ARTICLE

“We Seek After These Things”

Katherine Kitterman, Nozomu Okuda, and Lauren Truman
American University, University at Buffalo, and University of Minnesota

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Katherine Kitterman is a PhD candidate in history at American University. Her dissertation analyzes the rhetoric of Mormon women’s work for suffrage in nineteenth-century Utah.

Nozomu Okuda is a PhD student in classics at the University at Buffalo; his interest is in the intersection of computer science and Latin/ancient Greek.

Lauren Truman is a PhD candidate in Spanish Linguistics at the University of Minnesota. Her areas of interest include bilingualism, dual language immersion, and language policy.

“We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.” -13th Article of Faith

As Latter-day Saints, we believe in seeking after whatever is virtuous, lovely, of good report, or praiseworthy. At times it may seem that there is very little that is virtuous or lovely in our world. At others, truth and beauty seem to surround us. As covenant people who endeavor to love God with our heart, might, and mind, we want to discern what is good in the world and incorporate it into our lives. We can easily identify the countless enriching effects of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but do we sometimes fail to recognize additional good and truth available to us in other arenas?

Discomfort with the unknown can lead us to shy away from seeking virtuous, lovely ideas and pursuits outside of spaces that are clearly church-affiliated. After all, we do not want to be deceived into judging evil for good and good for evil (Isaiah 5:20). However, neither do we want to close ourselves off from sources of wisdom that can enhance our lives and help us build up Zion in our own communities. Fortunately, our humanities training has equipped us to discern the virtuous and lovely and compels us to seek these in new arenas. Engaging with the humanities cultivates habits of mind that help us perceive what is good and true in any aspect of life. As believers, three of these habits of mind—empathy, imagination, and patience—can be especially helpful in our seeking.

Empathy

Our purpose on earth is not to stagnate. Instead, we gather knowledge “into one great whole” as we continue to grow and progress throughout eternity. Joseph Smith wrote in 1839 that

"Mormonism is truth; and every man who embraces it feels himself at liberty to embrace every truth . . . the first and fundamental principle of our holy religion is, that we believe that we have a right to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men."[1] As children of God, we fill the measure of our creation as we seek for truth, wherever it can be found.

Engaging with the humanities fosters our capacity for empathy, which helps us to discern truth and "lay hold upon every good thing" (Moroni 7:19). Empathy is the ability to identify with someone else's experience, and it is a skill we all began to develop through a humanistic education that helped us to imagine other people's thoughts and feelings. The humanities encourage us to listen actively, asking what an artist, author, or culture can teach us instead of focusing only on ideas that reinforce our own assumptions. As we seek understanding through literature, art, music, and more, we allow other people's words and lives to inform our views and soften our hearts so we can see more clearly.

Empathy also motivates us to follow Christ as we interact with our world. Christian author Marilynne Robinson observed that the Christian response to the call of God is to "lov[e] the world God loves," and this is certainly how the Savior lived His life.[2] He continually sought out those on the margins of society—the sick, the lame, women, publicans, and the ritually unclean—and He invites us to follow Him and do as He did. Opening our hearts to our brothers and sisters makes room for God's love, and that love should turn us outward. As we seek to broaden our associations, interests, and experiences, our discipleship is enriched and deepened.

Empathy has opened me to learn from unexpected sources. Whether in a college classroom, a museum lobby, or a crowded subway car, I find that seeking to understand others creates space for spiritual truths to unfold in my mind and heart. This kind of learning continually reshapes my assumptions about the world, about other people, and about myself. Guided by empathy, I can learn to embrace truth wherever it can be found.

An example from the study of history illustrates the continuous process of gathering truth as we reach beyond our own interests and experience. Historians know that we can never completely recover "The Past." There's no such thing as a text or artifact that tells us exactly what happened in a particular time or place because these sources are all filtered through humans' limited perspective and understanding. Recognizing this, historians read sources carefully to glean the information available to them as it is refracted through human narrators. They use those fragments to construct a narrative of what happened, why, and how people felt about it at the time. And they continually update that information as they find new sources, or learn to see new things in the sources they already have. The narrative of history is never fixed or static.

Similarly, our human minds cannot comprehend "the meaning of all things" (1 Nephi 11:17), but we are all constantly constructing a mental narrative about God's work in the world and our place in it. Just as historians are continually updating their understanding of the past as

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[1] Joseph Smith to Isacc Galland, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri, March 22, 1839, in *Times and Seasons*, February 1840, 53–54.

[2] Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was A Child, I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2012), 128.

more information becomes available, we can listen for the emotional truth in our own and others' personal journeys of growth to continually refresh and deepen our understanding of God and His creations. As we actively seek to engage with others and make sense of their experiences as well as our own, our understanding of divine truth comes into greater focus. We may only ever see "through a glass, darkly" in this life, but we can grow toward our divine potential by actively seeking sight from different perspectives.

As Latter-day Saints, we believe in an unfolding process of gospel restoration and in our own divine potential for eternal growth. This means that our own mental narratives should never be fixed. Instead, we want to seek truth wherever we can find it, and to allow that truth to change our lives. The empathy we develop through the humanities can help us develop the capacity to discern truth more clearly as we approach the world with openness rather than suspicion. As we learn to feel more deeply, to seek out new information, and to recognize that God's work in the world is beyond our human understanding, we grow closer to embracing "all, and every item of truth."[3]

Imagination

A humanities education fosters imagination as well as empathy. This creative ability can shape the way we experience the truth, overcome our biases, and take action. It is a habit of mind we cultivate in the humanities as we repeatedly encounter the unfamiliar and attempt to make sense of it. While imagination inevitably leads to misunderstanding and mistakes, it can also be used to grow and heal.

An example from the Book of Mormon may be helpful. Captain Moroni has been fighting wars for several years at the start of Alma 59, and he requests more troops and supplies from the chief governor, Pahoran, to consolidate hard-won holdings. Reinforcements and supplies do not come in time, and an entire city is lost; and so captain Moroni sends a particularly angry letter to Pahoran, which is contained in Alma 60. Grant Hardy observes the following:

> Moroni begins "by way of condemnation" (Alma 60:2) and over the course of his epistle he becomes more and more sure that he has been betrayed by the civilian government. He accuses them of neglect, indifference, and slothfulness. He wonders if they have become "traitors to [the] country" (Alma 60:18) and threatens to overthrow them unless things change fast (60:25–27). By the end he boldly asserts, "[Y]e know that ye do transgress the laws of God, and ye do know that ye do trample them under your feet" (60:33; perhaps an allusion to Mosiah 29:22), and he claims a revelation to that effect: "Behold, the Lord saith unto me, 'If those whom ye have appointed your governors do not repent of their sins and iniquities, ye shall go up to battle against them'" (60:33).[4]

Captain Moroni has imagined that Pahoran's negligence caused the lack of needed reinforcements and supplies. In a strict sense, that imagined story is true—Pahoran failed to muster the troops and

[3] Smith to Galland, 53–54.
[4] Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 176–77.

send them to support Moroni's armies. What Moroni failed to imagine correctly, however, was the reason for Pahoran's failure.

Alma 61 contains Pahoran's creative response to Moroni's frankly offensive letter. Pahoran begins by expressing grief for the difficulties he imagines Moroni faces (Alma 61:2). He then carefully explains the situation which Moroni failed to imagine—insurrection drove Pahoran out of power, Pahoran was mustering troops to regain power, and the rebels were plotting to make an alliance with Moroni's enemies (Alma 61:3–8). Pahoran then invites Moroni to imagine with him a plan to drive the rebels out of power (Alma 61:9–18).

Frustration and suspicion led Moroni to imagine destructively. If Pahoran had not constructively imagined the good Moroni had been doing, was capable of doing, and would be doing, the result would likely have been sadness, enmity, and regret. Instead, Pahoran chose to imagine constructively and empathetically, and the fruit of his decision is conveyed in Alma 62: Moroni joins his armies with Pahoran's, and together they drive out the rebels (and even overcome the worst case scenario). Moroni's apparent weakness does not diminish his importance; there is no denying that it was under his military leadership, which was influenced by his various qualities and biases, that his people eventually won the war. However, Pahoran's creative imagination, first born from his own empathy and patience, fostered empathy and patience in Moroni.

Perhaps Pahoran's constructive imagination was not the result of a twenty-first century education in the humanities, but a twenty-first century education in the humanities can help us understand and value the power of the constructive imagination exhibited by Pahoran. In particular, the Moroni–Pahoran correspondence gives us a model for considering our own relationship with the activities or ideas we encounter. Do we dismiss with suspicion and frustration anything that we cannot immediately imagine to understand or agree with? Or can we use imagination to see the good? Do we imagine that other points of view or new ideas have the potential to build up and improve our understanding? Or do we imagine with fear that they will lead our understanding astray? If we approach something unfamiliar with suspicion, frustration, and fear, we will inevitably fail to see any good in it—whether it is produced and sanctioned by the church or not. But when we use our creative faculties to imagine the good in the unfamiliar, we demonstrate an openness to learn, and with patience and discernment, we will see whether it really is good.

During the 2019 BYU Summer Humanities Workshop, I recognized the power of constructive imagination while reading Alan Jacobs' "Love and the Suspicious Spirit" (from *A Theology of Reading*). Jacobs used Nietzsche—the philosopher I had previously known for writing "God is dead"—as an important source for discussing the meaning of giving and receiving gifts. I could not see beyond Nietzsche's atheist statement, but Jacobs was able to constructively imagine that Nietzsche's writings contained aspects of truth. Thanks to Jacobs' constructive imagination, my understanding of gifts was enhanced, and I saw the remarkable power in imagining the good in things I had previously and uncharitably assumed contained nothing but evil.

Patience

Tightly interwoven with empathy and imagination is a continual need for patience. As scholars of the humanities, we are no strangers to practicing patience. Whether vicariously, accompanying a character on an arduous journey, or firsthand, wading through a thick text or contemplating a complex piece of art, we have all had our patience tested at times. The critical, speculative nature of the study of humanities necessitates reflection, contemplation, and sitting with the obscure or unknown. It asks us to navigate resolute differences and strange spaces. It fosters debate and disagreement. Sometimes insight comes readily, but often it is a slow unfurling. If we are to arrive at understanding, we must have patience.

This same patience must accompany us as we continue our lifelong search for all things virtuous and praiseworthy. The discomfort inherent in the process of seeking can easily lead to impatience and cause us to abandon avenues that would otherwise lead us to discover a wealth of loveliness. There will be instances—perhaps many—in which we search for good in a concept, an association, or an activity, only to find corruption, maliciousness, or godlessness. We have all watched a show or listened to a podcast that received rave reviews from a trusted friend, only to discover in it underlying ideologies that affront our notion of what is praiseworthy and good. But it is through that same process that at other times we will find new ways of understanding truth and novel expressions for beliefs we already hold. Recall that in the parable of the wheat and the tares, the servants of the household only realized that there were tares planted with the wheat after "the blade sprung up, and brought forth fruit" (Matthew 13:26). Even though the servants were told not to separate the wheat and the tares until the fruit was ripe and ready for harvest, the fruit came and the harvest happened. Being surrounded by metaphorical tares can be discouraging, but all will be separated out in the Lord's time; our job now is to patiently work to recognize what pursuits will bear fruit and cultivate those to the best of our ability.

Often, having patience during a process also means having patience *with* another person. New ideas, interests, and endeavors are often introduced to us by those we associate with regularly. All of us have experienced this in classroom discussions. Both then and now, patience (along with empathy and imagination) is key to listening with an open mind to an idea or suggestion that we may not initially be interested in. Patience is also crucial in allowing those around us to do their own seeking, recognizing that they might see fruit where we do not, or may miss fruit where we find it abundantly. These differences can distance us from those who seek and find differently than we do, but patience with others acknowledges that these are very personal experiences. When we feel discouraged, we can find comfort in stories like Jacob and Esau, in which we see that when "truth is mixed with time" we can be reconciled to those whom we may initially disagree with.[5]

At times, the person we need to have patience with is ourselves. Patience with ourselves requires recognizing that we are all raised with certain biases and beliefs that at times cause us to involuntarily react negatively to opposing ideas; it is crucial to give ourselves space to recognize those biases and beliefs and to bring in new, uplifting experiences to our lives as we are ready. We should also be patient with our ability to recognize fruits or the lack thereof. In our pursuit of the good and virtuous, it is possible and even probable that we will judge some opinion, suggestion, or undertaking as praiseworthy when it is not or that we will miss the loveliness of some truly commendable pursuit or notion. This is a lesson that I have had to learn several times over as I

[5] Neal A. Maxwell, "Patience" (devotional address, BYU, Provo, UT, November 27, 1979), https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/neal-a-maxwell/patience/

have attempted to navigate the many new ideas that surround me in a graduate program that is far away from home in both distance and discourse. At first, my responses to unfamiliar ideas tended to be reactionary, though silent; gradually, and largely thanks to the patience and understanding of new friends, I became comfortable sitting with new ideas and working them out in my mind before drawing conclusions about their praiseworthiness. Some I am still working out, and others I know I will have to revisit later. At times, I still become impatient with others when confronted with a viewpoint that seems to contradict my own, or impatient with myself when struggling to let go of a bias. But as a friend recently assured me, growth comes from patiently questioning our biases and being open to new ideas; that is all anyone can ask for.

Closely tied with patience with ourselves is patience with the Lord. We know from experience that the Lord's timing is not our timing, even when it comes to discerning and integrating good, virtuous things into our lives. We are told often in the scriptures to "wait upon the Lord" (Isaiah 40:31) and are reminded that knowledge comes "here a little and there a little" (Isaiah 28:10) and "shall distil as the dew" (Deuteronomy 32:2). In other words, we are rarely, if ever, given an answer all at once. Receiving an answer is often dependent on our readiness to learn—our imagination of the validity of new ideas and activities. So, if we are struggling to know whether a new friend, opportunity, ideology, or text is lovely, virtuous, or of good report, and we feel the answer is taking too long, we may want to ask ourselves whether we have really taken enough time to experience it, whether we are able to imagine the resultant fruit, and then continue in patience. God is patient with our learning, and we should be patient with his dispensing of knowledge. When we are patient with God's timing and when we trust the process, seeking and finding actually become co-construction of knowledge and truth with God.

Conclusion

Seeking truth helps us to cultivate knowledge and grow into our divine nature. Just as Alma encouraged the outcast Zoramites to make space in their hearts to plant the word of God, to nourish that seed with diligence, and to look forward for it to bear fruit, we can make space for good seeds from any source, plant them, and imagine the lovely fruits of understanding and knowledge that may come from them. We do not know when a seed is planted whether it will bear fruit. However, whether the seed itself produces fruit or not, in the process we not only exercise empathy, imagination, and patience, but we increase our capacity for these virtues and others. Consequently, whatever else we may discover in our search for all things virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, the best fruit we will find will be a better version of ourselves.

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