

“It Filled My Soul with Exceedingly Great Joy”: Lehi’s Vision of Teaching and Learning

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There is much discussion about education these days, ranging from “What is the best way to teach?” to something even more fundamental: “What is education itself? What does it mean to teach, and what does it mean to learn?” This paper will explore Lehi’s vision of the tree of life as a model of teaching and learning. In studying this vision with such a purpose in mind, I will explore a pattern of ritualistic initiation in the vision and how it relates to the idea of teaching and learning as experiential acts. Taking a close look at some of the symbolic elements of the initiatory experiences in the vision can help us better understand the teaching and learning that occurs and apply that understanding to education today. When applying this knowledge, I will primarily rely on the writings of Parker Palmer, one of the most well respected scholars writing about teaching and learning today.¹ His emphasis on the spiritual elements of teaching and learning will help us understand the implications the tree of life vision may have for education.

Author and anthropologist Joan Halifax notes that the Western approach to teaching and learning holds that “the word *education* means ‘to be

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led out of ignorance into knowing and knowledge.’ Learning is described in terms of the accumulation of facts.”² There is another way to view teaching and learning, however: the idea of education as rooted in experience, particularly ritual experience. As Halifax points out, there is a “wide variety of forms and styles” of ritual learning in cultures that practice it, but “the most important context of learning occurs in the ritual process of initiation, known as *rites of passage*.” She continues by discussing three stages associated with initiation, as formulated by Arnold Van Gennep: (1) separation, in which an individual moves away from the familiar social landscape into something or somewhere unknown; (2) “the threshold experience,” in which the individual experiences liminality,³ a transformative time when “myth and story unfold and where love and death become amplified for the initiate,” and “when the initiate learns to bear witness, to be present for all dimensions of reality”; and (3) incorporation, “the movement back into the everyday world, a time of healing, of making whole again,” in which the individual is brought back into normal society as a changed, transformed person, ready to accept the new duties or responsibilities such transformation has brought about.⁴ Richard Dilworth Rust, a scholar who writes about the Book of Mormon as a literary testimony, sees a similar phenomenon in God’s interaction with man as described in the Book of Mormon: “Many of the characteristics of God’s ways pertain to thresholds—or, to use a word derived from *limen*, the Latin word for *threshold*, they are *liminal*.”⁵ As we shall see, Lehi participates in such a process of experiential learning in his vision of the tree of life.

It is essential to this discussion to remember that we are talking about a ritual experience *as it occurs in a vision or dream*. If we wished to explore the vision within the context of Lehi’s actual, physical life at that time, we could argue that the rite of separation occurs when he and his family flee Jerusalem and enter the wilderness, that the threshold experience is the vision itself, and that the incorporation is when he comes back from the vision and tries to spiritually heal his family. However, since we are discussing this initiation ritual as experienced in a vision or dream, we need to remember that each stage—separation, threshold experience, and incorporation—occur through Lehi’s role as a receiver of the vision. If we were to claim, for example, that Lehi never actually experienced the separation stage because, most likely, he was with his family in their camp while he was having the vision, we would

miss the point that this discussion is about what symbolically happens in the vision, not in the physical world.

Lehi's Separation Stage

Lehi's separation stage is at the beginning of the vision, when he moves away from the known world and is separated, finding himself in a dark and dreary wilderness. Here Lehi is faced with the “unfamiliar, the unknown.” He is confronted by what he does not know and is eventually left alone to find his way toward the meaning of his experience.

The wilderness and the man in the white robe. The Book of Mormon portrays Lehi as a caring, loving father. We also know him to be a good husband, leader, and prophet of God.⁶ But he also plays another role in the Book of Mormon that we do not often speak of: he is a model teacher who is constantly learning and teaching. In his vision of the tree of life, he is a humble learner, listening to the man in the white robe and following him, and a bold teacher, sharing what he has learned rather than merely keeping the benefit to himself.

The first image Lehi sees in his vision is one of darkness: “For behold, methought I saw in my dream, a dark and dreary wilderness” (1 Nephi 8:4). In a religious context, darkness symbolizes “a silencing of prophetic revelation” and “the state of the human mind unilluminated by God's revelation.”⁷ In our context of teaching and learning, darkness represents “ignorance”⁸ and “the unknown.”⁹ It is significant that it is not just any place that is dark and dreary, but a wilderness. In scripture, such wilderness is a “spiritual as much as a physical testing ground,”¹⁰ “any place in which the people are tested, tried, proven, refined by trials, taught grace, and prepared to meet the Lord.”¹¹ Since Lehi and his family have not yet made their journey to the New World, it is highly likely that the wilderness he sees in his vision is a desert.¹²

This dark and dreary wilderness becomes a classroom of sorts for Lehi. At this point, he is symbolically alone with his awareness of his own ignorance—of his need to learn. In his vision, he is separated from others and beginning his initiation, confronted with how much he does not know.

Next, Lehi sees a man dressed in a white robe. Significantly, in biblical symbolism, white is not set opposite to black but rather to darkness,¹³ making it the perfect symbolic color for the man in the robe to wear. The color symbolizes “purity, chastity, innocence, spotlessness, and . . . peace,”¹⁴ as well as

“timelessness.”¹⁵ More than any other color, white “has been associated with religious devotion since the days of ancient Egypt.” The reason white has been used in devotion so much is because it represents “spiritual purity and chastity of thought.”¹⁶ “White” is not the only word in this verse that carries symbolic importance. The term “robe” is also symbolic, representing a “godly, upright character,”¹⁷ and a white robe can symbolize “innocence, virtue.”¹⁸ The fact that Lehi’s guide appears dressed in a white robe is of tremendous symbolic importance.¹⁹

The man in the white robe can be a symbol of a number of things. He can be seen as representing the Holy Spirit in that he acts as a guide to the prophet. He may be considered a type of Christ in that he redeems him from the fallen dark and dreary world by taking him to a place that can offer salvation.²⁰ There is yet another individual that the man in the white robe represents: the teacher. “The most important thing a teacher can do,” writes Elder Gene R. Cook, “is to help the student feel the Spirit of the Lord. If the Spirit is there, true teaching and true learning will take place, and lives will begin to be changed.”²¹ Often the role of the teacher is to speak, to teach through words, but sometimes the role requires little speaking at all. Whether the man in the white robe said much or not, however, what he did was the act of a great teacher. The man was a guide for Lehi, and, as BYU professor (and current Sunday School general president for the Church) Russell T. Osguthorpe writes, to be “an effective guide one must possess two attributes: (1) knowledge of the terrain, and (2) knowledge of the traveler.”²² He did not simply tell Lehi where he needed to go, nor did he go for him, but he guided the prophet to the place he needed to be. The fact that he knew where Lehi needed to go implies that he had “knowledge of the traveler” and not just the terrain.

Counterintuitively, this teacher in the white robe does not deliver Lehi from the dark and dreary wilderness to the open field; after following the man, Lehi finds himself in “a dark and dreary waste.”²³ In effect, the man does not take Lehi to where Lehi would probably want to go, but instead takes him to the place the prophet needed to be to continue his journey.

Teachers who guide their students develop the trust necessary for true teaching and learning to happen. “Because our guide accompanies us on our journey, we develop a trust in one another that always comes when we are seeking truth. Our guide is not there to dispense truth but to show us the way

to find it—knowing all the while that because truth is intimate, we shall each come to know it in our own way.”²⁴ If we accept the fact that it is the Spirit who teaches, then an important part of the guide’s job is to bring us to a point where we can be taught by the Spirit, who will then help us to come to know in our own way. As Elder Cook teaches: “I suspect we sometimes think that if we don’t convey all the information we have on a subject, those we teach won’t learn what they need to know. But I would suggest a different perspective. As we develop greater trust in the Lord, we will know that if we can bring the Spirit into a teaching situation, that Spirit will help the other person to learn and know what is most essential.”²⁵

The man in the white robe taught Lehi more by teaching less.²⁶ So far as we know, he did not lecture Lehi about the Savior, nor did he even talk to him about the symbol of the tree of life. In fact, he did not even do so much as take him to the tree. He simply helped Lehi get to a point, as a student, where he could do what he needed to do in order to learn. What Lehi is about to learn in this vision is at the very core of what he needs to know—it is the single truth by which he will understand the universe. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ at its most simple and sublime: the Savior, his Atonement, and the life we must lead to come unto him.

Solitude. Since there is no longer any mention of the man in the white robe, it is reasonable to conclude that Lehi traveled for many hours in darkness alone and is alone when he begins to pray. The man in the white robe does not abandon his student but purposefully leaves him in solitude—a state that is significant to learning. This scene from Lehi’s vision is not a random occurrence without importance. “Scriptural *journeys* often symbolize man’s earthly walk from birth through the spiritual wildernesses of a fallen world (see Ether 6:4–7 for the ocean allegory of man’s journey; see also 1 Nephi 8 for the *path* leading to the tree of life).”²⁷ The image of “the lone wanderer lost in the darkness” is the most common one to “haunt the early Arab poets” and “is the standard nightmare of the Arab.” In fact, “it is the supreme boast of every poet that he has traveled long distances through dark and dreary wastes all alone.”²⁸ It is clear why this experience in the dark wilderness, alone, would be sufficient to cause Lehi to turn to the Lord in prayer.

Lehi’s finding himself in several hours of solitude in his vision contributes significantly to this rite of separation. This experience can often contribute to one’s learning; as Palmer notes, “If knowledge allows us to receive the world as

it is, solitude allows us to receive ourselves as we are. If silence gives us knowledge of the world, solitude gives us knowledge of ourselves.”²⁹

This image of Lehi traveling alone for many hours presents a number of questions: Why did the man in the white robe leave—or, did Lehi leave him? Why did Lehi travel in darkness for so long? What did Lehi do during all those hours? The answer to each of these questions may lie in the meaning of such a pilgrimage. This journey, consisting of only thirteen words, serves as a necessary preparation for his prayer. “The point of requiring people to undertake the journeys in the Book of Mormon is to make it possible for them to have experiences that drive them to their extremity, at which point they discover the delivering power of God.”³⁰ Lehi’s experience in the dark waste helps prepare him not only for his prayer but ultimately for his coming to the tree of life.

Lehi’s Threshold Experience Stage

Lehi’s threshold stage, when he undergoes a liminal experience that transforms him, occurs when he partakes of the fruit of the tree of life. If we keep in mind what we learn from Nephi’s vision about what Lehi saw, this is definitely a time in which Lehi sees the “myth and story unfold” as “love and death become amplified” through his partaking of the fruit and witnessing the life and death of the Son of God (see 1 Nephi 10:11). During this stage the prophet “learns to bear witness, to be present for all dimensions of reality” represented in the following symbolic principles incorporated in the dream.

The tree of life. Lehi sees the tree of life, “whose fruit was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10). The tree is a significant archetype in literature and culture. “The sacredness of trees and plants is so firmly and deeply rooted in almost every phase and aspect of religious and magico-religious phenomena that it has become an integral and a recurrent feature in one form or another at all times and in most states of culture, ranging from the Tree of Life to the May-pole.”³¹ The tree has played an important symbolic role in many cultures throughout the world.³²

We can see another dimension of the meaning of the tree of life by looking at part of the vision Nephi experienced when he wanted to see what his father saw. When Nephi wonders about the meaning of the tree of life, he is immediately shown Mary and the birth of the Son of God (see 1 Nephi 11:9–22). Nephi understands by what he sees that the tree represents the love of

God, but it is also clear that the love of God is personified in the Savior. “We need to read this in connection with other statements made by the prophets, e.g., ‘God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him’ (1 John 4:16). That is to say, ‘the love of God’ spoken of by Nephi relates readily to Jesus Christ, the great exemplar of love, and thus we may think of the tree as a symbol of the Savior.”³³

Truth. Understanding the tree of life as a symbol of the Lord is crucial to understanding the idea of teaching and learning in ritual that can be conveyed through this vision. The Savior is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), and education is the pursuit of truth. If the Savior is truth, and the tree of life is a symbol for the Savior, then the tree of life can also be a symbol for truth. The way in which Lehi interacts with the tree of life teaches us how to teach and learn—how to interact with truth. We come to know the Savior as truth not by objectifying him but by entering a relationship with him.³⁴ Lehi does not objectify the tree of life but enters into a relationship with it—first by seeing it and admiring its fruit and then by partaking of the fruit. It is easy to become so familiar with the vision of the tree of life and with what people would actually do in “real life” if they were to come upon a tree bearing fruit that looks delicious that we assume that what happened in the vision is the only thing that could have happened. The point, though, is that this is a vision—it is *not real life*. We may eat fruit because we are hungry or because the fruit looks good; there is usually no deeper meaning to the act. In a vision full of symbolism, however, we need to ask ourselves if even the most common of acts is intended to teach us something more deeply. Considering what *could have* happened illuminates the importance of what *did* happen. Lehi does not make the tree the object of his analytical study. He does not break off a leaf or piece of fruit and dissect it. He does not pull out a knife and scrape away at the bark to study it or analyze what is underneath it. Nor does he cut the tree down in an attempt to construct something out of it. It would have made an interesting, highly symbolic story if Lehi had crafted the tree into an altar on which he could offer sacrifices to God. Or he could have incorporated the tree’s lumber into the boat he and his family would sail in during their journey to the promised land. Perhaps the tree could have even remained intact as the mast. In each of these scenarios, Lehi would have been objectifying the tree. Instead, however, he becomes one with it—just as we are to become one with the Lord and not try to objectify him.

If we are to learn about learning from the vision of the tree of life, we must appreciate the personal nature of the experience Lehi had with it. Lehi had a deep, intimate experience with truth, and it filled his soul with joy. It was a paradoxical moment of solitude (not even his wife or children were present) and ultimate communion. Just as in the physical world, where people enter into a type of relationship with their food when they partake of it, Lehi enters into a relationship with the tree and its fruit when he partakes of the fruit. The fruit, and by extension the tree, becomes a part of Lehi. Spiritually speaking, this act helps Lehi and the Lord become one. Lehi's partaking of the tree of life becomes a type of sacramental act—the sacrament being the ultimate experience of partaking of food and becoming one: “He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood,” the Savior said, “dwelleth in me, and I in him” (John 6:56).

Palmer offers us an approach to education that is spiritual in nature: “*To teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced.*”³⁵ Teaching and learning involve a relationship—a covenantal relationship. Palmer explains that the English word “truth” comes from a Germanic root that also gives us the word “troth.” When you pledge your troth (as in *betrothed*), you enter into a covenantal relationship of mutual trust and faith: “Truthful knowing weds the knower and the known.”³⁶ While this relationship with truth may make sense to a religious person who might see the Savior as truth, it is not limited to that perspective. The ultimate relationship is with the ultimate truth, naturally, but teaching and learning are about relationships with truth at all levels. Such relationships grow and develop naturally; they are not coerced.

Lehi's Incorporation Stage

Lehi's incorporation stage, in which there is “the movement back into the everyday world,” begins when Lehi sees his family and beckons them to partake of the fruit. This is a “time of healing, of making whole again.” He is no longer separated but is once again part of the society of his family.

After Lehi partakes of the fruit, he sees his family and asks them to come to him and partake of the fruit as well.³⁷ The righteous members of his family—Sariah, Nephi, and Sam—come and partake, while Laman and Lemuel, his unrighteous sons, do not. When he invites his family to partake of the fruit, Lehi is entering into the incorporation stage of his initiation. He is returning to society as a transformed person. It is important to keep in mind,

as I mentioned earlier, that we are discussing a vision and that he returns to society in the context of his vision. He is not returning to the society of the Arab world in which his family exists historically; he is returning in his vision to the society of his family after the separation stage of having followed the man in the white robe and then being by himself for a number of hours. Lehi is still on his journey, but this journey has changed significantly. He has transformed from learner to teacher/learner. He teaches his family by inviting them to partake of the fruit, but he continues to learn as he observes who in his family accepts his invitation and who rejects it.

One of the amazing aspects of Lehi's calling to his family is how little is said.³⁸ According to the record that we have, Lehi simply invited his family to come and partake of the fruit. He may have told them that it was desirable above all other fruit, or that may have just been his repeated description of the fruit in his narrative. In any case, he says very little, inviting but not commanding or requiring. “He could not and would not force them.”³⁹ He does not describe the tree, nor does he explain why the fruit is so good—he just asks them to come to him and eat the fruit. Interestingly, this is also the way in which the man in the white robe taught Lehi: there was no lecture; he just asked Lehi to follow him. Lehi allows his family to enter into a relationship with the tree of life instead of making himself the gate they must enter through to gain what he has gained.

This is a mark of a good teacher. Lehi does not make himself the subject of what is to be learned, nor does he draw attention to himself rather than to the subject. True, he invites his family to come to him—not to listen to him but to partake of the fruit. He is standing right next to the tree (as far as we know), but it is the fruit he wants to get into those he loves, not his words or observations. Palmer speaks of this difference. In an academic culture that frames the debate as between being teacher-centered or student-centered, he argues for being centered on the subject, as Lehi was. “Passion for the subject propels that subject,” he writes, “not the teacher, into the center of the learning circle—and when a great thing is in their midst, students have direct access to the energy of learning and of life.”⁴⁰ The issue at hand is not what technique is used but how the teacher views the act of teaching. A teacher-centered teacher can still divide the class into groups, just as a student-centered teacher might lecture. A subject-centered teacher, however, will focus on how to help the students gather around the subject and learn, allowing the best technique

for any given time to flow from the subject. Such a teacher lectures when that is what will best help everyone learn from the subject and does group work when that is best.

This marks the end of Lehi's incorporation stage. He has returned to the society of his family. It is a time of being made whole, since the family is together again, and a time of healing, since some of his family partake of the fruit. However, it is not without pain, since Laman and Lemuel refuse to partake. Lehi is a transformed person because of his liminal experience of partaking of the fruit, and he is ready to live his life in harmony with that experience. Yet the dream is not over with Lehi's personal transformation. Instead the dream now reveals the same pattern but on a larger scale, where instead of just Lehi, it is now every man who will go through the pattern.

Transition

The next two verses of the vision (1 Nephi 8:19–20) comprise what I consider to be a transition. Though there are different ways of viewing this part of the vision, I see this point as being between the end of the Lehi's incorporation stage and the beginning of the multitudes' separation stage. These transition verses introduce two key elements of the vision: the rod of iron and the path. They become significant components of the separation stage for the multitudes.

The rod of iron. After his experience with his family, Lehi sees the rod of iron that "extended along the bank of the river" and "led to the tree by which [he] stood" (1 Nephi 8:19). This rod is an important symbol in the vision and can have a number of different interpretations. Even Nephi's idea that the rod of iron represents the word of God (see 1 Nephi 15:23–24) can be interpreted on different levels. Taken at the most apparent level, the rod of iron represents the scriptures and other words from God: "The rod of iron is a representation of the 'word of God' (1 Ne. 15:23–24). During the millennial era, Jesus will rule the nations with an iron rod, or with the word of God (Rev. 19:15)."⁴¹ However, I think a more meaningful interpretation of the rod of iron is that it is a type of Christ, who is *the* Word of God (see John 1:1–5). It is significant that Nephi understands that the rod of iron is the word of God when he observes, in vision, the Lord in his mortal ministry (see 1 Nephi 11:24–25).

Because the rod of iron is one of the most prevalent and easily remembered symbols in Lehi's vision, it is easy to forget that he had not seen any rod

until much later in his vision. Lehi follows the man in the white robe, wanders in the wilderness, sees the field, approaches the tree, partakes of the fruit, sees his family, invites them to partake, and watches some of his family partake while others do not—all without his seeing the rod of iron in the vision. It is not until we are leaving Lehi’s incorporation stage and are moving forward to the multitudes’ separation stage that Lehi sees the rod. This fact makes sense if we use the ritual paradigm to study the vision. Lehi does not need the rod of iron in the separation and threshold stages because he is directly relying on the Lord. He prays to the Lord after he has traveled alone in darkness for many hours (see 1 Nephi 8:8) during the separation, and he communes with the Lord when he partakes of the fruit of the tree of life in the threshold experience. And, in his incorporation stage, his family has the word of God when he, the prophet, beckons them to partake of the fruit. The prophetic word is, after all, the word of God.

The rod of iron is needed at this very specific point in preparing for the multitudes’ separation stage, when the larger society, represented by the various multitudes that appear, becomes a part of Lehi’s vision. The rod of iron is one of the things Lehi brings back with him from the threshold stage of his initiation—not the rod of iron *per se* but the idea of the word of God that is represented by the rod. Lehi interacts with the man in the white robe and with his family but never with the greater society represented by the multitudes. This greater society, then, will have the word of God in their world by virtue of the rod of iron.

If we see the rod of iron as representing the Savior as the Word of God, to hold to the rod is not only studying the scriptures but also entering into a meaningful relationship with the Savior and letting him be our guide throughout life. We hold to the rod, and, in a sense, the rod holds to us, protecting us and guiding us. Palmer speaks of this phenomenon: “By this understanding, I not only pursue truth but truth pursues me. I not only grasp truth but truth grasps me. I not only know truth but truth knows me. Ultimately, I do not master truth but truth masters me. Here, the one-way movement of objectivism, in which the active knower tracks down the inert object of knowledge, becomes the two-way movement of persons in search of each other. Here, we know even as we are known.”⁴²

Through our holding to the rod of iron, we can know as we are known. It is a relationship with the Lord that takes us to the tree of life, not the mere

reading or hearing of words. Of course, studying the scriptures is part of that relationship, as is participating in ordinances and making covenants. They are, in fact, a large part of how we come to know him. Seeing the rod of iron as symbolic of the Savior includes all that seeing it as the word of God would entail, plus much more. What has been written about the rod of iron could apply equally to living a life in which we follow the Savior: “It followed each turn, guided over each stumbling rock, and beckoned around each precipice of the deadly river. It led with secured, enduring strength through the spacious field to the tree.”⁴³ But it is important to remember that symbols often represent different ideas that are not mutually exclusive. Many are inclined to make a list of each symbol in the dream and what each one represents, as though they were making a list of mathematical formulas. Symbolism rarely works that way, however. Often symbols can have multiple interpretations. So the rod of iron could represent the Savior, and the tree of life could represent his Atonement. Or the rod could represent the commandments of God, and the tree of life, the Savior. There are other interpretations as well, and they can each be correct so long as each is in harmony with doctrine and is supported by the text. By saying that the rod of iron symbolizes the Savior, I am not saying that it does not symbolize the word of God as scripture or as guidance through the Holy Spirit. The symbol is simply not limited to the single interpretation of the rod as the written or spoken word of God.

As we consider the rod of iron as a symbol for the Savior, we can accept the message of the vision as including his role throughout our lives. He is not simply the tree—the end product of our journey through life. We are not required to make our way through the dangers along the path with only the scriptures at our side. Instead, the Lord can be with us throughout our lives; we can rely on him and all that he has to offer—grace, the Atonement, his personal guidance, the Holy Spirit, our knowledge of the Father, commandments, scripture, covenants, ordinances—to help us make it back to him and partake of the fruit of eternal life. Just as the fruit is “desirable above all other fruit” (1 Nephi 8:12), so is eternal life “the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 14:7).

Jesus Christ, as we have seen, is Truth. If the rod of iron symbolizes the Savior, then to hold to the rod can mean to establish a relationship with the Savior. And, to establish a relationship with him is to relate with Truth. If true education is to “*create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced,*” then

the vision of the tree of life is the ultimate education because it is the image of practicing obedience to the ultimate Truth—the Savior. Truth is throughout the vision, both as the tree of life and as the rod of iron. To enter into a loving relationship with the Savior requires obedience: “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Obedience does not mean “slavish adherence to authority, but careful listening and responding in a conversation of free selves.”⁴⁴ The Lord does not ask of us blind obedience but rather visionary obedience. We follow him because we see who he is, we love him, and we want to be like him.

This type of obedience is key to teaching and learning. It requires humility and a willingness to submit ourselves to another—a teacher, a student, a subject, a truth, *the* Truth. The vision of the tree of life is the prototypical educational experience. It teaches us how to come to *all* truth by showing us how to come to *the* Truth. It teaches us how to learn calculus or literature or history by submitting ourselves to the truth that is in them, showing us how to learn through submitting ourselves to the Savior.

The path. In addition to seeing the rod of iron, Lehi also sees a path that leads to the tree. A path can represent “life, experience, learning.”⁴⁵ There is an element of choice involved with a path, as it is usually assumed that it is “the route or way which a person chooses to travel. His choice may be to journey on the ‘path of the wicked’ (Prov. 4:14), which is the way of darkness; or he may choose to walk the ‘path of the just,’ which is ‘as the shining light’ (Prov. 4:18–19).”⁴⁶ Paths are part of the typological world in scripture and secular literature. As the literary critic Northrop Frye notes, the “human use of the inorganic world involves the highway or road as well as the city with its streets, and the metaphor of the ‘way’ is inseparable from all quest-literature, whether explicitly Christian as in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* or not.”⁴⁷ Though many do not succeed, the people on the path in Lehi’s dream are on a quest for the tree of life.

This combination of the tree of life and the path is also archetypally significant. As historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade notes, the center is the “zone of the sacred,” and “the road leading to the center is a ‘difficult road.’” Similarly, the tree of life is at the center of Lehi’s dream, if not geographically, then, without a doubt, thematically and symbolically. And the path leading to that tree is made more difficult, even dangerous, because of the mists of darkness. According to Eliade, there is a reason the path is difficult: “The road is

arduous, fraught with perils, because it is, in fact, a rite of the passage from the profane to the sacred, . . . from man to the divinity. Attaining the center is equivalent to a consecration, an initiation; yesterday's profane and illusory existence gives place to a new, to a life that is real, enduring, and effective."⁴⁸ The path is important in this moving toward the multitudes' separation stage because it acts as part of this "rite of the passage from the profane to the sacred." While the path was not a part of Lehi's approaching the tree of life, nor was it part of his family's, it is the very way by which the multitudes will try to progress toward the tree. It is how the multitudes can attain the center of this vision.

The Multitudes' Ritual of Initiation

While it could be argued that the multitudes are part of the greater society to which Lehi returns as part of his incorporation stage, I consider them not to be part of that stage for Lehi because they have no interaction with him. He does not return to them as he does to his family; he is not incorporate back into their society. He sees them from a distance and notes what they do and what happens to them, but the multitudes are a new part of the vision and have their own rite of initiation.

The multitudes of people. Lehi saw a number of people who commenced on the path. The very act of beginning the journey along the path was a sign of the people's willingness to follow God to some extent. Later in the vision there will be people who do not even attempt to follow the path, but the ones who do attempt have some desire to follow it, even for a short period of time. The path becomes a symbol, too, for dependence on the Lord. According to Book of Mormon scholar Hugh Nibley, Nephi generally sees the journey in the desert as "the most compelling image of man's dependence on God."⁴⁹ People who choose to follow the path acknowledge that this is the way to the tree of life, that they must depend on the path the Lord has set if they wish to partake of the fruit.

These people who start along the path are important to the symbolism in the vision. "The elements of wandering, deliverance, and coming unto Christ are all in the tree of life complex of symbolism."⁵⁰ It is especially clear later in the Book of Mormon that the Nephites see themselves as wanderers, searching for the promised land that is beyond this life.⁵¹ In this vision, the tree of life is the promised land, and those who seek it become pilgrims on a religious

quest. From a symbolic perspective, there is no need for Lehi to see multitudes of people. He could have seen one person in each situation and that would have sufficed in terms of conveying the particular meaning. However, using the image of huge numbers of people adds at least two dimensions to the symbol. First, it reinforces the idea and feeling that this is indeed the world we are looking at, that everybody is part of this vision in one way or another (see 1 Nephi 8:20), that it applies to us. And second, what is going on in the vision at this point is a communal activity. This is not something people do alone.

Teaching and learning are communal acts. The community may consist of the family in informal settings, the classroom in formal education, or the community of the reader, author, and the people who inhabit the text in the case of an individual reading a book.⁵² As a psycholinguist who has focused on the nature of teaching and learning, author and education scholar Frank Smith explains, “Learning is social rather than solitary. It can be summarized in seven familiar words: *We learn from the company we keep.*”⁵³ He calls these communal groups of learning “clubs” and writes of the importance of these clubs to our efforts to teach and learn:

These may sometimes be the formal organizations that we join and maintain membership in by paying a fee—the political clubs, sports clubs, and social clubs with which we might be affiliated. But clubs may often be the informal associations that we belong to just by sharing an interest and a sense of community—the metaphorical clubs of teachers, parents, students, book readers, gardeners, joggers, or cyclists—all of the different groups with which we identify ourselves.

The way we identify ourselves is at the core of it all. We don’t join a club, or stay in it, if we can’t identify with the other members. We are uncomfortable if we feel the other members are not the kind of people we see ourselves as being.⁵⁴

The relationship between learning and ritual, being established in Lehi’s dream, is even stronger when one realizes that, like learning, ritual is social in function. Ritual, even when practiced in solitude, is a communal event. It is a community that decides upon a ritual—deciding not only what the ritual elements are but also their meaning. The initiate is separated from community, and, once the initiation is complete, the initiated returns to community. Yet, as becomes clear in verse 30, Lehi does not just see one generic mass,

but “multitudes.” Though the makeup of the groups is homogeneous (making them somewhat surrealistic), the groups may be distinguished by a characteristic or characteristics that define themselves along with the other members of the specific grouping.

The distinction between “numberless concourses of people” and “multitudes” can be found in the separation stage, where they are truly separated from one another into three primary groupings. Everyone in the first group does the exact same thing: they start on the path and then lose their way after the mist of darkness arises. The people in the second group make their way to the tree and partake of the fruit, then fall away because of the people in the great and spacious building. And, while the people in the third group actually comprise two subgroups, each of the subgroups is homogeneous—the first group partakes of the fruit and remains true, while everyone in the second group does not even try to make it to the tree and falls away in various ways. Though it would be unrealistic in the actual, physical world, in this visionary world there is absolutely no overlapping.

At first, it may seem surprising to consider the groups to be learning communities when it does not appear that they are organized for the purpose of learning, but it is important to remember that many of the clubs Smith writes about are not primarily organized for learning purposes either. (People usually organize a soccer team to play soccer, not to learn about soccer—though the players will naturally learn about soccer while they play it.) The central image of learning in the vision is the tree of life, so it is important to see how these learning communities relate to that image. Most of the groups never make it to the tree. In fact, several of the groups do not even seem to have the partaking of the fruit as their purpose. However, despite the fact that most of the groups never participate in the full learning experience made possible by the tree of life, they are still learning communities.

Though we often speak of one influence or another impeding learning, what we more accurately mean is that the influence is impeding learning the skill or idea that we wish to be learned. People learn all of the time; it is virtually impossible to stop a person from learning something, even if the only thing he or she is learning is that there is not much worth learning at the moment. Students who are frustrated over the multiplication tables may not be learning the multiplication tables, but they are learning something: memorizing the multiplication tables is frustrating, difficult work. “If there is interest and comprehension, then

learning is inevitable and effortless. If there is no interest or comprehension, learning may still take place but with more difficulty and what is also inevitably learned is that the task or subject matter is uninteresting, incomprehensible, and not something anyone would normally do.”⁵⁵ The groups in Lehi’s dream are learning communities because they are grouped together for common purposes that center on the tree of life—either going to it or staying away from it. Though they may not be organized for the sole purpose of learning—or even for the primary purpose of learning—they cannot avoid learning as a community.

The first multitude. If we study the first group as a learning community we quickly see a fundamental quality to their experience as a group: despite the dangers of the mist of darkness, they do not even attempt to hold to the rod of iron. The mist would pose no danger to their progression along the path if they would hold to the rod, but they do not touch it. Perhaps they do not see the rod or they see it but do not believe it can help them. Perhaps they consider it too much work to hold to the rod. Though we do not know the specific reason they do not touch the rod, it is possible that the underlying principle could be lack of faith. Just as someone who has faith in Christ turns to him and relies on him, if this group had had sufficient faith they would have seen the rod and known its importance.

One of the elements of their experience that could have easily prevented or destroyed the group’s faith is the fear that the mist of darkness probably created in them.⁵⁶ It makes sense that a group of people traveling along a path would feel intense fear if suddenly a mist of darkness arose and they could no longer see where they were going. Such fear would have a devastating effect on their ability to learn.⁵⁷ Fear is often a daunting enemy to teaching and learning. Teachers may be fearful that they will not be liked, that they will look foolish for not knowing some answer, that students will be disruptive, that their jobs are in jeopardy for one reason or another. Students’ fears may often be similar to those of their teachers: they will not be liked, they will look foolish for not knowing some answer, the learning environment will be disruptive rather than safe, or their status may be in jeopardy for one reason or another.⁵⁸ Because of these fears, there is the danger that less teaching and less learning will take place. Teachers may be more prone to rely on old notes—and methods—that seemed to work last time, and students may find safety in not answering a question or answering in a safe way that the textbook supports despite their own thoughts.

The initiation of this first multitude ends with the separation stage. They do not have a threshold experience, as they never even make it to the tree of life. And they do not have an incorporation stage because they never return to society. They simply wander off and are lost.

The second multitude. While the first multitude never holds the rod of iron, this second group does take hold of the rod and makes it to the tree of life. They successfully complete their separation stage and do not get lost. And, since they partake of the fruit, they successfully complete their threshold experience as well—at least, at first it appears that way. Quickly they become ashamed and fall away because of the mocking of the people in the great and spacious building.⁵⁹ This second multitude apparently cares more about what others think of them than they do about the fruit of the tree of life. Unfortunately, they have not learned what these people about whom Palmer writes understand: “These are people who have come to understand that no punishment anyone might lay on us could possibly be worse than the punishment we lay on ourselves by conspiring in our own diminishment, by living a divided life, by failing to make that fundamental decision to act and speak on the outside in ways consonant with the truth we know on the inside. As soon as we make that decision, amazing things happen. For one thing, the enemy stops being the enemy.”⁶⁰

And who is the enemy of this second group? It is yet another group—a group not on the path but rather in the great and spacious building. Like the others, this group in the building represents another club, another communal learning group. Their “exceedingly fine” (1 Nephi 8:27) clothes and their relative seclusion up in the building are barriers to others knowing them for who they really are. As Elder Cook notes, “We want people to know us and love us for being ourselves, not for external adornments used to attract attention or perhaps even motivate some unrighteous feelings in those who might be influenced by us.”⁶¹ These people are learning things while in that building, but they are not things of the heart. The people in the building have learned the power they may have through being critical of others, through mocking them. Perhaps these people secretly envy those who have partaken of the fruit of the tree of life, but they are determined to keep such a feeling a secret. “Fashionably dressed beautiful people,” Nibley writes, “partying in the top-priced upper apartments and penthouses of a splendid high-rise, have

fun looking down and commenting on a bedraggled little band of transients eagerly eating fruit from a tree in a field.”⁶²

Why do the people in the building persecute those who partake of the fruit? What difference does it make to them that there are those who have gone to the tree of life? The people who have been to the tree are not preaching against those in the building. They are not preaching against anything. So far as we know, they are not even speaking. Perhaps they are being persecuted for the same reason that prophets often are. Nibley writes that “a prophet is a witness, not a reformer. Criticism of the world is always implicit in a prophet’s message of repentance, but he is *not* sent for the purpose of criticizing the world.” The Lord and his Apostles were not persecuted for their ideas, but it “was as witnesses endowed with power from on high that they earned the hatred of the world.” The Prophet Joseph Smith was likewise persecuted for his witness.⁶³ The people who have partaken of the tree do not have to say anything to be a threat to the people in the building; their simple existence stands as a witness against the flashier group up high. They show the world that there is a way other than that of the great and spacious building. They have learned what needed to be learned and have done what needed to be done. Despite their experience, however, those in the second group fall because of the persecution they receive.

The persecution the partakers of the fruit receive from the people in the building is relatively mild, especially compared to any kind of physical, violent persecution. We would like to believe that the experience of partaking of the fruit would be such an exquisite, life-changing moment that no amount of persecution would deter them from living righteously. But such is not always the case. Those who teach may wish to believe that if their students are exposed to truth they will embrace it and choose to live in harmony with it. However, the act of teaching and learning does not guarantee the integrity of the soul. Teachers may teach truth with power and authority, and students may even learn that truth, but living up to that truth is sometimes a different matter.

Though the second multitude completes its separation stage, it does not complete its initiation. The members of this group partake of the fruit but deny themselves the complete life-changing, threshold experience by feeling ashamed and falling into “forbidden paths”—lost. Like the first multitude, this second group fails their initiation.

The third multitude. The third group consists of two subgroups. This portion of the vision “appears to depict a polarization between the wicked and the righteous.”⁶⁴ The righteous subgroup partakes of the tree and remains faithful to the experience. The wicked subgroup has three smaller groups within it: the first feels their way to the building, creating the image of people groping in the dark, not being able to rely on vision because they are blind; the second drowns in the depths of the fountain; and the third wanders on strange roads, lost from Lehi’s view.

Interestingly, this first subgroup completes the separation and threshold experience stages of the ritual, but we are not given an account of their incorporation phase. We can assume they return to society as transformed individuals, ready to live up to their knowledge and experience, but the record ends with their threshold experience. In a way, this account is similar to the experience that many teachers have with their very best students. They see them successfully complete their separation stage as they grow more independent, and their threshold experience stage as they gain new knowledge and experiences that transform them for the better, but the teachers often do not get to see what their former students do with what they have learned.

The second subgroup barely begins their separation stage before they end up lost, without even trying to progress toward the threshold experience. Unfortunately, this story reminds teachers of the students they have often agonized over—the ones who, for whatever unseen reason, do not seem to try to learn and often give up, lost.

From an educational viewpoint, the nature of these three multitudes is fascinating. The fact that no group ever intermingles with another group, that each appears as a discreet unit with no variances within it, supports what Smith writes about learning clubs and Palmer about learning communities. There is nothing in the vision to indicate that the people are assigned to their respective groups, or that they are forced into them in any way. The people in the groups seem to be together because they choose to be together. And they learn from those within their group—for better or worse. Except for the one subgroup in the third multitude, the experiences of each of the groups and of Laman and Lemuel teach us that, unfortunately, there are students who fail—sometimes not because of being poorly taught, but because they choose not to experience what they could through wholly participating in the initiation process.

Conclusion

Lehi’s vision of the tree of life is a powerful passage of scripture on many different levels. Among its many lessons is what the careful reader can learn about how a great teacher may teach and how diligent students may learn through what can be called a ritual of initiation. The vision also shows us how students who refuse to embrace this kind of experiential learning can, as a result, end up failing. By reading the vision of the tree of life with the question of teaching and learning in mind, we can see it as a model of teaching and learning that reveres the importance of the spirit and not just the mind. “These terms would describe the roots of teaching and learning, not just the branches—words like *faith, love, joy, reverence, discernment, and humility, or inspire, ponder, and edify*,” Osguthorpe writes. “These terms were once central to teaching and learning but have long since lost their place in our conversation about education.”⁶⁵

Notes

1. I rely upon Parker Palmer’s writings because he is recognized as one of the leaders in the movement to consider the spiritual qualities of teaching and learning. Rather than just focusing on how the vision might help us learn more about teaching and learning the gospel, this paper is also concerned with how it helps with teaching and learning in general. Palmer helps us to see that these principles do not just apply to teaching the scriptures in a religious setting; they are helpful in any educational environment.

2. Joan Halifax, “Learning as Initiation: Not-Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Healing,” in *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education*, ed. Steven Glazer (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1999), 173.

3. In fact, Van Gennep writes of these three stages as centered around the concept of thresholds, or *liminality*. The rites of separation are preliminal, the rites of transition are liminal, and the rites of incorporation are postliminal. See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 11.

4. Halifax, “Learning as Initiation,” 174. Halifax also correlates the rites of passage with phases of a particular Zen Buddhist order. “The first tenet of the order is ‘not-knowing’ and denotes separation from the familiar, conditioned world of knowing, the opening of the spontaneous mind of the beginning. The second tenet is ‘bearing witness,’ and emphasizes being fully present to the suffering and joy in oneself and the world. The third tenet is ‘healing oneself and others’ through returning to the world with the aspiration of liberating oneself and others from suffering.”

5. Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 221. For more on this topic, see pages 221–28.

6. For an informative discussion of Lehi, see H. Donl Peterson, “Father Lehi,” in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988).

7. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 192.

8. Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1974), 129. It also symbolizes “mythic nothingness” and “the Great Void.”

9. Wilfred L. Guerin and others, eds., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 161.

10. Richard Dilworth Rust, “Book of Mormon Imagery,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT FARMS, 1991), 137.

11. M. Catherine Thomas, “The Provocation in the Wilderness and the Rejection of Grace,” in *Thy People Shall Be My People and Thy God My God*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 169.

12. “Certainly there is no doubt at all that the Book of Mormon is speaking of desert most of the time when it talks about wildernesses.” Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 135. Nibley later observes that the “desert has two faces: it is a place both of death and of refuge, of defeat and victory, a grim coming down from Eden and yet a sure escape from the wicked world, the asylum alike of the righteous and the rascal. The pilgrims’ way leads through sand and desolation, but it is the way back to paradise; in the desert we lose ourselves to find ourselves” (148).

13. Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, *Dictionary*, 944.

14. Arnold Whittick, *Symbols, Signs, and Their Meaning and Uses in Design*, 2nd ed. (London: Leonard Hill, 1971), 349.

15. Guerin and others, *Handbook of Critical Approaches*, 161.

16. Whittick, *Symbols, Signs, and Their Meaning*, 349.

17. Walter Lewis Wilson, *Wilson’s Dictionary of Bible Types* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1957), 382.

18. de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, 388.

19. “The Book of Mormon has a good deal to say about messengers in white. Lehi’s desert vision opens with ‘a man, and he was dressed in a white robe,’ who becomes his guide (1 Nephi 8:5). Lehi is shown ‘twelve ministers, . . . their garments . . . made white’ (1 Nephi 12:10), followed by three generations of men whose ‘garments were white, even like unto the Lamb of God’ (1 Nephi 12:11). Soon after, Nephi also in a vision ‘beheld a man, and he was dressed in a white robe,’ this being John who was to come (1 Nephi 14:19).

“‘There can no man be saved,’ says Alma, ‘except his garments are washed white’ (Alma 5:21). He tells how the ancient priesthood ‘were called after this holy order, and were sanctified, and their garments were washed white through the blood of the Lamb. Now they . . . [have] their garments made white, being pure and spotless before God’ (Alma 13:11–12). But the most moving and significant passage is his formal prayer for the city of Gideon:

‘May the Lord bless you, and keep your garments spotless, that ye may at last be brought to sit down with Abraham Isaac, and Jacob, and the holy prophets, . . . having your garments spotless even as their garments are spotless, in the kingdom of heaven to go no more out’ (Alma 7:25).” Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 156.

20. I have written elsewhere about another possible identity for the man in the white robe:

“One more future historical event is part of the vision of the tree of life but is not included in either account: the end of the world. In his vision, Nephi sees John the Revelator and is told that John ‘shall see and write the remainder of these things; yea, and also many things which have been. And he shall also write concerning the end of the world’ (1 Nephi 14:21–22). In other words, Nephi is stopped from giving a complete account of his vision because it includes the end of the world, and the Savior has chosen John to write about that in the book of Revelation.

“The presence of John the Revelator in Nephi’s vision adds another element of historical reality to the vision. The way in which Nephi describes his vision of John is significant to the beginning of Lehi’s vision: ‘I looked and beheld a man, and he was dressed in a white robe’ (1 Nephi 14:19). Nephi’s prophetic vision, which forms an interpretation of his father’s dream, drawing out its apocalyptic nature, now comes full circle, ending where his father’s dream began (see 1 Nephi 8:5). Though there have been other interpretations of whom the man in the white robe represents in Lehi’s dream, from a messenger to a Christ-figure to Moses, I believe that John the Revelator is one important possibility.

“Pursuing this idea, we find John greeting Lehi at the beginning of his vision and serving as his guide, taking him to the point when Lehi can turn directly to the Lord and see a vision that can be understood to concern not just his family, or even his descendants, but also the entire world and its ultimate destiny. Thus, when reading 1 Nephi 14:25—“The Lord God hath ordained the apostle of the Lamb of God [John] that he should write [of the apocalypse]”—we are not surprised that the Lord would appoint the man he ordained for that purpose to begin and end the vision of the tree of life in the Book of Mormon. Lehi and Nephi may have experienced more in their visions than they recorded. For example, perhaps they both saw the man in the white robe at the beginning and end of their respective visions. However, if we consider what we do know from the record the Book of Mormon offers, it becomes significant that the man who appears at the beginning of Lehi’s account could also be the one appearing at the end of Nephi’s, thus emphasizing the relatedness of the two accounts.” Charles Swift, “Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life: Understanding the Dream as Visionary Literature,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 63.

21. Gene R. Cook, *Teaching by the Spirit* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 15.

22. Russell T. Osguthorpe, *The Education of the Heart: Rediscovering the Spiritual Roots of Learning* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 1996), 84.

23. If we turn to an American dictionary in use at the time that the Book of Mormon was translated we find that *waste* has as its third definition a meaning that is remarkably appropriate for this vision: “A desolate or uncultivated country. The plains of Arabia are mostly a wide waste.” *Waste* can be another word for wilderness, so this waste could either be a part of the previously mentioned wilderness or a different one entirely. See Noah

Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language, 1828, Facsimile Edition*, 6th ed. (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1989).

24. Osguthorpe, *Education of the Heart*, 84–85.

25. Cook, *Teaching by the Spirit*, 15–16.

26. Palmer explains the notion that “covering the field” may mean teaching less. “In every great novel, there is a passage that when deeply understood, reveals how the author develops character, establishes tension, creates dramatic movement. With that understanding, the student can read the rest of the novel more insightfully. In every period of history, there is an event that when deeply understood, reveals not only how historians do their work but also illumines the general dynamics of that epoch. In the work of every philosopher, there is a pivotal idea that when deeply understood, reveals the foundations of his or her system or nonsystem of thought.

“By teaching this way, we do not abandon the ethic that drives us to cover the field—we honor it more deeply. Teaching from the microcosm, we exercise responsibility toward both the subject and our students by refusing merely to send data ‘bites’ down the intellectual food chain but by helping our students understand where the information comes from and what it means. We honor both the discipline and our students by teaching them how to think like historians or biologists or literary critics rather than merely how to lip-sync the conclusions others have reached.” Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 123.

27. Thomas, “Provocation,” 169.

28. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 253–54.

29. Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), 121.

30. M. Catherine Thomas, “Types and Shadows of Deliverance in the Book of Mormon,” in *Doctrines of the Book of Mormon: The 1991 Sperry Symposium*, ed. Bruce A. Van Orden and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 186.

31. E. O. James, *The Tree of Life: An Archaeological Study* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), 1.

32. A number of scholars have discussed the tree as a symbol of the sacred in various cultures, such as Thomas Barns, “Trees and Plants,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928), 12:448–57; John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1985), 47; John M. Lundquist, “The Common Temple Ideology of the Ancient Near East,” in *The Temple in Antiquity: Ancient Records and Modern Perspectives*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984), 53–76; C. Wilfred Griggs, “The Tree of Life in Ancient Cultures,” *Ensign*, June 1988, 26–31; John W. Welch, “The Narrative of Zosimus (History of the Rechabites) and the Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 323–74; Irene M. Briggs, “The Tree of Life Symbol: Its Significance in Ancient American Religion” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1950); Allen J. Christenson, “The Sacred Tree of the Ancient Maya,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 1 (1997): 1–23; Donald W. Parry, “Garden of Eden: Prototype Sanctuary,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 126–57; Arnold Whittick, *Symbols, Signs, and Their Meaning* (cited above).

33. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Donald W. Parry, *A Guide to Scriptural Symbols* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 104.

34. “From the outset of their encounter Pilate tries to objectify Jesus by forcing him into the category of ‘king.’ He is trying to make Jesus a comprehensible and dispensable entity in the political terms of the time. But Jesus, the person, resists Pilate’s categories. He asks, ‘Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?’ suggesting that Pilate’s opening question comes from impersonal caricature, not personal understanding. He says that his ‘kingdom’ is not of this world, that it cannot be comprehended in objective political terms. He puts forward a personal claim related to his very birth about his reason for being. But Pilate is incapable of knowing this personal truth because he holds the person at arm’s length, treating him as an object, a thing, a ‘what.’ By reducing truth to objective terms Pilate puts himself beyond truth’s reach. Eventually, he assents to murdering a personal truth that calls for conversion in favor of an objectivism that leaves him in control.

“The story suggests that in Christian understanding truth is neither an object ‘out there’ nor a proposition about such objects. Instead, truth is personal, and all truth is known in personal relationships. Jesus is a paradigm, a model of this personal truth. In him, truth, once understood as abstract, principled, propositional, suddenly takes on a human face and a human frame. In Jesus, the disembodied ‘word’ takes flesh and walks among us. Jesus calls us to truth, but not in the form of creeds or theologies or world-views. His call to truth is a call to community—with him, with each other, with creation and its Creator. If what we know is an abstract, impersonal, apart from us, it cannot be truth, for truth involves a vulnerable, faithful, and risk-filled interpenetration of the knower and the known. Jesus calls Pilate out from behind his objectivism into a living relationship of truth. Pilate, taking refuge behind the impersonal objectivist ‘what,’ is unable to respond.” Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 48–49.

35. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 69.

36. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 31.

37. Lehi’s desire to share what he has discovered with his family is not only a powerful illustration of a father and husband’s love for his family, but is also indicative of the feeling of a people. “Perhaps the most common and most touching theme in the vast corpus of Arabic desert inscriptions is the theme of longing and looking for one’s family. When the writer comes to water and rests, he wishes for his family, and is usually smitten with terrible longing to see them.” Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 255.

38. One might argue that it is possible Lehi said quite a bit, but that it was simply not recorded. Perhaps Lehi, in telling his family about his vision, said that he had lectured them but Nephi just left if out of his account. Or, perhaps, Lehi did have more to say in the actual vision but did not relate that to his family. In any case, we are studying the account of Lehi’s vision as found in 1 Nephi 8. If more were said in the vision but the account does not include that, then that in itself is significant. Whether the lack of speaking can be attributed to what happened in the vision or to how it was recorded in the Book of Mormon, the fact remains that the text we have has Lehi saying very little—regardless of the cause, that fact is symbolically significant. This principle of interpretation holds true throughout our discussion of Lehi’s vision—we are discussing the text itself, not all of the possibilities

we can imagine surrounding the events that actually occurred. Indeed, the only access we have to those events is through the text.

39. Susan Easton Black, "Behold, I Have Dreamed a Dream," in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation*, 118.

40. Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, 120.

41. McConkie and Parry, *Guide to Scriptural Symbols*, 94. Though I quote this passage from Revelation, I do not imply that the Greek word translated into *iron rod* means the same thing as *iron rod* in the Book of Mormon. One of the unique qualities of the Book of Mormon is that it is an ancient text that was translated by the inspiration of God directly into nineteenth-century American English. Regardless of original Greek meanings, the Lord knew when he inspired the translation of the Book of Mormon that the term *iron rod* was also used in the English version of Revelation. That fact alone warrants a comparison regardless of what the Greek word originally meant.

42. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 59.

43. Black, "Behold, I Have Dreamed a Dream," 118.

44. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 65.

45. de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, 359.

46. McConkie and Parry, *Guide to Scriptural Symbols*, 89.

47. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 144.

48. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), 17–18.

49. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 157.

50. Rust, *Feasting on the Word*, 209.

51. Bruce J. Boehm, "Wanderers in the Promised Land: A Study of the Exodus Motif in the Book of Mormon and Holy Bible," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (1994): 187–203.

52. Reading "is not a solitary activity. Readers are never alone. Readers can join the company of the characters they read about—that is the reason we read stories of people with whom we can identify or of situations in which we would like to be." We do not only join the company of the characters, but also of the authors. "We can share ideas and experiences with them, often in considerably more comfort and security than the authors were in when they had their ideas and experiences or wrote their books. We can also employ authors as guides to help us to learn new words, to sharpen our skills of reading and writing, and to augment our abilities in the expression of ideas, in argument, and in thinking creatively." Frank Smith, *The Book of Learning and Forgetting* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 24.

53. Frank Smith, *Between Hope and Havoc: Essays into Human Learning and Education* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995), 40.

54. Smith, *Book of Learning and Forgetting*, 11.

55. Smith, *Book of Learning and Forgetting*, 54.

56. After the disciples on the boat awoke the Savior because they feared the storm, he drew a relationship between fear and faith: "And he saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" (Matthew 8:26).

57. Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, 36–38. Palmer identifies four particular fears that hurt us in education: fear of diversity, fear of conflict, fear of losing identity, and fear of changing our lives. Each of these fears is part of what he calls the “fear of the live encounter.”

58. “Space itself is often frightening. Students are threatened by an open invitation to learn for themselves and to help each other learn; they would much rather have their education packaged and sold by the teacher. They are threatened by the strangeness of what they do not know, by the thought of having to expose their ignorance, by having to relate to their peers in ways that would hardly occur to them outside the classroom, and by the possibility of a failure that will mar their self-esteem and careers. Students come into a classroom with these fears close to the surface. If they are not acknowledged and addressed they will close down the space for learning.

“But teachers, too, enter the classroom with fears; at least I do. I am afraid of being inadequately prepared, of having my own ignorance exposed, of meeting the glazed eyes and bored expressions of some of my students. Behind my role and my expertise, I wonder what they think about me as a person. They may be afraid of my power over their lives, the power of the grade and credential, but I am afraid of the negative or ambivalent feelings my power creates in them. I need their affirmation as much as they need mine; I need a sense of community with them that our roles make tenuous.” Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 84.

59. Hugh Nibley discusses an historical account of a similar situation in which someone in that area of the world felt extreme distress over public humiliation. “If this seems an extreme reaction to a little loss of face, we need only contemplate a touching inscription cut in the rocks by one who ‘encamped at this place . . . and he rushed forth in the year in which he was grieved by the scoffing of the people: he drove together and lost the camels. . . . Rest to him who leaves (this inscription) untouched!’” *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 260.

60. Parker J. Palmer, “The Grace of Great Things: Reclaiming the Sacred in Knowing, Teaching, and Learning,” in *The Heart of Learning*, 32.

61. Cook, *Teaching by the Spirit*, 168–69.

62. Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 503.

63. Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987), 13, 14, 15–16.

64. Corbin T. Volluz, “Lehi’s Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 27.

65. Osguthorpe, *Education of the Heart*, xxiv.