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*I say unto you, even as you desire of me so it shall be unto you; and if you desire, you shall be the means of doing much good in this generation (D&C 6:8).*

## A Frog in the Well

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“The frog in the well knows nothing of the great ocean,” according to a Japanese proverb. My professional career—and, in particular, the manner in which I scrupulously avoided affiliation with BYU until I was ready for the experience—has persuaded me that the obverse is also true: a frog who has wandered from one Ocean to another can only come to understand the comforts and rewards of the well after much meandering.

As I consider the four opportunities I had to become associated with BYU, and the three I rejected out of hand, I have come to realize that the problem for me was not one of “finding God at BYU.” It was, rather, that of “finding that God is at BYU,” and, more specifically, that of “finding that God wanted me at BYU.” This is not to suggest that I have not had significant personal encounters with God since coming to BYU in 1990; a couple of those I will detail below. But my personal journey has been much more a discovery of the role the University could play in my life, and I in its. That will be my focus in the ruminations which follow.

I grew up a Baptist in Salt Lake City and joined the Church only a month into the beginning of my college career at the University of Utah. My conversion to the gospel was not accompanied by any pentecostal promptings to transfer to the Church’s University in Provo. I had a four-year scholarship to the “U” in hand; besides, it was the late 1960s, and there were few things more important to my generation than the right to choose our own lengths of both skirt and stubble (neither of which I personally wore, by the way). Not many of my LDS high school chums chose BYU. My wife-to-be, who had introduced me to the Church, was certainly not going to kneel to have her hems measured. So like many of my friends, I lived at home in Salt Lake City and became a resident Ute.

I thus blissfully avoided giving BYU consideration for my own education. Even after returning from a mission to Japan to discover that the language department at the U of U had no advanced-level Japanese courses to offer and treated my request for lower-division language credit with a goodly measure of scorn, I could see no reason to forfeit my scholarship. The idea of trading in my red sweaters for blue never appeared as even a faint blip on my radar screen.

A desire to pursue graduate study of Japanese language and literature took me and my new bride on a meandering journey through educational Sinai. We lived in Manhattan for three years while I worked on my Ph.D. at Columbia University, then a year in Tokyo while I pursued my dissertation research. I taught at Columbia for a year after receiving my degree, then spent two interesting years as a Latter-day Saint on the faculty at Notre Dame. (Parenthetically, I listen in dumb amazement to conversations about whether BYU should try to become a “Mormon Notre Dame.” When I lived in South Bend from 1980 to 1982, well over half the Notre Dame faculty was non-Catholic. I never heard any discussion about integrating Catholic beliefs with secular study. And the only real conversation about the religious nature of the institution came as part of a feeble effort to define what it meant for the University to be “Catholic with a lower-case c.” The only way BYU could become a Latter-day Saint version of Notre Dame would be to abandon its religious mission altogether.) I subsequently spent eight years at the University of California at Berkeley, where I received tenure the year before I came to BYU.

Interspersed in that chronology, however, were two failed attempts by BYU to recruit me. Both times, I could not see how coming to Provo would “further my career.” In fact, on the second occasion, I consciously defined the choice between an offer from Berkeley and an offer from BYU as options to establish myself as a scholar in my

discipline or to make whatever contribution I could to the Church's educational system. When I opted for Berkeley, I convinced myself that there were many ways to serve in and serve the Church, and that whatever ecclesiastical roles I could fill in "the mission field" would be acceptable to the Lord. I'm still somewhat persuaded by that logic and am certain it is a completely worthy choice for most people at most times of their lives. And I am persuaded that I made the right decision for that particular time in my life and career.

But lives and careers are dynamic, and I think the Lord uses that shift and flux to mold and change and make best use of us. No one I knew, either personally or professionally, could have conceived of the possibility that I might resign a newly tenured position at a prestigious university like Berkeley, abandoning the fame of name and the privilege of working with graduate students, in order to come to BYU. I was the most convinced of anyone that I would never get or desire another opportunity to make that choice.

My job-interview trip to Provo in early 1990 was, in fact, almost comically painful to me. A determined department chair and dean at BYU had labored mightily to locate a faculty slot for me, but it seemed to me that their efforts had come a bit too late. Just six months earlier I had, after considerable tribulation, attained a tenured position at one of the most renowned (if, admittedly, radical) public institutions in the nation. Psychologically, it was time for me to settle in, to finally nestle into an academic and emotional home for my work. Berkeley had just afforded me that opportunity, and it seemed madness to consider uprooting my career and my family once again. Yet, a sense of both gratitude and duty dictated that I at least acknowledge the earnest efforts of the BYU chair and dean and go through the motions of a campus interview. Then I could politely decline when and if an offer was made.

The interviews went smoothly, and the campus visit was pleasant. Still, when I returned to California I told my wife that I felt as though I had misused tithing funds by allowing the University to pay my expenses for a job-hunting trip that I had no intention of taking seriously. I was convinced that an offer from BYU could not be made to appear attractive to me. Little David in Provo could not begin to find stones large enough to fell the Goliath that towered over the academic world just as the Campanile dominates the Berkeley campus.

Three previous times I had snubbed, ignored, or discounted what BYU had to offer. Granted, there was every likelihood that those "offerings" had increased in value, and in personal significance for me, with the passage of time. In retrospect, however, I now view the processes of my life not as random episodes linked only by their accidental association with me as an individual, but as part of a training program to prepare me for roles and duties and relationships that I could never have anticipated for myself.

In my more whimsical moments, I surmise that the Lord had a hand in raising the fees for faculty parking at Berkeley, knowing it would be the final straw that broke the back of my intellectual pride. (I no longer consider it a coincidence that I experienced three brushes with BYU and can locate the admonition "Be thou humble" three distinct times in my patriarchal blessing.) While I am not convinced that God is actually responsible for dismantling before my very eyes what had once been a thriving Japanese program at Berkeley, I do know of a certainty that he demolished my illusions about the importance of university name recognition, and that the eroding away of every reason I had tenaciously embraced as my excuses to remain at Berkeley finally drove me to that most risky of actions—to actually pray about whether I should accept what turned out in all ways to be an attractive offer from BYU.

I never did unearth any really logical reasons why I should leave Berkeley. The ninety-minute-one-way commute so I couldn't locate a campus parking space that I was paying sixty dollars a month for the privilege of not finding was an irritation, but it was not a reasonable reason to abandon ship. All I can affirm is that the Lord changed my heart and that of my family, and in my wicked moments I suspect he even hardened the hearts of the bureaucratic pharaohs at Berkeley who refused to counter BYU's offer to me with anything but insults. In any case, I had contracts with BYU and with Ryder Truck within the space of a couple of weeks. The frog had seen both oceans, and after determining that the opportunity to taste the living water in the well far surpassed the vistas on either coastline—which were, admittedly, wide but ultimately not spiritually nourishing—he opted for the well.

Many perspectives have changed for me since coming to BYU. My approach to teaching has changed significantly, and that is not unrelated to the dramatically different ways that I look at my students. I first learned the meaning of academic freedom not at that secular bastion of same, Berkeley, but at BYU. I had not realized, until I began teaching my field of Japanese Christian literature to a room full of Christians, that I had never previously felt at liberty to discuss the Christian messages, symbols, and purport of the texts with my students. Teaching religious novels (in my case, works such as *Silence* and *The Samurai* by the Japanese Catholic author Endō Shūsaku) at Berkeley and even, interestingly enough, at Notre Dame had been an intellectual exercise in fuzzy obfuscation. Obviously religious features of texts were diluted in class discussions to abstractly "cultural" features, and the conflicts were not defined in terms of right vs. wrong, temptation vs. moral choices, but pared down into politically acceptable declarations about the differences between civilizations East and West. The attempt to teach Christian fiction in the rarefied secular air at

Berkeley was akin to describing Michelangelo's Sistine paintings as "depictions of mythical encounters with figures from legend and superstition."

I thrilled at the expansive realization, as I hesitantly introduced religious dialogue into my Japanese literature classes at BYU, that my students had more than a passing interest in those topics. In fact, reading in *Silence* about a Catholic missionary in seventeenth-century Japan who struggles to defeat his own Euro-centric ego while enduring tortures that are ultimately the means by which he discovers the depths of his own faith in Christ, my classes—populated predominantly by returned missionaries from Japan—could relate with such personal intensity to such novels that our level of conversation about the very topics I could not introduce at other universities transformed many classes into moments of simultaneous literary and spiritual discovery. Hearing a returned missionary from Japan confess that he, like the semifictional Catholic priest of three centuries earlier, had harbored feelings of cultural and spiritual superiority to the people he had been called to love and serve opened my eyes to some of the challenges and opportunities available to me, in my role as a BYU faculty member, to help refine the raw ore that a missionary carried home from Japan.

My goal as a teacher at previous institutions had been to impart knowledge and information about my discipline of Japanese literature to my students. Coming to BYU—where I experienced for the first time the exhilarating emancipation that comes from being able to talk about who I am as an individual of faith and to discuss literature from a perspective that is, for me, inextricably tied to the spiritual experiences I have had in and with Japan—has not obliterated that goal of imparting knowledge. But it has expanded and enriched my pedagogical aims as I have sensed divine confirmation that I can help add value to the knowledge my students already have of Japan from their mission experience and can thereby assist in molding them into even better emissaries of the gospel message as they continue their associations with the Japanese people. The great majority of our students of Japanese do not pursue the academic study of the country in graduate programs but rather branch out into fields such as law, business, medicine, and so forth. But I suspect that most of them will continue to have contacts with Japan, either through work in the country or in companies that have contacts there.

And so, from my perspective, they have not completed their missions. Or, rather, they have the opportunity, as part of the education we provide them at BYU, to serve unofficial second missions as they pursue their secular careers. If I am doing my job properly in the classroom, students will have learned more of nations, kindreds, tongues, and peoples. With that expanded knowledge and sensitivity, they ought to be even more effective carriers of the Word, and from that higher plateau they are virtually *impelled* to be so. They leave Provo with a charge to preach the gospel from a new summit of discernment, a new depth of sensitivity, a new awareness of cultural qualities and idiosyncracies, a new facility with words. They should, in short, leave BYU more fluent in the language of redeeming love. In the Doctrine and Covenants, after the Lord has instructed all of us to study things in heaven and on earth, including a knowledge of countries and of kingdoms, I find it interesting that in the very next verse he seems to be speaking very specifically to graduates of BYU: "That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you *again* to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you" (D&C 88:80; emphasis added).

I think I was rather slow in learning this new definition of my role as a teacher at BYU. While the campus-wide conversations about integrating knowledge and faith interested me from the outset, the discussion of literary works all but totally removed from the Western Christian tradition seemed at first to offer little that could facilitate my teaching in that mode. I supposed I could assign a Japanese novel and then bear testimony after we had discussed it that my students should avoid modeling their behavior after the lives of these fictional characters. But that seemed a cheap and obvious charade unworthy of a university environment. I struggled for some time trying to figure out how I could fulfill my commission as a teacher in Zion.

My quest was given some impetus and direction shortly after I was named chair of the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages in 1992. It was around the time Elder Henry B. Eyring was appointed Church commissioner of education. I was notified that Elder Eyring wanted to meet for ninety minutes with each department chair and had requested a sample of scholarly writings from faculty in each department. With a bit of anxiety stemming from my newness in the position of chair, I tried to prepare for the interview by reviewing the accomplishments of my colleagues in the department, certain that I would be interrogated about what the department was up to and how we were contributing to the University.

The interview itself came as a total surprise to me and, I think, to Elder Eyring as well. There was no discussion of any kind about the department. For an hour and a half, he plied me with questions about my personal background, extracting from me an oral autobiography, complete with boring details. I suppose near the end of the conversation I must have had a quizzical look on my face, for Elder Eyring smiled a serious smile and answered my unarticulated question by saying, "I'm trying to find out why the Lord is bringing people to BYU."

I cannot pretend to know why the Lord brought me to BYU, whether I attempt to frame the reasons with either humility or pride. What I can affirm, however, is that Elder Eyring's statement has obliged me to ponder the question with great seriousness. In the process of inquiring of the Lord about his purposes—not only in bringing me to BYU but also in leading me on the circuitous and often difficult path through a wilderness that included a great Ivy League school, an institution considered the model of religious schools (that I think has a poorly realized religious mission), and a prestigious public mega university—I have very strongly felt the presence of God at BYU. I have come to sense a palpable spirit hovering—and, yes, sometimes brooding—over the place, and a determination on the part of the Lord to bring together people and programs, ideas and initiatives, that will allow BYU to become not just a good university but also a laboratory for lifting souls and a training ground for testimonies, so that those who have the opportunity to study here can be prepared for whatever it is that lies ahead, seen by the Lord but only faintly perceived by any of us here and now.

I have thus seen God at BYU as much in the processes of cultivating our definitions of a BYU education's aims as in the eyes of the individuals—students, faculty colleagues, staff, and administrators—with whom I daily associate and from whom I learn more than I could ever teach. Most of all, it is the students—in who they are and in what potential they embody—who have been open enough and brave enough to afford me glimpses into their spiritual aspirations, however clumsily realized in the present, and have thereby directed my gaze toward a God who so clearly and intensely cares about what they are doing at BYU and what they will do after they leave. I must confess that the priceless opportunity I had to serve for three years as a single-student ward bishop has clarified and deepened my appreciation, not only for the members of my ward but for every student I now encounter, for they all seem connected to me by their hopes, their struggles, and their shared sense of belonging to God. Alan Jay Lerner expressed this all better than I could in the lyrics for his tender 1974 musical film adaptation of Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince*. I somehow cannot help but think of the glowing promise of a BYU student whenever I hear the title song:

Little Prince from who knows where.  
 Was it a star? Was it a pray'r?—  
 With ev'ry smile, you clear the air  
 so I can see.  
 Oh, Little Prince, don't take your  
 smile away from me.  
 When you came, my day was  
 done,  
 And then your laugh turned  
 on the sun.  
 Oh, Little Prince, now to my wonder  
 and surprise,  
 all the hopes and dreams I lived  
 among  
 when this heart of mine was wise  
 and young,  
 shine for me again, Little Prince,  
 in your eyes. <sup>[1]</sup>

This particular frog, still croaking away at BYU, no longer yearns to see the ocean, when he can see the image of God and the skies stretching to eternity in the eyes of his students.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Alan Jay Lerner, "Little Prince," *A Hymn to Him: The Lyrics of Alan Jay Lerner*, Benny Green, ed. (New York: Umelight Editions, 1987), 212.