

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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Admiring Spectators

Years ago, Lia and I moved to Berlin with our three little girls—Julia (7), Elisabeth (5), and Katharine (2 ½)—merrily in tow. Over the course of the challenging but joyful year that followed, I tried to write the story of Germany’s postwar constitutional court, arguably the most influential tribunal in the world.

I spent hundreds of hours in the *Staatsbibliothek* on *Potsdamer Platz*, hunkered over aging volumes of court reports and banging away at the keyboard of a very tiny laptop. During lunch hours, I sneaked across the street to study the portraits in the magnificent *Gemäldegalerie*. On bus rides, I read German history, philosophy, and literature—Heine and Schopenhauer, Thomas and Golo Mann. Somehow, the dissertation got written, and the book (eventually) got published.

Over time, I became convinced that my writing the history of Germany’s supreme court was only a secondary purpose of our going to Berlin. Our travels unlocked family history treasures, allowing us to perform proxy ordinances for generations of Lia’s German ancestors. Julia and Elisabeth, who spent their second grade and kindergarten years in German schools, later returned to Germany as full-time missionaries.

When Julia was called to serve in the Germany Frankfurt Mission (and later in the newly reopened Hamburg Mission), I felt impressed that our Berlin experience had less to do with my writing a book than with preparing a little girl to serve a mission. I had thought of myself as the protagonist of my own story. I was instead a supporting character in my daughter’s story.

I thought of this lesson when I recently revisited a 1991 message in which President Oaks described the Church’s (and the university’s) efforts toward “getting to know China.” At the close of that fascinating prophetic message, President Oaks testified that the Lord “is doing [His] work all over the world as walls crumble and as old prejudices are readjusted. He is doing His work in China, *and we who think we are important actors are often no more than admiring spectators*. The work of the Lord will go forward.”¹

Admiring spectators. During my three years (and counting) as academic vice president, I have watched and marveled as the Lord has magnified our collective efforts to establish and implement University 101, to strengthen the student experience and foster student success, to refine general education and other curricula, to stand up a school of medicine, to strengthen our students’ testimonies and fortify their faith. I have made many mistakes on all these fronts, and I don’t mean to declare premature victory in any of them. But I have sensed the Lord’s overarching providence for the work of this university, and I feel increasingly like an observer, rather than an actor, in a grand unfolding drama.

Our Elisabeth returns from her mission to Berlin in mid-December. In a recent conversation, she expressed some trepidation at the prospect of post-mission life. There was so much work still left to be done, so little time remaining.

I suggested that it might be helpful to shift her frame of reference from thinking of herself as the heroine of “her” mission and think of herself instead as an instrument in the ongoing work of the Lord. That work will continue long after she

completes her service. Her office is not to finish the job before she goes home. It is to be a diligent and faithful steward of a work that others will continue.

I even hazarded a paraphrase from *The Lord of the Rings*. At a tense moment in the final volume, as the western armies prepare to march for Mordor, Gandalf reminds his comrades of their limited role in the cosmic scheme: “Yet it is not our part,” he says, “to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of

those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.”²

I hope to do all I can for the succor of these pivotal years in BYU’s history. I hope to be a wise and faithful steward. I hope to bequeath good earth to those who follow. But in the end, the weather and the work are God’s to rule. And I am content to witness and adore—an admiring spectator of His marvelous work and His wonders.

¹ Dallin H. Oaks, “Getting to Know China,” BYU devotional address, 12 March 1991 (emphasis added).

² The character Gandalf in J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (1955), Book V, Ch. 9.