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Introduction ***Finding God at BYU***

Each experience and encounter with people of faith is for me . . . a religious experience. –Rabbi David Rosen

Near Luxor, Egypt, the magnificent temple of Hatshepsut rises against the western cliffs of the Nile valley. Hatshepsut, a woman king, followed the practice of rulers of the time and commissioned a burial place for herself that included bas-relief paintings of scenes from her life. Now, gazing across centuries, we wonder at the art and the hands that created it. It's the idea that intrigues us—the idea of building a place for burial while one is still alive, the idea of choosing events from one's life to decorate the walls of a burial place. What events would you choose? Would BYU be there? We began to think that there are stories to tell. This book is about finding God and strengthening faith. Though some have written about how they joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is not a book of conversion stories. When we began the effort three years ago to find persons with interesting stories to tell about how BYU intertwined with their lives and affected their faith, we expected to see two kinds of influences come together. The first, we thought naively, would consist of meaningful encounters with religious values in the classrooms of BYU. That is, we imagined that the intellectual and academic influences of the classroom would lead to reflections on faith. We also anticipated that those encounters would lead to a blossoming curiosity which could only be satisfied when the individual joined the LDS Church, or became more active and committed if already a member. We were wrong. Instead, we found experiences that were much richer and wondrously more complex.

We freely admit that we draw inspiration for this collection of stories from a work titled *Finding God at Harvard*, which was edited by Kelly Monroe and appeared in 1996. Monroe's book offers to readers a rich array of stories that explore a variety of personal responses to religion, particularly as one can find religion at Harvard University, a bastion of secular education. A person immediately senses, of course, the motivation for collecting stories about faith at a university that is unabashedly secular. So why a book about faith at BYU? Is it not one of the chief purposes of BYU to strengthen faith, to assist students and others to find God? After all, the published mission statement since 1981 states that "all students at BYU should be taught the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ." Hence, one expects BYU to provide a classroom atmosphere in which faith finds strength and the name of God brings respect. So why a book on finding God at BYU? Experiences are likely to be predictable and, in a general way, pretty much the same. We were wrong again.

Instead, the variety of personal experience among the authors points to a high degree of both reward and frustration. For some, BYU was not an easy place to come to. In fact, for them it posed powerful personal challenges almost from the first day. For others, the spiritual and personal rewards for coming to campus were immediate. The essays of Patricia Holland and Terry EchoHawk are of individuals who as young teenagers were deeply touched by their first contact with the University. They came expecting a wonderful influence and found it. Because of Earl Kauffman's visits to other universities during his senior year in high school, he also came away from his first contact sensing an unusual, special dimension to the campus.

In contrast, overtly or subtly, for others the atmosphere at BYU apparently demands that they decide how to respond to the openly religious campus environment. The stories of Vivian Mushahwar and Kevin Giddens reflect this dimension of life at BYU. Each came as a student who had grown up in a very different atmosphere and had no idea what campus life in an LDS setting would be like. Their transitions to life on campus were challenging. It was similarly challenging for Benoy Tamang, who attended BYU-Hawaii as an undergraduate from Nepal. For Julie Boerio-Goates, who is married to a Latter-day Saint whose family has deep ties with BYU, there were few surprises. But the intensity of the atmosphere forced her, as it were, to decide how she felt about her own faith.

As we have hinted, our biggest surprise arose from what we didn't find. We were surprised at the almost total lack of reference to classroom experiences as life-changing. Rather, crucial differences arose either because of interaction with other individuals or because of the general religious environment at the University. From the reflections of those whose essays follow, it is clear that for many either the BYU community or a particular individual associated with BYU was far more important and formative than the BYU classroom. Thus, a person—his priests quorum adviser—made a difference in the life of Larry EchoHawk. An old man in India, and then later a BYU professor, brought God into the life of Karandeep Singh and effectively kept Him there. Initially, a religion professor opened Steve Clements's heart to God, and his fiancée kept it open. For Charles Metten, it has been students individually—who have made a positive difference in his long teaching career. As a student, Allen Bergin followed the woman he loved to Provo and was never the same thereafter, personally or professionally.

For a few, by contrast, a task serendipitously brought them to a point where contact with the University or the Church meant something to them. That is the case with Rabbi David Rosen, who traveled to Salt Lake City to meet with Church leaders about the BYU Jerusalem Center, and with Johnny Bahbah, who was moved spiritually when translating a General Conference talk into Arabic.

Four faculty members came to appreciate the unique spiritual characteristics of BYU only after they had joined the faculty. Bruce Christensen sees the University differently and in a more reflective way because of leaving and then returning. Kate Kirkham, who arrived as a faculty member with high expectations, appreciates the University because of divine help in surmounting difficulties encountered there. Van Gessel, who came with few expectations but from a strong LDS background, was surprised by the effect that freedom to speak in the classroom about spiritual matters had on him. Robert Patterson, who for much of his career avoided association with BYU, found God in day-to-day interactions with colleagues and students that took on a sacred hue.

Others who wrote knew to a substantial degree what awaited them at the University and were not surprised by its emphasis on religious matters. But their essays reveal a rich texture of religious life at BYU. Melinda Cameron, daughter of a famous actor, came from Beverly Hills High School looking for a career in theater but also looking for something that only BYU might be able to offer. Lita Giddens, already a member of the Church, came to BYU because of a promise in a blessing. Eula Monroe joined the faculty after teaching at Western Kentucky University for years and now advises the Baptist Student Union on campus. Both Frank Rothaermel of Germany and Fredy Gantner of Switzerland knew of BYU's connections to the Church before attending graduate school but found that the University fostered deeper spiritual meaning than they had expected. Michael Young, a Latter-day Saint before he came to BYU, was one of the few who reported unusual stimulation in a classroom setting.

We return to the image created by Hatshepsut's monument in Upper Egypt. She chose to feature certain events from her life on the walls of her monument. In a similar way, our authors have done likewise. In each of their life stories, BYU has played a significant part.

We thank sincerely the authors whose essays appear in this book. It has been a privilege for us to work with them, and we consider it a sacred task to bring their stories to the public. On one level, these individuals have reproduced a significant part of their life histories. On another, they have permanently enriched our lives, as well as our perspectives on finding God at BYU. On another note, we offer thanks to some who wrote for us but whose stories do not appear in these pages. There are regions in the world where people do not enjoy much freedom. For sensitive political and personal reasons, we agreed with those authors not to print their stories. We sincerely hope that time and circumstance will improve so that their essays might yet see the light of day.

Finally, we wish to express gratitude to Pat Ward, administrative assistant in Ancient Studies, who helped us tremendously in the workaday tasks associated with stitching this book together. And we thank the staff of the Religious Studies Center for bringing it to light.

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