be ashamed to proclaim the blessings of the atonement of Jesus Christ. Christ has made me what I am and given me everything I have.

I am not here because I learned perfect obedience once and for all. I am only here because God is gracious.

One of his most gracious gifts is friends. To tell but one story, I was admitted to Stanford and keen on attending but was worried about having enough support from fellow Mormons to stay strong. As I prayed about it, I felt that I would be all right. At Stanford, you fill out a roommate card during the summer, and, based on that information, they choose your roommate for you. I didn't indicate my religion, since it didn't ask, but I remember writing, "I don't want a roommate who parties too much." My brother helped me to move in the first day. My roommate had already moved in, but he wasn't there. On his desk sat a Book of Mormon. My brother and I looked at each other, astonished. We thought, was he an anti-Mormon?! This just seemed too improbable. As it turned out, there were only four male Mormons entering the freshman class of 1,500 students. My roommate, Andy Sorenson, was from California and also had recently gotten active in the Church and decided to go on a mission. He too had arrived at Stanford with a prayer in his heart that he would have help to get on his mission.

God brought us together, and we remain best friends. We helped each other to stay active and to serve missions, which established a solid foundation for us to later begin our relationships with our respective future wives in that small, wonderful Stanford ward. I could have devoted most of my talk to my most important friend, Amy, but suffice it to say that I married a calm, steady, loyal, and brilliant woman whose critical capacities and compassion are exceptional and whose commitment to charity have helped me never to take myself or my ideas or my perspective too seriously. She is patient with contradiction, with difficult trials and difficult institutional situations, and has held strong through my darkest hours. She doesn't overreact to my struggles and helps me to keep things simple. So I guess that moment of grace to start my college career was a small but pivotal and eternally important gift. I started out and remain a free spirit, but I was immature. I was sorrowful too. I could cry easily, and I often did. I could fall apart. I think because of my brother's recent death, I felt at any time that all I knew and could believe in could be swept up in a dark tornado of violence at any moment. Or that I myself might drop the sacred value of my life on a whim, and that would be the end of me. I have lived with a sense of urgency and anxiousness that has kept me clinging to Christ. It has been a lifelong struggle, and only the grace of good friends and good family and God's tender mercies have saved me.

Enough experiences with God's love, then, and you will realize something fundamentally good and true about the Church and the gospel, and also something fundamentally good and true about yourself and your life. Existence itself becomes a miracle and a rare and beautiful gift. This is the basis of my interest and research in environmental stewardship. It isn't because it's a political trend. It's because nature as an expression of Christ's glory has healed me of my sorrows and because creation care is how I show gratitude for his gifts. There is a scene in my favorite novel, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov,* that captures how God's love increases our ability to bear contradictions, to withstand doubts, to endure suffering, and to embrace physical life with all of our heart. Zosima the monk is Alyosha's spiritual mentor, and he tells Alyosha his entire life story. Zosima says, "Even one day is enough for a man to know all happiness."[8] Think on that. If we were truly aware of how little we have earned and how much is already given, we would have no needs, no anxieties or dependencies. Going in to the monastery, Alyosha was weighed down by unanswered questions about his own life, but he emerges from the monastery and collapses under the weight of life's joy:

> Night, fresh and quiet, almost unstirring, enveloped the earth. The white towers and golden domes of the church gleamed in the sapphire sky. The luxuriant autumn flowers in the flowerbeds near the house had fallen asleep until morning. The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars. . . . Alyosha stood gazing and suddenly, as if he had been cut down, threw himself to the earth. He did not know why he was embracing it, he did not try to understand why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss all of it, but he was kissing it, weeping, sobbing, and watering it with his tears, and he vowed ecstatically to love it, to love it unto ages of ages.[9]

It took me many years to learn to accept myself and to see this exceptional privilege of the bare facts of existence, unadorned by the promises of money or good looks or reputation or fortunate circumstances, and unattached to anxieties about worthiness or being good enough. None of this is earned, you see. This body, this planet, these beautiful people around you, the mountains, the clouds, the very fabric

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8. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 289.

9. Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov,* 362.

of life's inconceivable diversity. Maybe in some ways that means God's pure love, his charity, can feel impersonal, since it is available to anyone. But that's just it. It is universal, so it is yours for the taking and yours also for the giving, to assist others in their pursuit of deeper happiness in Christ, the Creator and the Redeemer. I have, in other words, the privilege and responsibility to love those I come to know in all their individuality and to love my corner of the earth I have come to inhabit in all its particularity. I look around at the bounty of what I have here, and I can do nothing more, and nothing less.

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