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The tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance (1 Nephi 1:20).

Millersville or BYU

Robert S. Patterson

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Finding God at BYU is not the title I would have chosen. At first this title seemed a little presumptuous. I recognize that God can be found in any locale or circumstance in which he is earnestly sought—though some may be more conducive than others. As I thought of contexts in which I have both experienced and observed the development of testimony, I began to wonder whether the unique intellectual-spiritual-emotional climate of BYU would be more or less favorable to finding God than circumstances that might be quieter, less stressful, or less encumbered with demands on the individuals’ time, talents, and strengths. Is seeking God at BYU like seeking him in the whirlwind rather than in places where the still small voice is easier to hear?

Another reservation interrupted me: If I were to give public voice to ways in which my BYU experience has enhanced and developed my relationship with God, might this be misinterpreted as a form of pride? Could I do justice to my testimony and my blessings without seeming to exalt myself? Even Ammon was chided by his brothers for boasting when he rejoiced in the way the Lord had magnified his efforts and blessed his work.

Finding God at BYU. As I wrestled with the challenge of writing this chapter, I walked casually through a favorite used-book store, rummaging through stacks of old books, pamphlets, and tracts. *Finding God in Millersville*; the small brown pamphlet would have been easy to overlook, but the similarity in the titles seemed more than coincidence. In 1932 President Heber J. Grant had this story printed to give to friends and family at Christmastime. Eagerly I scanned the simple narrative. I had no idea where Millersville might be, but someone had found God there—and President Grant had thought highly enough of the experience to share it with his loved ones. I wanted to know how his author had treated my assigned subject of finding God. [1]

The story in the pamphlet is related by a businessman who was raised by his grandmother, a God-fearing woman who in her narrow-minded zeal to turn her grandson unto God had turned him away from God altogether. He left her home as soon as he could get away and found work in a cutlery factory in Millersville; soon thereafter he stopped attending Church. As years passed, this young man—“Mr. Thornton”—rose to become manager and principal stockholder of the factory. One day his secretary told him with urgency that “Jimmy” was dying and was asking for him. Mr. Thornton did not know who Jimmy was; he had scarcely noticed the small office boy who waited on him faithfully from day to day. His reaction was to send flowers and some perfunctory note of sympathy to the family, but the secretary insisted that it was important that he see the boy. So, grudgingly Mr. Thornton went to the poverty-stricken home and knelt by the bedside of the dying child. The boy’s final words were, “I wanted to tell you I done the best I could, Mr. Thornton.” [2]

It was the doctor’s words that placed the blame: “Do you know what killed that kid? No air; no sunshine; long hours in a dirty hole of a factory. How many days did your people lose last year on account of bad health?” [3]

Jimmy’s death was the beginning of Mr. Thornton’s search for God in Millersville. As he grew concerned about the health of his three hundred employees, Mr. Thornton took money he had saved to remodel his home and began to remodel his factory to let in more light and sunshine. He shortened the workday and the workweek. He sought to know his workers personally, to show an interest in their lives and their needs. “Gradually, as I got nearer to my people, they

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began to move in close to me,” he wrote. “The closer I got to them, the more I admired them.” As he became closer to his fellow man, he began to think more of God: “What kind of a God is he? How does he act?”^[6] Reflecting on the fatherly feelings he experienced for his workers, he began to reflect on the fatherhood of God.

Finally, as Mr. Thornton sat in his factory in Millersville he began to realize that “the human personality is greater than the world” and concluded: “The happiest times in my life are when I find someone among my folks who really appreciates what I’m trying to do, and who turns in and tries to help. Having that in mind, I am ready to believe that [God] must have smiled for a second on that Saturday afternoon when I found him in my office . . . My life really is as valuable, as important, as worthwhile in the world as I have always wanted to believe it. He needs me; that’s importance enough.”^[7]

My office at BYU is far removed in time, and probably in space, from Mr. Thornton’s office in the cutlery factory in Millersville. Yet it too has been a vantage point from which God can be discerned in the lives of his children and better understood through the joy of serving them and serving with them. Mr. Thornton’s quest to find God began when he recognized the value in his workers and dedicated his efforts to meeting their needs. As I read his story I thought of a recently retired colleague who seemed to have a knack for learning the needs of his students and quietly, modestly setting out to help them. It has been his practice to petition the Lord to lead him to people who need help; and the Lord’s response has been evident as people in need have just kept showing up in his classes and in other aspects of his life.

During one semester this professor noticed that one of his students had missed several class periods. Sensing that this young man’s problem went beyond the laziness that sometimes sets in about midsemester, the teacher went by the student’s home and found him caring for his wife, who was seriously ill. Two very young and very disheveled children ran about the disordered house. A brief conversation revealed that food was scarce and many bills were unpaid. Quickly calculating how much would be needed to rescue the young family, this professor wrote a personal check for the required amount. While caring for his wife and children, this student had fallen behind in several of his classes.

Over the next few weeks the professor spent much personal time in coaching and tutoring so the young man would be able to catch up. An ironic twist on the situation occurred as this student did not have the attributes and abilities necessary to succeed as a teacher, and it was the professor who had given him so much help who was required to make the judgment that he should not be certified to enter the teaching profession. Because of the love and consideration that the professor continually showed him, the young man was able to accept the judgment gracefully and to make the necessary changes in his professional plans.

As this professor continued to pray for opportunities to help others, opportunities continued appearing in his classrooms. An older woman, poorly dressed and poorly groomed, attracted his attention not only through her appearance but through her struggle to attend classes and keep up with her work. Visiting her at home, he found a very dirty environment and three neglected children. The professor hurried to his own home and picked up wash buckets, scrubbing utensils, and other cleaning supplies. Dishes were washed, floors were scrubbed, bathroom fixtures were scoured. On his next visit, he brought a Christmas tree and decorations. Years have passed, and this woman, now confined to a wheel chair, still calls the professor every few weeks to receive the comfort and encouragement that he has consistently and cheerfully given.

Through this professor’s influence, encouragement, and help, many young people have become missionaries. One rather unpromising prospective missionary came to the professor’s office asking to add a class that was already more than full. The young man refused to remove the hat covering a head of hair that was definitely out of harmony with the University’s dress and grooming code. Quickly sizing up the situation, the professor asked, “Do you want it badly enough to go and get your hair cut?” The boy agreed to the haircut, and the professor signed the add card. Some time later the young man withdrew from the University when he spent his tuition money on a marijuana party. Despite this rather inauspicious beginning, he later realized his error, repented of his attitude and his mistakes, and finally entered the mission field. He was effective in his work and found joy in his missionary service. Partway through his mission he wrote to the professor, thanking him for his positive influence and expressing love for the gospel and his mission. The young missionary mentioned in his letter that his mission might be cut short because his father had recently lost his job and his family could not afford to keep him in the field. The professor immediately called the mission president and committed to send the money necessary for the young man to complete his mission.

This professor is one of many who daily go about their business—quietly, modestly, unobtrusively doing good. As I associate with such people, I find God, for these are servants who do God’s work as a natural, integral part of their daily lives.

Some of my colleagues and associates at BYU teach us of God through what they are as well as through what they do. One of my former associate deans is such an individual. Through years of close daily association, I have never heard her speak negatively of another person—something which can be said of very few individuals. Widowed at an early age with a number of children, she has faced challenging circumstances with remarkable courage and unwavering faith. If you ask her how she has managed to raise those perfect children alone—working more than full time, teaching, mentoring, and inspiring innumerable university students as well—she’ll answer simply, “I’ve been blessed.”

Several years ago we had an opportunity for eight of our BYU students to do their student teaching at a private boarding school in China. I asked this associate dean to accompany the group, help them to settle into their new situation, and generally mentor, supervise, and assist them as they began this cross-cultural living and teaching experience. The culture shock for this group was a shock indeed. In the cramped dormitory in which they were housed there were no mattresses on the beds, and there was only a hose for showering and washing dishes. Many of the children at the school were not as obedient or respectful to the American teachers as they were to the more experienced Chinese and Canadians; and teaching Chinese speakers English—even in English—was more difficult than they had expected. Satan took advantage of the young women’s vulnerability: they were homesick and discouraged, some were angry with the University for sending them into such uncomfortable conditions, and a couple spoke of wanting to go home right away.

In this highly volatile situation, my associate dean was the source of stability and optimism. She remained cheerful and positive, taking the students out for special dinners, sightseeing, and shopping expeditions. Through her example she taught them to laugh at inconveniences, find blessings in their experiences, and focus on loving the Chinese children. One of the student teachers wrote in her journal that this dear sister was one of the most Christlike people she had ever known. The student explained the attitude she had developed under this influence. “I know Heavenly Father has a purpose for me and for each of the people I meet, however different or similar we may be. I am grateful to be here and would not wish myself anywhere different—even if given the opportunity.” Another went from initial dismay at the living conditions to a strong personal focus on service. “I think King Benjamin was right when he said that when you are in the service of your fellowmen you are only in the service of your God. Service is the key. If you do things for those around you, they will more likely help you. If you are good to them, they will be good to you.”

Perhaps the greatest strength in the leadership of this associate dean was her vision of the student-teaching experience as having an important purpose in the lives of those students as individuals and in the work of the Lord in the country of China. This vision infused her personal words and actions—the counsel she gave and the sacrifices she made. The young women caught onto her vision and began to transform their own attitudes and behavior. Some of their communications reveal this change. “Because I am here, I have to remember that I am here because this is where the Lord wanted me to go. Although I still miss my life back at home, keeping my greater purpose in mind has given me the strength to be here and work hard. The Lord’s mission and our education are not two separate things but one and the same. I know the Lord has much in mind by leading me and the other girls here. I don’t understand all that he has in mind, but I am willing to do my best to represent him.”

Though her responsibilities as associate dean prevented her from remaining in China throughout the student-teaching experience, my friend continued to offer encouragement and love through weekly communication. The students confided their joys their victories, their needs, their trials, and their frustrations. Mattresses were obtained, but the water was still cold. Teaching never became easy, but it became meaningful for the young women who followed the example of their mentor. Love was the wellspring of all that she did, and many of the students followed her beautiful example. Several of them used love in defining their experience. “I’m sure a great love and lasting friendship will develop between me and [the Chinese] people.” “We must . . . use love in action to portray our feelings.” “It is amazing how fast the heart can love.”

This remarkable woman served as associate dean until she was called on a mission—her third in about a dozen years. We sometimes referred to her behind her back as “the Mother Teresa of BYU.” As I see her love, along with faith, integrity, and determination to serve, I find even more of God at BYU. Our Savior exemplified unselfish love as he taught, healed, forgave, and ultimately atoned for the sins of his people. Daily I see colleagues who are doing their best to follow his example. And I learn from them.

I learn from my students as well as from the faculty and administration. I am continually renewed by the faith of those young people and moved by the sacrifices that many of them make.

Shortly after arriving at BYU, I requested and was privileged to teach a class on the Doctrine and Covenants. In this class I was to encounter a young man from Honduras who would teach me a great deal about goal setting and persistence, as well as about the early scholar-leaders of the Church.

In class, I was first attracted to this young man through the brightness and enthusiasm that shone in his face. He

made few comments, due to his struggle with the English language, but when he did speak he bore a strong testimony of how the Holy Spirit provides insight to those who seek its guidance. The third of ten children raised by a single mother, this student had come to the United States to study at BYU with only ten dollars in his pocket and his determination to succeed. His English language skills were very poor. He took the TOEFL test nearly fifteen times before he could score high enough to be accepted as a student; he took the test so many times he was no longer asked to pay the fee for it. I learned to love this young man, particularly to appreciate the ways in which he depended on the Holy Ghost to guide the course of his life.

About a year after taking my class, this student called to ask my advice about finding employment. He was discouraged because his poor English skills were making it difficult for him to obtain the kind of job he needed to finance the remainder of his education. I had been planning to undertake research on two Latter-day Saint scholar-teacher-apostles, John A. Widtsoe and James E. Talmage. I found myself asking my former student if he would like to become my research assistant on this project. As he agreed enthusiastically, I did not quite anticipate the extent of participation that would come from a third member of our research team. Whenever my assistant would encounter a stumbling block in his work, he would humbly petition the help of the Lord through the Holy Ghost. Whether the obstacle was difficulty in finding particular materials or the refusal of his request to examine documents in a particular collection, he would pray, and without exception the barrier would be removed. I looked forward to our reporting sessions when he would report on these spiritual experiences as well as on the information he was finding to expand my research. After three years of working with me (five years at BYU), this student finally graduated with a degree in computer science. He had completed his degree and had managed to send one hundred dollars home to his mother every month after taking care of his own needs and obligations. And I had gained an enviable pile of research on Elder Widtsoe and Elder Talmage, in addition to a renewed testimony of the presence and influence of the Holy Ghost in the lives of those who humbly request it.

In addition to my teaching, I have felt the influence of many students through my calling as a patriarch in a campus stake. One young man had prepared throughout his life to play football for a major university. With the enthusiastic support of his father, he had trained until he had achieved a high degree of skill. As a successful high school player, he was offered full-ride scholarships at a number of institutions; however, for a reason not understood by his family, he decided to attend BYU, although no scholarship had been committed for him and he would be trying out for the team as a walk-on. During his first few months on campus, a concerned and loving bishop talked to him about a mission. When he came to me for a blessing, he had received his call and was excited over the prospect of entering the mission field. He realized then the reason he had felt drawn to BYU. He had found something more important to him than football, something that would not have happened if he had accepted a football scholarship at a secular institution. His father did not understand his choice and made no attempt to conceal the disappointment and alienation that he felt. But the young man still approached his mission with thankfulness and joy. He knew that his choice was correct, and he hoped that in the near future members of his family would accept and appreciate the decision he had made.

When a young woman from Singapore came into my office, I relived events that had been pivotal in my own life many years before. She told me of her choice to come to America to study and of her decision to attend BYU. Her superior academic record and her family's wealth made it possible for her to attend almost any institution. But when she heard of BYU, she was unable to dismiss the thought that she should come here. When she arrived on campus, her roommates quickly accepted her into their circle of friends and began including her in their activities. Before long she began taking the missionary discussions, accepted the truth of the gospel, and was baptized into the Church. When she came to me she was facing a serious confrontation. Her family embraced a non-Christian religion which had little tolerance for those who challenged its teachings. She feared that the love and acceptance that had sustained her from infancy would be withdrawn, that she would no longer be welcome in her parents' home. But she knew that she had found the truth, and she was determined to follow the gospel's teachings, wherever she should be led. I was at her age and period of life when I joined the Church. As I spoke with her, my mind ranged back to the time when I discovered the gospel, studied it, converted, and entered the waters of baptism. I recalled the reaction of my own family as I shared her anxiety over the reaction she might receive. I was blessed to be able to reassure her that her decision to be baptized had been correct and to affirm that I had not for one moment regretted making that same decision so many years ago. Together we bore testimony that the Lord sustains his people in their time of need.

So I have found God in my office at BYU through the students who have visited me, bringing with them accounts of their ambitions, their sacrifices, their joys, and their faith. Thus, faculty, administrators, and students have shown me by their activities, their faith, and their sacrifices that God is indeed a part of daily life at Brigham Young University. Like Mr. Thornton at the cutlery factory in Millersville, I find God in the lives of those who love him, follow him, and obey his commandments. And I understand more of his nature as I serve and grow to love those who

serve and love him.

Mr. Thornton’s quest to find God began with a death and with a desire to alleviate suffering in others. The dying words of little Jimmy, the office boy, were an assurance that he had done the best he could. There is something particularly sacred in the service of those who continue to work for others when there is very little strength, energy, or time left for them to give. As I’ve watched those around me struggle with life-changing and life-threatening illnesses, I’ve seen faith that continually inspires and strengthens my own.

Daily I see colleagues who smile with faith and courage though they know their illnesses will soon take their lives. In the hall near my office I often pass a professor who has been through several bouts of chemotherapy to eke out a little more time from an incurable form of cancer. Determined to serve as long as he can in as many ways as he can, he teaches religion courses in addition to classes in his own field of specialization, works at the temple, and teaches Sunday School as well. He is the first to notice when someone else seems tired or ill, the first to express concern. He is also the first to offer help when someone needs to relocate a desk, adjust a shelf, or bring a new filing cabinet into an office. He recently returned from his vacation more tired than he was when he left; he had spent his “rest” time helping others to remodel and repair their home.

I remember another gifted and dedicated professor who came to my office near the beginning of a fall semester. Characteristic of her unselfish concern for her students, she had come to explain that she might not be able to adequately teach the classes for which she was scheduled. She told me that she had been diagnosed with a particularly lethal form of cancer and had been advised that she had only a short time to live.

This visit took place two years ago. In a priesthood blessing, this sister was told that she had additional work to accomplish on this earth. With unquestioning faith she has sought and received the blessings of the Lord. Though few people have long survived the form of cancer from which she suffers, she is determined to complete her work. A year after her diagnosis, she invited me to her bedside. Despite discouraging messages from her own body and from the doctors who were caring for it, she committed to attend the annual fall conference of the faculty and staff of the McKay School of Education. We then committed to each other that between the meetings we would walk together in the sunshine. Leaning heavily on the arm of her husband, she met with her colleagues—and then we had our walk.

Trusting in the power of the Lord, this sister taught another course—though others in her condition would not think of leaving their homes. Another year passed, with new tumors and more surgery. Finally, the end came for the mortal existence of this brave sister. Her life was truly a testament of the existence of God. At our most recent fall meetings, another sister who suffers from terminal cancer was asked how she was feeling. “Really well,” she responded. “I’m glad to be able to be back.” On close questioning, she was forced to admit that her cancer is not operable, but she is grateful for what she can do and does not complain about what she cannot. Another courageous sister suffers from a serious lung condition, but she conducts workshops to educate teachers with her portable oxygen tank beside her.

I feel the power of the plan of salvation as I watch these brothers and sisters serve with their remaining energy and face their coming transition with confidence and hope. They know that the success of their mortal probation lies in what they contribute to God’s work and to his children—and they are going to contribute in every way that they can. Theirs is a consecrated service. As I see it, I see God at BYU.

Elijah found God, not in the whirlwind, but in the still small voice. As I seek for God at BYU, I find him, not in the whirlwind of activity, debate, reputation, or super achievement—though I suspect he exerts a definite influence in some of those areas. But I find him in the still small voices of the people: students, professors, and other colleagues who quietly, modestly, and very naturally dedicate themselves to his service. Finding God at BYU? It’s not so difficult after all.

[1] *Finding God in Millersville* (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, 1932).

[2] *Finding God in Millersville*, 21.

[3] *Finding God in Millersville*, 23.

[4] *Finding God in Millersville*, 26.

[5] *Finding God in Millersville*, 35.

[6] *Finding God in Millersville*, 37.

[7] *Finding God in Millersville*, 38–49.

