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Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths (Proverbs 3:5–6).

Put to the Test

Vivian K. Mushahwar

Vivian K. Mushahwar was born in Jerusalem. She attended Brigham Young University, graduating with a bachelor of science in electrical engineering in 1991. She then pursued a doctorate in bioengineering and neuroscience at the University of Utah. Currently, she is doing postdoctoral work at the University of Alberta on improving and restoring function and mobility after spinal cord injury. Earlier, she did postdoctoral work in rehabilitative medicine at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. She is fluent in three languages, speaking, reading, and writing Arabic, Hebrew, and English. Dr. Mushahwar lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

I was born in East Jerusalem thirty-two years ago to a young Palestinian couple. I was the second of three children. I came to BYU not knowing anything about the University other than that it was listed among competitive universities in the U.S. My knowledge of the people and their religion was limited to the Honor Code I was asked to abide by as a future BYU student. I was very impressed by the Honor Code, and so were my parents. My family believed that I was going to be part of a community that preached Arab values and standards, because aside from not allowing the drinking of coffee, the Honor Code resembles very much the Arab way of living. My Palestinian upbringing instilled in me a strong sense of honesty and generosity. Within my frame of values, education and a belief in Christ were deeply engraved. Familial, cultural, and religious edicts compelled me to accept graciously the friendship of upright individuals regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds.

Yet, as a non-LDS student, adapting to the unique environment of BYU proved to be difficult. Part of the difficulty stemmed from the notion that acceptance at the University was based primarily on religious beliefs—beliefs perceived by many cultures as personal and private. It appeared as though LDS students were continually attempting to convert their peers of other religions. Little time and effort were spent on getting to *know* non-LDS friends, and interest in them dwindled when no conversion was in sight. Overcoming these impressions and adapting to the seemingly difficult environment of BYU required personal growth and reaffirmation of what I held to be true.

For all students, Brigham Young University presents a distinct environment to which they must adjust. LDS teachings govern numerous aspects of students’ daily lives, beginning with the Honor Code and encompassing the majority of social activities on campus. While some students take exception to the defined structure of the University and set out to beat the system (after all, for youngsters, rules are made to be broken), the majority of students accept this unique environment and joyfully participate in what it has to offer. For LDS Church members, BYU provides an exceptional opportunity for enjoying an all-encompassing, Church-influenced life not easily available in their home states or countries. For students of other faiths, BYU is a puzzle that quickly turns into a challenge.

While all societies expect their members to live an honest life upholding the laws of the land, a person’s sense of morality is shaped by a more personal set of experiences intimately affected by family interactions and religious teachings. It is this set of personal beliefs that was frequently put to the test for me at BYU. In the BYU context, religion becomes an ongoing daily activity rather than a weekly confession of beliefs. Thus, a person’s lack of acceptance due to differences in religious affiliation poses a remarkable challenge to that person’s values. In attempting to deal with such a challenge, I have found that individuals respond in one of four ways: first, a feeling of rejection can promote resentment toward the University and LDS culture. The expression of resentment may, however, occur at the expense of one’s own personal values. Along this path, an obsession with beating the system by compromising one’s own morality and integrity often leads to the loss of one’s own values and, ultimately, oneself.

Second, the need for acceptance may encourage conversion without the precursory faithful admission of these beliefs. By converting without really believing, one is compromising one’s morality in return for social acceptance. By knowingly abandoning what is true, one is again at risk of losing oneself.

Third, one may faithfully accept the new beliefs and values. A conversion to these beliefs provides the individual with an honest and enlightening sense of morality necessary for a complete transformation of one’s life and value system. Within this transformation, one can discover oneself and establish a new covenant with God. A fresh, unblemished beginning follows.

Finally, the most difficult and frightening path one may pursue in dealing with a perceived lack of acceptance is an honest reassessment and recommitment to one's own beliefs. In this case, one is allowing oneself to candidly look deep within and rigorously affirm what one's core beliefs are based on. Intimate religious beliefs and personal values are put to the test—not even the slightest slack or diversion is allowed. The emergence from this honest assessment reaffirms one's beliefs, and the fear of having them challenged by others disappears. Moreover, the notion of lack of acceptance diminishes as one realizes that acceptance should be mutual: one cannot demand what one is not willing to offer. Though such a path may very well lead to the loss of a few friends, it enhances one's internal light and renews one's contract with God. It further embellishes self-confidence and provides the strength one needs to maintain one's values. More importantly, it grants the strength needed to allow one to understand that the truthfulness of one's religion does not preclude nor supersede the truthfulness of other religions. In fact, it grants a person the strength to accept and learn from all religious and moral teachings. It allows for an openness to all truth. Indeed, it allows for the reaffirmation of the presence of God, an experience I gratefully acquired at BYU.

Soon after I arrived at BYU I realized that I was at a university where church and religion dominated every aspect of a student's daily life. I found people discussing religion every minute of the day. Everyone seemed to be so wrapped up in religion that there was no chance for a non-LDS student to participate in any discussions. All opinions and stands were based on religion. There appeared to be no controversies; things were understood in one set way, and all other ways were considered wrong. I saw no chance for critical thinking and felt my brain was going to burst from boredom. I came from a place where controversy is a way of life, where active and heated discussions are social activities, and where individuals struggle hard with concepts prior to accepting them. Yet, once accepted they become solid, unshaken values implemented on a daily basis with sincere conviction. I was taught that faith does not mean submitting and following without truly believing. Inquisitions of one's own religion were accepted and even encouraged. Therefore, the common "it has not been revealed to us yet" answer that I received from fellow students to my questions regarding LDS beliefs was completely unsatisfying. In discussing general issues spanning euthanasia, abortion, and the rights of all people regardless of gender and ethnic background, answers such as "I only believe this because the Church tells me to" were equally ungratifying.

I came to resent the new atmosphere of BYU as well as the cultural differences I encountered. In addition to what I saw as a lack of critical inquiry at BYU, I was irritated with the frequent question of what religion I belonged to. I could not see what difference it made whether I was a member of the LDS Church or not; nor could I understand why I should be treated differently being one or the other. In my mind and heart, religion was a private matter with its principles upheld and practiced in daily interactions. I started responding to persons who mentioned anything about religion with open animosity. I took every explanation about Mormonism as a personal attack on my church and myself. I became extremely sensitive and intolerant of any comments made about "people from another faith." Sitting in a religion class became psychological torture. I read the assigned scriptures, studied diligently for my tests, wrote my papers, and got A's in my religion classes. But this did not come easily. I used to literally force myself to sit down and do the reading and writing. My religion assignments were constantly on my mind. They affected all my other classes. By forcing myself to get my religion homework done, I was expending so much time and energy that I was totally drained when it came to attending to my other classes.

"But why did you let those religion classes affect you so much?" you might ask. After struggling with this question myself, I realized that it was because I was very interested in learning about the LDS Church and religion, but at the same time I had a closed mind and an intolerant spirit. While I was very interested in learning about people through their religion, I was not interested in the constant pressure I felt pushing me toward converting to Mormonism without anyone even attempting to discover what my beliefs were about. Without realizing it, I had become as intolerant as I thought those around me were. The situation continued until the fall semester of 1987.

At that time, I enrolled in a course covering the first part of the Book of Mormon, taught by Professor Donna Lee Bowen, a political science professor with whom I had a prior acquaintance and whom I highly admired. Professor Bowen was very tolerant of other religions and very understanding of the cultural and religious differences I encountered at BYU. She did not push me but treated me like the rest of the LDS students in class. Unfortunately, I had been pushed to the edge in a course covering the second part of the Book of Mormon. The previous spring term I had taken the course from a professor who seemed to have made vows to convert me to Mormonism before the end of the course. He was exceptionally nice and answered my questions. He explained all the doctrines in the first part of the Book of Mormon that I had not yet studied, but he pushed me hard to believe and convert when I did not need to be pushed. This experience sharply increased my feelings of resentment.

Because I had known Professor Bowen before I started taking the first part of the Book of Mormon, I hoped that things were going to be all right and that the feelings of frustration I had developed during the previous spring would

have all been washed away during the summer. I was mistaken. By the second or third week of the semester I realized that all of the frustration was still there, and the inner struggle over doing homework for the class began anew. During the next few weeks, the frustration intensified until it came to a point where I could handle it no more. I hated everything around me, and I knew that things could not continue as they were. Grades in other classes suffered, and it was time for me to rid myself of this “religion syndrome” that had captured me.

I went to Professor Bowen’s office determined to tell her that I had had it, and that I was simply not going to write the last religion paper. (I had already written a large number of short papers in the course, but the fact that it was nearing the end of the semester or that I had done all of the work to date did not matter—I was not going to do another thing in a religion class.) I walked into her office and bluntly announced that I was not going to write that last paper. I can still remember how shocked she was. Apparently, I had managed to hide my frustration quite well throughout the semester. The only time I had expressed some anger in one of my papers, she followed me after class and told me that it was all right. Unfortunately, I was beyond the stage of believing that.

She asked me to sit down and with great concern asked, “Vivian, what happened?” I had very little to say in response. So she presented me with my alternatives: “If you don’t write that paper,” she said, “you’ll drop your grade to an A minus. But let’s talk about it.” She tried to ask me about what was bothering me. But she was not very successful because I gave an “I don’t know” answer. It did not take her long to realize that she was not going to get me to talk. Still, she continued to ask questions, basic questions, such as whether I believed in God and Christ. As I gave affirmative answers she repeated the question of “what’s bothering you then?” For the first time I realized that it was not Mormonism itself that bothered me.

I had grown up among practicing Muslims and Jews. Therefore, it was not LDS religious principles that disturbed me but the way I was received at BYU. I was not made to feel that I belonged. Certainly, I made things worse by adopting a reciprocal attitude of intolerance. I explained to Professor Bowen that I resented the way I was received. I hated feeling that the way the Book of Mormon was taught became the root of discrimination against me and that it was providing grounds for people around me to do the same. I complained that people were not open enough, were very narrow-minded, and would not deal with anything out of their norm. I complained about being judged because of what religion I belonged to rather than the kind of person I truly was. I resented being looked upon as an inferior who had not yet seen the light. Professor Bowen just listened. It seemed as though she understood what I was going through and limited her comments to gestures of disapproval of the ways I felt I was mistreated. She let me talk. By this, she let me hear myself complaining about things that I was not applying to myself. And in doing so, it became clear to me that I was not open enough, that I was extremely intolerant of people around me, and that I was not about to deal with them on their terms. I realized that I was as rigid as I thought the BYU community was.

It clearly was time for me to change. I had to change my attitude, and I had to reintroduce myself in the BYU community. I started opening up gradually and was able to communicate with people around me. I realized that I could find some individuals with whom I could carry on fruitful intellectual discussions based on logic and mutual understanding. By opening up, I realized that I could be the person I was no matter where I was. It was I who formed my image and not the people around me. I was the only one who could make myself into the person I wanted the people to know. I learned that my values could not and should not be compromised because of people’s attitudes toward me. To compromise them meant to live in misery, for I could not find happiness when I was myself intolerant and resentful. I had to change my way of thinking and doing things.

I then came to see that understanding Mormonism and its different doctrines was my means of understanding the majority of the students and faculty at BYU, their culture, and their way of thinking. This understanding helped me relate to others and to communicate with them. I found that members of my BYU community were approachable, but that there was a particular way of approaching them. My peers could not deal with ideas that were not familiar to them. Introducing different ideas by using examples from the Book of Mormon that held significance for them proved to be very successful.

Washing away my intolerance reaffirmed my belief in God and gave me the strength to face the community I was living in rather than to shut myself out. After I opened up, life became brighter in that I saw that there were many opportunities for advancement and growth. I found that not everyone was against me and that I could accomplish many things. I started getting involved with the different activities held on campus, and I began initiating my own activities. I found out that there was a way for me to express myself and to influence people’s thinking. I realized I that I was much better serving my people by going out, getting in touch with others, and teaching them about my country, my history, my culture, and my traditions. I started accepting people the way they were. We were different, but that did not mean that one of us was wrong while the other was right. I realized that we could both be right and that we could both advocate upright and righteous living.

I eventually wrote the last religion paper and did get an A in the class. That last paper was the one paper that I truly enjoyed writing. I did not have to struggle or force myself to write it. I was relaxed, and the writing went very smoothly. I attribute that smoothness to the change in my approach to the LDS religion. I was able to acknowledge that this was a class about a religion that was very interesting to me and that I wanted to learn as much about it as I could. Understanding this religion or having others talk about it no longer seemed to be a personal affront. I felt comfortable with most of the doctrines presented and could extract many principles that helped me evaluate my own behavior and become a better person.

The situation I was in before my change was very painful and did not lead anywhere. I seemed to be stuck in a deep, dark hole. To me, nothing could have been worse. I could have dropped out of school and gone home. But then I would have had to deal with a sense of failure that would have accompanied me for a long time. I could not allow myself to quit without trying to resolve my difficulties. I had to take responsibility and change my own life. Furthermore, I had a golden opportunity that I could not have wasted: I had a scholarship and was going to school, when my friends in Palestine were denied the right to do that. In short, I had to make things work out for me, and nothing could have been worse than where I already was.

By listening to me, Professor Bowen made me hear things that I ought to have been doing myself before demanding them from other people. I have great admiration for Professor Bowen. I have great respect for her strong faith, diligence, and patience. Her honesty and straightforwardness allowed me to trust her and hold her in the highest regard. My interest in initiating different activities, following them through, and having them succeed would not have been possible had I not changed. I feel that by stepping out of the hole I had dug for myself, I have contributed a lot to my people and my country. I was able to reach out and educate some BYU students about myself, my nation, and my plight. I was able to communicate my aspirations, hopes, needs, and feelings. Knowing that a few people now realize that I exist as a Palestinian with the need to be free is yet another reward.

The vividness of this experience has been with me for the last ten years and will stay with me for many years to come. I can never forget that it was at BYU where I developed and grew. My experience there, as difficult as it was, made me a better person. While I urge people to carry an open and tolerant mind now, I exert a lot of effort to do the same myself. When the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants call for honesty, charity, and righteousness, I try my best to comply. These books are no longer my enemies, but they and other religious books have become providers of upright principles.