

# LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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October 2024

## Wholeness

*Saturday morning, early.* Miriam starts to squirm and fuss. Wearily, blearily, I scoop her up and whisk her away before Lia awakens. I wrap my baby girl in a favorite swaddling blanket and retreat to our basement lair while the rest of the house sleeps on.

Safe in our subterranean redoubt, I sing to Miriam my customary quintet of lullabies: “Love is Spoken Here,” “I’m Trying to Be Like Jesus,” “Beautiful Savior,” “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need,” and “Brother James’s Air.” Gradually, Miriam melts. By the end of the last song, her head rests limply, trustingly, on my left shoulder.

We lie down delicately on the plushy red couch in the playroom. Miriam’s heart beats over mine; her smooth cheek nestles against my scratchy one; she rises and falls with my slow breathing and tickles my neck with her own. We listen to a general conference talk, a couple chapters from the Book of Mormon, and part of Paul Nagel’s biography of John Quincy Adams. Ninety minutes pass as Miriam sleeps soundly. Upstairs, I hope, Lia is doing the same.

Nothing about this season of our life is easy, but this is a sweet reward. Such moments are as sacred as they are evanescent. Nothing soothes one’s spirit like a baby on one’s heart.

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Recently, at long last, and in my approaching (advancing?) middle age, I read and finished *Walden*—“cover to cover,” as an irregular reader might say.

I had tried *Walden* before—both as a teenager and as an adult—and had failed again and again. I didn’t find it easy going this time either. In the early chapters, my own sleep deprivation and

Thoreau’s frequent longueurs (especially in an opening chapter unpromisingly titled “Economy”) combined to commingle a toxic brew. Often, when I sat down on the couch to read, I soon found myself lying on the couch to snooze. I hadn’t made it past page 70 or so when I surrendered again and turned to reading other things. But eventually I returned to *Walden*, resolved to see the thing through to the end.

I’m grateful that I did. Thoreau repaid my persistence with a prodigality of beautiful prose; a cornucopia of keen perceptions about nature, life, and literature; and an omnigatherum of trenchant aperçus. The book resonated with my native romanticism, and it stirred sweet memories of splashing in Walden Pond with our little girls (now not so little) in conjunction with graduate school trips to the Boston Temple.

Above all, though, something within me responded to Thoreau’s call for a simpler, more deliberate life—a life shorn of unnecessary complexity, of superfluous attachments to worries and things. Stretched by assorted cares and weighed by various burdens, I found myself yearning for simplicity and wholeness.

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Over the summer I had lunch with a beloved friend and colleague a few years my senior. I asked him about his plans—what he and his wife looked forward to in the coming phases of their life together. “We’ve discussed some possibilities,” he answered. “But, you know, we really only have one goal—and that is to let God prevail.”

“Purity of heart,” wrote Kierkegaard, “is to will one thing.”

I, alas, will many things. I want to be a good husband, a good father, and a good academic vice

president. I want to be a good teacher to my UNIV 101 students and a good minister to my neighbors. I want, in my “spare time,” to read good things; to do a little writing—perhaps a little poetry; to stay modestly engaged as a scholar; to keep minimally abreast of developments in constitutional thought; to stay informed about public issues and international affairs; to revisit favorite writers in Italian and German and French; to close colossal gaps in my general education.

The list goes on (and on), but this much suffices to stoke some stress and strain.

“Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But [only] one thing is needful” (Luke 10:41-42).

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“The Aims of a BYU Education” concludes with a stirring peroration that should be better known than it is. “These,” the passage begins,

*are the aims of a BYU education. Taken together, they should lead students toward wholeness . . . [and help them] integrate all parts of their university experience into a fundamentally sacred way of life—their faith and their reasoning, their knowledge and conduct, their public lives and private convictions. Ultimately, complete wholeness comes only through the Atonement of Him who said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Savior Himself is both the source of wholeness and the model of abundant life. His Atonement (at-one-ment) allows us to be made whole—at one with Him and the Father who sent Him. His life and character exemplify such unity. His own unbroken wholeness stems from His singular devotion to His Father’s sovereign will. “I do always those things that please him,” He said (John 8:29).

I hope, in my small sphere, to learn to do the same. I hope to answer President Nelson’s recent call to make our discipleship our highest priority. I hope, in the end, to make my discipleship my *only* priority—the one thing I will that encompasses or displaces all others. “When we put God first,” said President Ezra Taft Benson, “all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lives.”<sup>2</sup>

*One thing is needful.*

*Love this baby girl. Love her siblings. Love their incomparable mother.*

*Love my university and all who learn and labor there.*

*Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, might, mind, and strength.*

*Let God prevail.*

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<sup>1</sup> “The Aims of a BYU Education” in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU: Volume 1, Foundations and Dreams* (2022) 80.

<sup>2</sup> *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson* (2014) 40.