

ARTICLE

My Journey as a Scholar of Faith

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I. “I realized I had no idea what the story was that I was a part of.”

At eighteen I was convinced I was going to be a chemical engineer. I thought it was a very practical profession, I loved chemistry, and I wanted to follow in my father’s footsteps. Once I arrived at BYU, I declared my major as chemical engineering, eagerly enrolled in the courses required, and went to work. I had no idea that every Friday for the next fourteen weeks, immediately after leaving the testing center, I would spend at least an hour on the phone with my parents, distraught over my test scores and my future. Remembering those phone calls now, I am humbled by my parents’ patience. They listened to me complain about the same thing for hours and never once gave up or hung up on me. They tried to convince me that my scores were fine, and everything would work out, but around the third or fourth call of the semester they knew I needed a change. They kept asking me: What do you really want to do?

At first, I did not have an answer, and this terrified me. I realized that my very practical plan for the future was not what God had in store for me. He needed me to trust Him and to co-author a new plan alongside him. One far more risky, yet rewarding than the one I had constructed on my own. Or, as Tracy K. Smith phrases it in her memoir *Ordinary Light*:

I realized I had no idea what the story was that I was a part of. I didn’t yet know what was important to me or what would remain important years down the line...But I wanted to believe I was right when I told myself that the God I’d learned to believe in so long ago was still there, bigger and more real than I had imagined, and that He was long-suffering, abiding, that whatever He was would blaze bright and undeniably near when the thing that led me to Him was not obligation or fear. (254)

II. “And what would I be without God? He does everything!”

The summer before my senior year of high school we were assigned to read Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *Crime & Punishment* for our Advanced Placement English class. Everyone I talked to told me I would absolutely hate it. It’s long, depressing, and convoluted. As a result of these conversations, I kept pushing off my summer reading assignment. I waited until mid-August to start reading the novel in our family cabin up Provo Canyon. Contrary to popular opinion, I was enraptured by the novel. Vladimir Nabokov, who notoriously gave Dostoevsky a Z- when grading famous Russian writers, would chalk up my adoration for the novel to mere sentimentalism and a banal interest in the detective genre. Perhaps, in a way, Nabokov is not entirely off-base in his assessment. After all, as a young girl and teenager I spent my free time reading and was obsessed with Geronimo Stilton, the mouse detective, and Sherlock Holmes. Trips to our local library were frequent. I would check out as many books as my mother would allow me and devour them until our next visit. Nevertheless, sitting in our A-frame cabin,

occasionally looking out to see the leaves rustle in the wind, listening to the creek in the backyard and my cousins arguing over card games in the other room, I felt that there was more to this novel than sentimentalism and the trite nature of the detective genre.

I sensed this most acutely while reading the fourth chapter of part four of the novel. Right before Sonya reads from the fourth gospel about the raising of Lazarus. Raskolnikov tests Sonya with difficult questions about her faith and relationship with God. He asks: "So you pray very much to God, Sonya?" Sonya does not respond right away but eventually she whispers quickly and energetically, glancing at him fleetingly with flashing eyes and pressing his hand firmly with her own: "And what would I be without God?" (323). Still not satisfied, Raskolnikov continues to torment her: "And what does God do for you in return?" Sonya is silent for a long time, as if unable to answer Raskolnikov's question, but finally whispers to him: "He does everything!" (324). I had never seen such faith before! Despite the horrible pain and suffering Sonya had experienced, she was still able to declare, albeit after long silences and only in whispers, that God does everything, and she would be nothing without him. I longed for that level of faith. III. "What did you say to Dr. Kelly? You destroyed him."

When my parents asked me what I wanted to do with my life on those dreary Fridays outside the testing center my experience reading *Crime & Punishment* and other great works of literature came to mind. We eventually decided that I should enroll in "Masterpieces of the Russian Novel in English" with Dr. Purves and the "Intro to the English Major" with Dr. Muhlestein for the following semester. Those courses changed my life. I grew both intellectually and spiritually. Within a few weeks, I changed my major from chemical engineering to a double major in Russian and English and am now a PhD candidate in Slavic Languages & Literature at the University of Southern California.

It seems to me, that the works I have encountered both at BYU and USC have taught me time and time again to question my rash judgments. My favorite line from my patriarchal blessing advises me: "Sarah, people need your love not your judgment." The scriptures do the same: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matthew 7:1-2).

Along with challenging the nature of my judgements, the works I have encountered have consoled me. I have been comforted by the assurance that there are others in the world who have similar questions, doubts, concerns, fears, hopes, and beliefs as myself. The innocent suffering of children in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Ivan's subsequent rejection of God, were particularly poignant. Ivan's argument in the novel resonated with me because my sister's niece had just been diagnosed with cancer. At the end of the semester, our instructor Dr. Kelly asked each of us to explain how one of the readings related to our personal lives during the oral portion of our exam. I told him how Ivan's struggles reflected my own. Before I began my oral exam, Dr. Kelly told me that he would not interrupt or ask me questions until after I had finished, but once I told him about the cancer diagnosis, he had to stop me. With tears in his eyes, he told me he could not let me finish without telling me how sorry he was. He did not try to fix the problem or offer up senseless platitudes. Instead, he just sat and cried with me. In that moment, Dr. Kelly was the embodiment for me of Mosiah 18:9: "...willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort." Once I finished my oral exam, I left Dr. Kelly's office and my close friend went in after me. A few minutes later, as I was walking home, my friend texted me: "What did you say to Dr. Kelly? You destroyed him."

IV. “Glory be to God for dappled things”

My faith journey is like learning a foreign language. Russian to be exact. With its flowing sonorants, beautiful hushers, guttural velars, complicated case system, and relatively free word order. Learning a language is an extremely vulnerable endeavor. Nothing has ever opened me up before quite like learning Russian. At times, I’m amazed by what I am capable of and, at others, I’m struck dumb by how little I am capable of. Despite how discouraging these fluctuations in faith might be, they are not uncommon. We can see this in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poetry. Consider the despair of the speaker in “No worst, there is none. Pitched Past pitch of grief”:

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief, / More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring. / Comforter, where, where is your comforting? / Mary, mother of us, where is your relief? / My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief / Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing – / Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked ‘No ling- / ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief.’ / O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap / May who ne’er hung there. Nor does long our small / Durance deal with the steep or deep. Here! creep, / Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

Now consider the joy of the speaker in “Pied Beauty”:

Glory be to God for dappled things – / For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow; / For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim; / Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings; / Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough; / And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim. / All things counter, original, spare, strange; / Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?) / With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim; / He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: / Praise him.

Clearly my fluctuations in faith, and Gerard Manley Hopkins’, illustrate that faith is a fluid process not a formula. It is better to be in motion than to be fixed.

I am infinitely grateful for the humanities. Through my studies I have connected to people, cultures, and languages not mine own, as have the rest of you in this room. I believe our work is a profound example of Christlike love and service because we strive for difference, not division (John D. Zizioulas). And it is only through Christ that I can do all things for “Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid; for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also has become my salvation” (2 Nephi 22:2/Isaiah 12:2).