



### Foreword:

What follows is a personal reflection in the form of a letter, addressed to God.

Before continuing, **I invite the reader to spend time with Paige Anderson's wonderful piece** 'Again, Glorified (Atonement Triptych)' (shown above), which I hope will help to convey something of the tone and intention of my thoughts.<sup>1</sup>

Please also be aware that I use the endnotes as a space to address the reader and fill in gaps / provide explanations that felt unnatural in the flow of the main text.

Dear God,

I was in a sacrament meeting and the speaker mentioned Elder Rasband's conference talk about words, reminding us that our words matter, inviting us to use the words "thank you," "I'm sorry," and "I love you" more often and with more sincerity. It occurred to me that I use those words a lot when I'm talking to you. The way those three interact with each other reminds me of George Handley's triad of virtues: criticism, compassion, and charity. Criticism is, perhaps, what we use when we say I'm sorry. It takes critique and discernment<sup>2</sup> to really see what is wrong in my life or in my own conduct. I also think there is something compassionate about saying thank you. It is recognizing the suffering (whatever the degree) that someone else undertook for your sake. To suffer with them, compassion, allows you to feel gratitude and understanding. And of course, sometimes, when we really mean it, it is charity that speaks "I love you," a mark of the incomprehensible human capacity to care deeply about someone else, and to define ourselves, finding our highest fulfillment, in relation to those we love. That is a miracle, isn't it? Moroni understood it to be a gift, "bestowed" upon those who seek it.<sup>3</sup>

## THANK YOU

So I wanted to take this opportunity to say thank you. Thank you for the questions you've been stirring in my heart for several years. As a young man I prided myself on my understanding. I thought that I was "highly favored" of the Lord because I didn't struggle with church teachings, etc.; I was a "wheat" who could outlast any sifting of the "tares." I was Nephi, taught by faithful parents, eager to please; dumfounded by the lack of faith I saw in the Lamans around me. To my credit, and Nephi's, I also remember being deeply moved by the Psalm of Nephi, wretched and helpless in the face of my own questionable motives, crushed by a

relentless moral inertia in which I could see what ought to be done and could not, by force of will, move myself to do it.

In recent years I've had a falling out with Nephi. I hope he will forgive me someday. Reading the Book of Mormon with more cynical eyes — a hermeneutics of suspicion — I was honestly annoyed by his arrogance and embarrassed by his conviction. I still wonder how things might have played out if Lehi's family had followed President Monson's adage, "never let a problem to be solved become more important than a person to be loved."<sup>4</sup> Is there any version of our story that does not inevitably become 1,000 minus 400 years of "-ites", contempt, and warfare? Are the Nephites really the "righteous" ones we should emulate, when their exclusivity and pride are almost always the cause of the divisions and ultimately lead to their destruction? I don't know. It's complicated. Those phrases roll easily off my tongue these days.... I'm reading the Book of Mormon with more generous eyes lately, and if I am at all critical of Nephi, it is only because I still see myself in his story, and I am afraid of doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, or of valuing "right-ness" over "one-ness" in the pursuit of truth.

Do you remember what you told me in my patriarchal blessing, that I was blessed with "a love of truth"? I'm starting to appreciate more what George meant by the metaphor, *if truth were a child*. He said, "truth is no trophy you can hold up. Its value isn't in possessing it. Its value is the love we muster to build relationships in its pursuit."<sup>5</sup> In the Solomon experience, the one who was not the real mother cared only about possessing the child — about being "right" — while the mother was willing to lose possession of the child, to concede to someone else, to avoid tearing it in pieces. If we truly love the truth, we will worry less about being the possessor of it and more about being very gentle with it: for truth is a fragile, delicate thing, that in reality has much more

growing up to do before it can live on its own. We would rather humbly concede that someone else might be in possession of the truth than to risk crushing it in our rigid desire to be right.

That reminds me: I wanted to thank you for George Handley. And for Matthew Wickman, and Abby, David, Haleigh, Jacob, Kristen, Mila, Rachel, Sam, Seth, and Vashti. For Jennifer Bown, Rex Neilson, Brian Roberts, Stan Benfell, Debbie Dean, Marie Orton, Lori Branch, Jacob Sherman, Miranda Wilcox, and Mary Eyring, all of whom contributed to the workshop this week. Also for Elliot Wise. For Fiona and Terryl Givens, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Patrick Mason, Sam and Jenn Norton, Tim and Aubrey Chavez. For Josh and Sarah Sabey, and Maddie Baker who illustrated their book. For Kate Holbrook and Melissa Inouye, who have both, as we sometimes morbidly say, sealed their testimonies with their blood. For my mother, who has always been my most compassionate and critical sounding board.

This is one litany among many I could give, and only the beginning of one, but I want you to know that I am grateful for the people you've put in my path. Jonathan called it the curriculum of my life.<sup>6</sup> While I know there's a danger in thinking of that in terms that are exclusively prescriptive, I have always loved the feeling that you were teaching me through the people and ideas I came across in all areas of life. *This* litany is about those questions that I never thought I would have, and the process Matt described as "spiritual maturation". He writes so beautifully about spiritual experience, and it gives me hope that someday I'll have words like those to reflect in meaningful ways on my own growing, "to the measure of the stature..."<sup>7</sup> I'm beginning to see that my spiritual gift was not, as I once thought, my understanding, but rather my thirst for it. There's a line in one of the songs I like by Chris Tomlin, "when I'm empty, you fill me / with hunger for more..."<sup>8</sup> Thank you for filling me with hunger. For taking away (at

least for a while) the answers, so that I could learn to live with the questions. I think those empty tombs are making me a better Christian.<sup>9</sup>

## I'M SORRY

In all of this searching and seeing the many sides of things, I appreciate what Jenny Hale Pulsipher said about nuance, that it is "a tricky position to take" and that it is not appropriate in every situation.<sup>10</sup> In various ways my sisters have often reminded me of the virtue of acting on the understanding you have, particularly in situations where there is an urgent need for something, *anything*, to be done. Earlier this week Matt gave me Nietzsche's words to describe this: "Knowledge kills action." I'm afraid that has been true for me and my action(s).

In the name of "I don't know" and "it's complicated," I have sometimes failed to speak up when something or someone I love was being ill-used or ill-spoken of. I have allowed the things I don't understand to prevent me from bearing witness (like in a court) of the things that I do know, and that I have experienced. I have a fear of being wrong... no... I have a fear of being *perceived* as wrong (foolish, naïve, inconsequential).<sup>11</sup> You and I have talked about this many times, I just want to say again that I'm sorry for caring more for the praise of "the world" than the approbation of God.

On the other hand, it's not just growing in knowledge of the complexity of the world that precludes action. In fact, there are many ways that my education *should have* galvanized action, as I've gained empathy for, and proximity to, individuals and communities who are suffering. Learning to see my own privilege; learning to love cultures which are different from my own; learning from history and attempting to confront the fallenness of humanity; all of this should have put me in a position to do more for the marginalized, oppressed, or underrepresented. If, for all the talk of equity and honesty and empathy in my field, I am not willing to change the

patterns of my life to make room for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the afflicted—if I cannot muster enough care for the earth and its people to disrupt my creature comforts and convenient routines—then I have not charity, and I am nothing but sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.<sup>12</sup>

You taught me this when Katie was in Radium Girls.<sup>13</sup> In all the ways that I have made thy children an abstract set of ideas to be debated or analyzed, and failed to truly see them as sisters and brothers, to do what I can to provide for their needs... I'm sorry. In the hypocrisy of right-thinking without right-doing, if I have become someone that "loveth and maketh a lie," I am sorry.<sup>14</sup>

## I LOVE YOU

I remember a time as a missionary, explaining to someone that it was *better* to have plain white walls in the chapel, with no other adornments or pieces of art, because the cloth draped over the sacrament trays was the *only* appropriate symbol of Christ in our most sacred spaces. Because anything but austere minimalism and Puritan congregational hymns would be *distracting* to our worship. This was one example of taking something 'as it is' and coercing it into 'as it should be.' In most cases I'm finding that it's better to avoid speculation as to why a thing is done, especially in a large bureaucratic organization like the church.<sup>15</sup> I've since found other reasons to love our chapels; the simplicity does, at times, give me space to breathe and follow the architectural lines upward to the lights that are all (in spite of our claims to artlessness) designed to lift our eyes heavenward.

But I also remember entering the Salt Lake Temple celestial room for the first time and being shocked to find a vision of an abundant paradise, lovingly crafted by a people longing for a more beautiful home. I wondered how we could have strayed so far from seeing Heaven as they did. When did emptiness and sameness become more prized than fullness and variety? When did we become so embarrassed by provincial depictions of putti and cornucopia that we would choose to stay in the lone and dreary waste instead of returning to Eden? For the first time, perhaps, I realized that in visual terms, silence does not necessarily equate to reverence, and there are more ways to worship than the ones I always took for granted.<sup>16</sup> In other words, I found myself drawn to a visual/artistic style that I had never before associated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—that kind of opulent decoration always belonged, in my mind, to other, older traditions—and I was surprised to find it in the very heart of our church, geographically and symbolically speaking.



I'm thinking about that moment, and how many other times I have looked out into the beauty and diversity of the world and felt holy envy for things I feel are lacking or deficient in my own tradition... only to look inward again and find that the roots of it were here all along, buried in a milieu of cultural assumptions and habitual adaptations. That is not to say that our Church contains all good intrinsically, as it is now. We believe in all that God has revealed, all that you are now revealing, and we believe that you will continue to reveal many great and important things pertaining to the kingdom. Many of those great and important things, I think, will come to us through our friends of other faiths, the ones you have been guiding and teaching "after the manner of their language, that they [too] might come to understanding."<sup>17</sup> Having said that, I love belonging to a tradition that continues to surprise me with its depth and versatility. What we lack often has less to do with doctrines, or what we might call raw material, and more to do with creative imagination to make the best use of the material we've been given. I consider it a great privilege (and responsibility) to live in a time when so many great minds and sincere hearts in the church are engaged in those types of creative re-cognitions of our heritage, our scripture, and our practices.

I suppose what I'm trying to say is that for all its flaws I really do love this church, and I don't say that often enough. I may not look at Arnold Friberg images in the same way I did as a child, but I also have Minerva Teichert now. And Paige Anderson, and Megan Geilman, Caitlin Connolly, Melissa Tshikamba, and Kirk Richards... In many ways I feel as if I've stepped into that celestial room again, stunned by the variety and richness of what I see.

All of this might seem a strange way to express my love for God, and to be sure, it feels even stranger to say "I love you" directly in a prayer or a letter addressed to the divine. Is it too casual or familiar? Perhaps. Why does it feel safer to couch it in pluralisms and formalities ("we

love thee") and awkward to accept it as personal and direct? In any case, I think it's difficult to conceive of my love for you in any terms *other than* my love for other people and things. How do I know that I love God? I love Julia, I love my children, and I love the sunlight sparkling through the leaves and glancing off the window. These are also the very same means by which I know that you love me. In seeing the beauty of the world, I am learning to see you, and in so doing I am learning to love you. Indeed, I am becoming someone who is capable of loving you.<sup>18</sup>

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In my field, as in most scholarship in the Humanities, criticism comes with the territory, and it seems to be increasingly popular to apologize for the past, or at least to assume that an apology is needed. On the other hand, there *are* those who become enamored with their period, who are able to look with compassion at the contexts that produced beloved images and objects. I am grateful for the ways in which Art History has given me the tools for both discernment *and* empathy. But more than that, I believe there can be something transformational in the practice of carefully looking at art. As someone who is prone to many words, visual art has a way of creating stillness in me.<sup>19</sup> If I'm patient and persistent in my looking, it can quiet the noise that is language and speak to another part of me in silence. Of course, the words do come, and perhaps what I enjoy most is finding words to describe what I am seeing.<sup>20</sup> There's a wonderful paradox in the way art, especially abstract art, both defies and begs explication. But the more I think about it, the more I am persuaded that the practice of looking has given me new eyes with which to see.

As I look ahead—to the next five years and beyond—I've been wondering what form my consecrated scholarship will take. What does it look like to do Art History as a disciple of Christ? For me. What does it look like in my work? I wrote some of my commitments in my

diversity statement for the Emory application, and I intend to follow through on what I said there. I also want to promise you that I will always view my academic pursuits as a way to seek after you. Not just criticism, not compassion alone, but asking always for the gift of charity.

"Then Jesus beholding him loved him."<sup>21</sup>

I don't mean, of course, that to engage in faithful scholarship I must fall in love with every paper I write or be infatuated with every period I study. I am simply trying to say that it is possible to engage in my work in ways that disconnect me from myself, from others, and from the divine, and there are ways of doing it that seek after connection, reconciliation, understanding, peace... This is what George described as a hermeneutics of love, and Lori Branch called *metanoia*. When we repent, we are turning our hearts and minds back into loving relationship with thee, and with each other. When I look at art, I want to repent.

Paige Anderson's atonement triptych, for example, has been a wonderful space for me to come back, time and again, to see and to feel and to be still. Coming back to it now, I am finding new words to describe what I see.

The Garden on the left, The Cross on the right, Resurrection in the center.<sup>22</sup>

Thank you. I'm sorry. I love you.

Yours,

Joseph

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<sup>1</sup> Paige C. Anderson, 'Again, Glorified (Atonement Triptych),' 2019. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Joyce Martin Hill and George Hill, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Discernment was Abby's word for criticism in our discussion of Dr. Handley's remarks.

<sup>3</sup> Moroni 7:48

<sup>4</sup> Monson, Thomas S., "Finding Joy in the Journey", Ensign (Nov 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Handley, George, "On Criticism, Compassion, and Charity," 123.

<sup>6</sup> Here I am referring to Jonathan Pike of the Wheatley Institute, and a conversation he directed during my time as a Wheatley student scholar in the Fall semester of 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 4:13 (12-20)

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<sup>8</sup> "Who You Are to Me" by Chris Tomlin and Lady A, in the album *Chris Tomlin and Friends*

<sup>9</sup> This was a reference to the poem, "The Answer" by R. S. Thomas, as discussed by Matthew Wickman in *Life to the Whole Being*, pp. 202-206.

<sup>10</sup> Pulsipher, Jenny Hale, "Warts and All" in *Every Needful Thing*, 143.

<sup>11</sup> I resonate deeply with Sarah Bachelard's description of her process of "unselfing", an account she gives in the third meditation of her book, *Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis*. In her discussion of grace she writes, "the prospect of failure put me in touch with the realisation that my sense of my own value had been tied up with a felt need to become 'someone' and that to justify my existence I needed to contribute more to the world than others... Finally I could relax and rejoice in being simply a human being among others, no better and no worse." (81, 83)

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:1

<sup>13</sup> Katie is my little sister, an excellent actress who participated in a very moving production about a number of young girls who died after working in a factory where they were exposed to radium. Katie played the lawyer/activist who sued the company in an attempt to get the girls adequate medical treatment. Her passion was countered by the apathy of the factory owner, who was later haunted by the fact that he could never look the girls in the eyes during the trial.

<sup>14</sup> Revelation 22:15. Acknowledging that there have been many interpretations of this phrase, I am using it here to express the idea that a humanistic, intellectual appreciation of something (or someone) without an accompanying sense of accountability toward their welfare, is akin to "loving and making a lie"

<sup>15</sup> 1978 comes to mind, as does the popular urban myth of "sacred silence" surrounding Heavenly Mother.

<sup>16</sup> I was also forced to confront my notions of *horror vacui* — a modern western paradigm that projects "fear of empty spaces" onto the oriental or medieval "other" while prioritizing the perceived rational austerity of blanched Greek monuments and (perhaps equally whitewashed) philosophers. In its worst forms, this conceit is not true/fair to either tradition, as even Renaissance art is not as plain or "clean" as we sometimes pretend.

<sup>17</sup> D&C 1:24

<sup>18</sup> I think this is a parallel thought to what Jacob Sherman expressed in the conclusion of a chapter in his book on contemplative philosophy. "We require practices of holistic formation because the instrument of our vision is nothing other than our whole selves. There is no other way. In the quest to know God and the world, to know being and its determinations, to know and love our neighbors as ourselves, we do not have the luxury of instruments that would do our knowing for us, or that would, via some technique of magnification, overcome our myopia. We have to offer ourselves and ask (pray) our neighbors, the things of the world, and the mysteries beyond to reciprocate. In order to see, we must become." *Partakers of the Divine*, chapter 5, p. 241.

<sup>19</sup> The stillness of looking provides the kind of open contemplation—the seeing and being seen, creating and being created—that we discussed in relation to Rowan William's *The Edge of Words*.

<sup>20</sup> Words do matter. I mean this in more than one sense, and I'm thinking about the metaphysical discussion we had with Jacob Sherman, the title of Catherine Pickstock's essay, "Matter and Mattering," Mary Eyring's thoughts on narrative, and how the stories we tell/words we use to describe a work of art are what give form to how we see it. In other words, words give matter and substance to the image as it exists in our mind.

<sup>21</sup> Mark 10:21

<sup>22</sup> Paige Anderson discusses her work generally, and this piece specifically, in an interview with MOA Director Janalee Emmer which is available to watch here: <https://moa.byu.edu/blog/the-moa-acquires-paige-andersons-a-gain-glorified-atonement-triptych>