

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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September 2022

Back to School

Years ago, I read a simple recollection from President Boyd K. Packer that struck me with what the scriptures call “a familiar spirit” (2 Ne. 26:16). “On one of my rare days at home,” he wrote,

I was out in a large grove of trees near our little homestead. My little boys were with me, and we were cutting firewood for the fireplace for winter. It was a beautiful, crisp, September morning. The sun was filtering down through the foliage, and I stood and contemplated the scene before me. . . . Suddenly I was struck with an impression. It was a spiritual experience. I experienced a reverence for life and a humility that is not always constant with us. It was September, and school was about to begin. . . . Soon I would be a teacher again.¹

These words hit home with all the force of truth. I sensed in them something of the glory of approaching autumn:

Where are the songs of spring?

Ay, Where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.²

Even more, I sensed something of the sorcery that stirs with the starting of school. Deepest of all, I sensed somehow that someday I would be a teacher too.

The start of school this fall is bittersweet for me. It is bitter because, with my recent transition

to the ASB, I will not be teaching this year. It is bitter too, but sweet as well, because there is an empty seat now at our dining room table—because our oldest daughter, Julia, is now a BYU freshman.

I had a dream about Julia not long before she was born. I am not usually a dreamer. In my whole life I have had only two or three really meaningful dreams. This was one of them.

I dreamt I was sitting on a bench at a table, reading, when an absolutely adorable little girl—probably about three or four years old, with large round eyes and thick brown hair—sidled up next to me.

“Are you really my daddy?” she asked.

“Of course I am,” I responded.

“Then why,” she demanded, “won’t you play with me?”

“I *will* play with you,” I promised, somewhat taken aback. Then, in a non sequitur that revealed my dream self to be even more obtuse than my conscious self, I suggested that we could read the scriptures together.

“Do you know what the scriptures are?” I asked.

“Um,” she mused in a winsome little voice, “I believe that they are the records of the endeavors of prophets.”

The little girl and the dream then vanished, and I awoke to a surge of sweetness and light. Soon, I knew, I was going to be a daddy. The little girl from my dream would be my little girl. We would play together and read scriptures together—though I would try, in my waking

hours, not to confuse the two. Above all I would love her—I *already* loved her—with all my heart.

This fall, as I gaze through my office window at crowds of bright, exuberant students whom I won't (yet) get to teach, I realize in my bones that every one of them, along with every BYU student I have ever taught, is somebody's Julia—somebody's precious daughter, someone's priceless son.

Including God's. Our theology, reinforced by specific prophecies about BYU, discloses a soaring vision of who these students really are and of what they are destined to become. They “are not only precious per se,” said Elder Maxwell, “but [they] also constitute the cadre of the kingdom of God!”³

In the end, the sorcery of September resides less with the start of school than with the return of our students. They bring with them a vibrant energy and a dazzling light. They come to us still trailing clouds of premortal glory.⁴ Among their ranks, we sense, are some of the “brilliant stars”

whom President Kimball foresaw.⁵ The light in their eyes and the fire in their souls summon forth the very best that we, as teachers, have to give. As we peer into those eyes and warm ourselves by that fire, we remember President Worthen's recent, stirring declaration: “This is a student!”⁶ They are the reason this university exists.

The year rolls round once more. The magical season returns. Fall is upon us. We are teachers again. Or, at least, *you* are teachers again.

*And this grey spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.*⁷

Welcome back.

¹ Boyd K. Packer, *Teach Ye Diligently* (Deseret Book, 1975) 291.

² John Keats, “To Autumn,” lines 23-24.

³ Neal A. Maxwell, “Jesus, the Perfect Mentor,” *Ensign*, February 2001.

⁴ See William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.”

⁵ Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” *BYU Devotional*, October 10, 1975, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball/second-century-brigham-young-university/>.

⁶ University Conference Message, August 22, 2022.

⁷ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Ulysses,” lines 30-32.