

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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My Accidental Neighbor

It was early morning, and the law school building was quiet and still. I walked to my office through mostly empty halls. As I approached my office door, I saw a student at the far end of the hall, sitting on a bench alone. I felt a distinct impression. “He is having a hard time,” the Spirit nudged. “Go talk to him.”

I am not very good at hearing impressions like this; I might be even worse at heeding them. I didn’t immediately obey this one. This was not, after all, *my* student. I knew his name, but we had never met. After some hesitation, I suppressed my native shyness, walked down the hallway, and said hello.

We had a brief but edifying conversation. The student was touched by my gesture, modest as it was. He soon adopted me as a mentor. I tried, when possible, to be his advocate. Over the years we have become good friends.

Experiences like this are not, alas, very common with me. But I am forever grateful for this one. I thought initially that the Lord was using me to bless a student. I realize now that He was blessing me with one of the most meaningful relationships of my career.

Perhaps not by accident, it was “a certain lawyer” who cynically asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). As we all know, the Savior responded with one of His greatest parables.

We sometimes suggest—too quickly, I think—that the moral of the Good Samaritan story is that “everyone is my neighbor.” I want to propose a more concrete interpretation. When Martin

Luther translated the New Testament into German, he rendered *charity*—the Greek *agape* or the Latin *caritas*—as *Nächstenliebe*. One needn’t know German to discern the relevant cognate. My *Nächste* is the person next to me. Charity is love for those whom God has placed physically in my path.

“We make our friends,” wrote G.K. Chesterton;

we make our enemies; but God makes our next-door neighbour. Hence he comes to us clad in all the careless terrors of nature; he is as strange as the stars, as reckless and indifferent as the rain. He is Man, the most terrible of the beasts. That is why the old religions and the old scriptural language showed so sharp a wisdom when they spoke, not of one’s duty towards humanity, but one’s duty toward one’s neighbour. . . . [W]e have to love our neighbour [simply] because he is there He is the sample of humanity which is actually given us. Precisely because he is anybody he is everybody. He is a symbol because he is an accident.¹

Too often, I have allowed some distant sample of humanity—distant in time or distant in space—to divert my concern for the sample of humanity that God has actually given me. C.S. Lewis’s warning on this point is justly famous. “It is a serious thing,” Lewis observed,

to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses. . . . There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is

*immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.*²

At BYU, it is immortals whom we teach, advise, mentor, and serve. Accordingly, our mission statement summons us to promote “the balanced development of the total person,” to foster “the full realization of human potential,” and to “assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.”³

Early in his ministry, Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote that

[t]he same God that placed that star in a precise orbit millennia before it appeared over

¹ G.K. Chesterton, “On Certain Modern Writers and the Institution of the Family,” in *In Defense of Sanity: The Best Essays of G.K. Chesterton* (Dale Ahlquist, Joseph Pearce, and Aidan Mackey, eds., 2011) 14.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (HarperCollins, 2001) 45-46.

*Bethlehem in celebration of the birth of the Babe has given at least equal attention to placement of each of us in precise human orbits so that we may, if we will, illuminate the landscape of our individual lives, so that our light may not only lead others but warm them as well.*⁴

Friends and colleagues: I am grateful that God has placed our students—and that he has placed me—within *your* orbits. Your arrival on this campus at this season of our history is, in my view, no accident. Together, you provide leadership, illumination, and warmth that make you the best of neighbors.

³ “The Mission of Brigham Young University,” in *Envisioning BYU: Dreams and Foundations* (John S. Tanner ed., Brigham Young University, 2022) 65.

⁴ Neal A. Maxwell, *That My Family Should Partake* (1974) 86.