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Seek you diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith (D&C 88:118).

Sustaining the Presence

Karandeep Singh

Karandeep Singh is a graduate student in art history and curatorial studies at Brigham Young University. He was born in New Delhi, India, and grew up there. Following completion of high school in India, he enrolled at BYU and completed a degree in anthropology and philosophy in 1995, graduating with honors and as the valedictorian of his class. He enrolled at Brandeis University to pursue graduate work but decided to return to BYU to continue his master’s degree. His story was written in two stages. The first part was written shortly after Mr. Singh left BYU for graduate school in the East. The second was written two years later, after he had returned to BYU for additional graduate education. Mr. Singh currently resides in England where he is pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Essex.

God found me four years before I found BYU. He came to the fifteen-year-old New Delhi (India) suburbanite, who was also a newly proclaimed atheist and an aspiring cardiovascular surgeon, in the form of a soft-spoken, retired army officer. Something about this dashing octogenarian Sikh struck me as extraordinary: his radiant forehead, the conviction in his speech, or maybe just his handlebar mustache. Concealed in his understated demeanor, though, was the spark of a revolutionary. Either that, or I was all too combustible on that balmy February day in 1988. The flame was kindled; the contagion contracted. Almost in spite of myself, I began the journey of a Sikh.

Don’t misunderstand me. My family has been Sikh for several generations. We have worn our turbans with pride and adorned unshorn hair with fortitude. But all I found growing up was stagnation: an unthinking faith that cared more for the soporific norms of a complacent society than for the dynamic dictates of its prophets. There was no—how shall I say it?—commitment. Well, there was a kind of commitment, but a very superficial one of the kind where a community gangs up against missionaries from another faith but gets lackadaisical as soon as the missionaries leave. Nobody cherished repentance over convenience; not one of these so-called disciples practiced their credo of “service before self.” So at fifteen, I was disenchanted with life, with religion, and with God. Then that retired army officer accosted me in his delectable half-British, half-Hindustani accent.

He spoke of *living* the word, of *becoming* scripture, of being elevated to Godhood. He talked of implementing doctrine, *personifying* charity, and *cultivating* virtue. I had never heard anything like it before. Sure, I had all the usual read-your-scriptures and be-nice-to-others and pay-your-tithing and attend-church-regularly coming out of my ears. Mere preaching, I used to think. The blind leading the blind, as if we all knew where we were going. But when “Bauji” spoke (I have come to call him that—it is Punjabi for “ grandpa”), a thunder roared in my insides. It was as if the very pauses between his sentences were pregnant with truth. He had merely to look my way, and I felt as if I had become the locus of the entire Sikh community. Eighteen million Sikhs converge in me when “Bauji” narrated awe-inspiring tales of valor from our shared religious heritage. He had a way of personalizing the impersonal, of rendering the abstract accessible, that foiled all habitual attempts on my part to deflect responsibility. Was this guy for real?

Ever the doubting Cartesian, I probed his life (oh, he has to be another charlatan) but found it unimpeachable. I discovered that he did not let a sermon escape his lips until he had preached it through his actions. He was so large, so brimming with life, so utterly simple in his faith that I found myself more and more in his company. I hungered for his words, craved his wisdom, sought after his simplicity. He seemed to eat, drink, and sleep the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh scriptures). What struck me most was his intuitive capacity for the spiritual realm; in fact, it was precisely his mastery of the spiritual secrets of everyday life that won over my unruly intellect. Even his stem discipline—he was an army man after all—had an inexplicable attraction. In short, he became my ideal of a disciple, which perhaps is the best way of describing a mentor. I was given a mentor; God had found me!

Interestingly, the entire time I was being initiated into the rigors of discipleship, I had no idea that twelve thousand miles away, across a continent and an ocean, fellow adolescents in another community were experiencing similar throes under their own prophets and mentors. I had never heard of the Mormons, nor was I even remotely acquainted with Brigham Young University. What I was acutely aware of, though, was an overwhelming desire to come to the United States to further my education. The liberal arts have always entranced me; and of all the universities in the

world, I thought the American ones incorporate the liberal arts most effectively into a rigorous undergraduate curriculum. When application season came, I applied to five of the best private schools in the country. A couple of months later, a family friend, himself a graduate of Harvard and an admirer of Latter-day Saints, brought up the possibility of going to BYU. On his lofty recommendation, I decided to give it a shot, only to be told in a curt official notice that BYU doesn't allow men to wear facial hair for nonmedical reasons. Oh, and rule number two: hair must be worn short—no longer than collar length, ears exposed, neatly groomed.

That has to be one of the most amusing nonstarters. Not so much offended as baffled by the tone of the letter, I forgot all about BYU. But this family friend was irate. He pursued my case with some LDS friends in Salt Lake City. The misunderstanding was sorted out: of course I would be allowed to keep my hair and beard. A week later, I got a letter in the mail congratulating me on being accepted to BYU. Now I had a choice. The Honor Code tilted the scales in BYU's favor, and I moved into room 312 of V Hall, Deseret Towers. That was in the fall of 1992. In the spring of 1995, I received a letter announcing my eligibility to graduate that April, which I did with two majors, three mentors, four B's, and no job offers. But perhaps most importantly, with the art of preserving God in my life.

In the last several years, spent mostly in the United States, I have come to realize that even though God found me four years before I found BYU, I had not the skill to handle the fragility of his presence. The companionship of Deity is a blessing bestowed upon a disciple; this much I knew from my experiences as a fifteen year old. But I learned the hard way that this presence needs to be preserved and sustained, for the slightest inattentiveness results in its loss. I lost it several times during my time at BYU. Some days it was the pressure of a midterm; on other occasions a particularly bewitching young lady became the distraction; on still others the headiness generated by intellectual accomplishments got in the way. Perhaps it was a question of perspective, I figured, and hence requested my sophomore-year roommate, Marc Johnson, to chime to me as soon as the clock struck 11 P.M., "Look at the larger picture." Marc, the blessed soul, did it diligently the entire eight months we shared that not-so-spacious Penrose Hall room. It didn't work.

The quest for permanent, or at least a long-term, association with the Lord became increasingly convoluted. Maybe the spirit had deserted me because I had turned down the calling of the ward social events coordinator. I shared my predicament with the elders quorum president, Shawn Henderson, who listened sympathetically. He seemed rather surprised, for both he and the bishop had concurred on the validity of my reasons to decline the calling. (That was the first semester I attempted—rather disastrously, but that's another story—twenty-one credits.) I tried to make up for it by sedulously attending ward prayer every Sunday. They usually had root beer floats at the end, which gave my conscience a whole new warehouse of arsenal. But of course I didn't go there for the ice cream; I went for the bonhomie and the camaraderie and the warmth and the fuzziness and the . . . Attendance in the activities of the ward didn't work either. More than anything else, I probably ended up distracting even further, with my polka-dotted turbans—ah, those were wild days—the already much distracted majority of eternal-partner-seekers.

Frank Susa, the pocket-sized dynamo from Rhode Island, furnished an alternative. Instead of the typical cheap undergrad pizza and (caffeine-free) coke birthday party, why not celebrate his twenty-first birthday by spending the evening with the children at a local orphanage? No prizes for guessing Frank's major. Philosophy, of course. Where else on a contemporary college campus can intelligent idealists still hang out? A service project, I thought, is bound to cure my malaise. It seemed to be working as long as the kids thought I was the genie—it's the turban, I tell you—and gave me a list of all the things they would have liked me to conjure up for them. I still have that list, scribbled in pink and green and blue crayons. Barbie dolls and fighter jets and red cars and palaces, but no mom and dad. Not a single child wanted mom and dad. Maybe they didn't think I was genie enough, or they, like the nine-year-old son of the second-grade captain in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, had lost all hope. Except in this case, it was not my finger they wanted to chew, but my scalp. Someone figured out that I had hair down to my waist hidden under the turban. Before the orphanage administrator could blink her eyes, the little army had started to climb the six-foot-one-inch mountain with its eyes set on one goal: eliminate the peak and swing down the hair! I still hadn't found permanence, but I wasn't too worried about it that moment. Life seemed slightly more significant, and I'm grateful to have escaped alive, the rich crop on my scalp intact.

The significance of life—I use that phrase so effortlessly now. Yet it took James Faulconer, professor of philosophy, mentor, and dear friend, slightly over four years to get me to see life's significance, especially as it relates to discipleship, or the preservation of relationships with God. He stayed back after class—it was the second half of the history of Western philosophy, I think—one Tuesday morning to talk to me about a paper I had written for a course on Judaism. (Dr. Faulconer suffered, with fortitude that would make the pioneers proud, the torture of reading everything I ever wrote at BYU, from the first report I did for his honors freshman writing class to my commencement speech.) The conversation, meant only as an after-class courtesy chat, lasted almost two hours. Both of us missed the devotional. In

addition, he probably missed a few important meetings, and I missed a north-lobby-of-the-library rendezvous with a prospective Friday-night date. I still recall vividly that hideous room where we stood talking, tucked away in a corner of the first level of the JKHB, surrounded by semi-circles of the world's most uncomfortable chairs. "You are a modern philosopher," Brother Faulconer said to me. "Thank you," I said, trying not to blush. "No, no," he clarified, a half-smile dancing around his lips, "that was not a compliment."

I love Brother Faulconer. He can be so delightfully cryptic at times. On that frosty Tuesday, he cryptically told me that in buying everything modernism was selling in the name of Descartes, I had been a sucker. The merchandise in question consisted primarily of the idea that the foundation of everything, including religion, is knowledge. Not right, argued Brother Faulconer, face aglow, arms waving like chopper blades. Religion teaches a way and not a knowledge, though it is usually assumed that the way will eventually result in a knowledge. Explanations of religious behavior—the Sikh practice of keeping unshorn hair, for example—therefore, are accounts that stem from a way rather than serving as justifications for the way. I was stunned. Faulconer was saying that the way that produces the accounts is more fundamental, more foundational, than the accounts themselves. Which is why there could be multiple equally cogent explanations. In other words, if one looks at the life that a disciple takes up—or, and this is classic Faulconer, the life that takes him up—one finds a flow, a gushing, dynamic truth that defies all attempts to reduce it to a set of propositions. The modern demand for the one, perfect explanation, then, is essentially misplaced. Our life, the Bauji reminds me, must change if we are to be Sikhs. Faulconer, in articulating and living life as the foundation of everything, including knowledge, taught me a crucial lesson in preserving God: discipleship is more about *being* than *knowing*. What better way to transmit the lesson than to stay back after class on a Tuesday morning and call your student a modern philosopher?

I now look to life, and not the passive principles of knowledge, for inspiration. Apparently, Dr. Faulconer taught me more than he intended that day. Subsequently, I have discovered that life is the only source of restoring the companionship of God. Life, that is, and not the mere motions of living. In moments when I can muster enough courage to jettison the secure, comfortable principles of the world and embrace life with all its mystery, I hear the laughter of my Lord as he leads, guides, and walks beside me. Mystery? Yes, for like Blake, I'm now at ease with not knowing some things, because knowledge is not of the foundation of everything, especially not of the religious life. And a religious life is what I have sought to live, ever since I met that retired army officer in 1988.

I couldn't possibly conclude this reflection without acknowledging that the very words that allow me to share these memories were acquired at BYU. The Lord's University taught me a new tongue, one that enables me to do three things: (1) delineate between spiritual discourse and worldly discourse; (2) recognize when I have slipped from the spiritual into the worldly and rectify the slippage; and (3) check my tendency to hijack the language of the spiritual to suit my convenience in the worldly. Amazingly, I can recollect the exact moment when the spiritual/worldly distinction became clear as daylight. The classroom decor was still as hideous, the building still the JKHB, the chairs still uncomfortable, but the professor this time was Arthur Bassett. This was my final undergraduate semester at BYU, and we were winding up Dr. Bassett's honors course on American humanities. The topic for the day was existentialism. Dr. Bassett walked in and in characteristic fashion proceeded directly to the chalkboard, where he scribbled, one atop another in a column, three words: *angst*, *absurdity*, *alienation* (the three A's of existentialism). The din subsided to a hush. Cheetos were put away, notebooks retrieved, pens positioned. A few of the forty or so in attendance stirred in anticipation; others resigned themselves, with an inaudible sigh, to the next hour, as if it were forced labor in Siberia. And, as always, there were those who chose to remain in la-la land. Dr. Bassett stood silently, a thousand unformed thoughts criss-crossing his brow. Suddenly, he turned back to the board and in another column of words, adjacent to the first one, wrote: *faith*, *hope*, *charity*. End of lesson.

Three weeks later, President Gordon B. Hinckley got up and introduced me to an audience of eighteen thousand. "An anthropology and humanities-philosophy major," he said, "Brother Singh is from New Delhi, India. The Sikh honor code requires him to wear a turban and a beard. He has been respectful of our faith, as we are of his." We had come full circle. From the terse you-can't-wear-your-beard-at-BYU notice to President Hinckley's cordial introduction, the journey had at once been full of both anguish and inspiration, suffering and salvation, despair and deliverance. "The World Is Our Campus," says the inscription at BYU's entrance. Where else would twenty-seven thousand Mormons train a Sikh to preserve the companionship of God?

Return to BYU for graduate studies in art history? *After* BYU had declined to display some of the sculptures in a Rodin exhibit? Nettlesome questions followed: Beyond the nostalgia of one's undergraduate years, what could possibly draw you to BYU for graduate work? Family and friends—Punjabis don't distinguish between the two—have reserved for themselves, by heavenly decree, the right to doubt and question another's decisions. And I, confessedly, evaded their stinging questions, thinking my silence would somehow cause them to vaporize. They haven't.

Months ago while I was enrolled in a doctoral program at Brandeis University, I was compelled by an invitation to write the previous pages of this essay to construct a framework—necessarily conceptual, although not entirely subjective, in which case I would be able to write about it all—to make sense of what had occurred during my undergraduate years at BYU. I concluded then that the very language—the syntax, the structure, the style—necessary to be able to articulate my experiences and aspirations was learned at BYU. More than that, the aspirations themselves were given their substance by the incessant pursuit of excellence exemplified, with contagious panache, by my mentors. Sikh prophets created for me the possibilities of dreaming; my parents encouraged me to dream; but my mentors at BYU helped me forge the equipment essential to translate dreams into reality. To put it another, rather pedestrian way: if dreams have wheels, mine were rendered steel-belted at BYU.

Not surprisingly, in the two years that I was away from BYU the steel-belted took some hammering. The glorious community of disciple-scholars that I discovered and cherished at BYU was not found in the situation in which I found myself after leaving Provo. Brandeis's Crown Fellowships, abundantly financed and prestigious, with an impressive—make that *jaw-droppingly* impressive—body of alumni, exacted a price that I became increasingly unwilling to pay. The acquisition of knowledge required a renunciation of the spirit. To gain the intellectual, I kept finding, was to lose the spiritual. Put simply, what confronted me in graduate school was an atmosphere not conducive to sustaining the spirit. No matter how hard I tried, I kept losing its companionship. How was I to learn anything, except that I couldn't learn anything without the spirit in attendance?

I confess that there were moments in graduate school when I thought that going to BYU for an undergraduate education had been a big mistake. You see, colleges and universities of the sort that I was now attending were the norm; BYU was the exception. To my dismay, I soon found, however, that by starting out at that exceptional school, I had diminished my chances of ever making complete peace with the radically different ambience found at other universities. Miserable and slightly crestfallen, I sought the counsel of Jenny Pulsipher, a fourth-year Crown Fellow who was also a BYU alumna. Sitting at her dinner table, surrounded by much mirth and liveliness (it is amazing what life four children can bring to any occasion, mundane or otherwise), Jenny empathized with my “loss of meaning” experiences. But she said something that I could not get out of my mind: “Last night I stood on the back porch,” she began, “with Sam [her youngest, then eight months old] in my arms. As I showed him the stars and sang a lullaby, I paused and said to myself: ‘This has meaning.’” Alas, I had neither a wife nor children.

Six months later, I seriously considered dropping out of my graduate program. I was lonely, but I learned that I wasn't alone in feeling lonely. At the Starbucks on Massachusetts Avenue one cold night, as Heather Lau, my one-person community in Boston and the Relief Society president of the Longfellow Park Ward, and I sat sipping our honeyed milk, I lamented that the wait for a prospective wife was getting exasperating. With an “oh-yeah” look in her eyes, Heather leaned over and, with feigned circumspection, said: “There are one hundred and sixty of us in there. And what do you think we are doing? We are *all* waiting!”

Jenny's and Heather's comments reappeared in memory as I sat in my uncle's living room in San Jose trying to repatch my dreams. The classroom beckoned, for sure, and I knew it had to be art history and theory. But having burned my hands at Brandeis, this time I wanted to go where the mind could be developed along with, and not at the cost of, the soul. I also wanted community. And so I called the Visual Arts Department at BYU.

My circuitous educational journey has BYU as its origin and destination. I returned to BYU for a graduate degree because of the abundance of the spirit on its campus. Partaking of this spirit creates the courage to dream, and consequently there are dreamers aplenty here. So I returned to the machine shop to mend the tires, knowing that I must leave again to go elsewhere for a Ph.D. But this time I will leave understanding that unless one is careful, there is a negative correlation between advanced intellectual inquiry and spiritual preservation. When I went away the first time, I found that the more I pursued only the nuances of political, economic, and social history, the more the spirit eluded me. When I go away the second time, I will do so understanding that it doesn't work the same way if the two factors are turned around: Beginning with the spirit, no depth of intellectual inquiry is outside of one's grasp. It is possible for disciples to do first-rate intellectual work, work that has meaning. Indeed, to use religion to excuse substandard academic performance and intellectual sloppiness is to strengthen the false dichotomy of faith and reason.

What is my dream? I want to be part of a *counter-renaissance* of men and women who call themselves servants of God who will reclaim from the world the arts and sciences. I dream that the abundance of spirit at the BYU campus will, even in the face of apathy and materialism, initiate a resurgence of learning where disciples will once again create the standards for meaningful intellectual inquiry. Of course this is a grandiose dream. But there are dreamers aplenty at BYU in body and in spirit as embodied in the history and unique heritage that is BYU's. If one is not careful, one can be infected with their vision. I stopped being careful a long time ago. That's why I returned to BYU for graduate studies in art history—*after* Rodin.

