

On Gratitude

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It is literally a miracle I am here, and that I can share with you a bit of who I am on my journey of becoming. I find the genre of the personal essay of faith wonderful because my faith has defined just about every aspect of my existence in spite of my personal resistance, shame of being different, and lack of a knowledge of much truth applicable in all situations. I do not know why the Lord has loved my family and I and stuck with me through my trials and blessed me abundantly. I know these blessings are not felt by everyone and I do not pretend to be any more special than any other person. However, as the hymn teaches: “Because I have been given much, I too must give;” and regardless any merit I may have or not have to my blessings, I feel that sharing my experiences by teaching and acting with faith to be worthwhile.

I, like Nephi, was born into a goodly family. I had a father and a mother that loved each other and loved us, their two children. They were not perfect, and we had many challenges, but as I reflect on my childhood, I can’t imagine I could ask for better parents. My mother loved the arts and my father the sciences. We attended concerts, theater plays, repaired everything, and learned the value of hard work. Now, lest you imagine our lives to be posh, I have to tell you a few other things about my childhood. Contrasting my home life, was a public life ruled by mistrust, corruption, and tyranny. I was born in Romania under the spell of an oppressive communist government that worked to rot our country both economically and socially. While my father had a good job as a mechanical engineer, throughout his childhood he was persecuted for having a father who had owned land. My grandfather was judged to be a *Chiabur* or a rich peasant part of the bourgeoisie, who owned more land than he could work and who disposed of some means of production, that a good Marxist would say, was used to exploit poorer laborers. By the 1960s, the government confiscated my grandfather’s land, his store, and amusement park and sent him to jail for the sin of prosperity. My father was not allowed to go to high school and held back due to his “bourgeois” father. He nevertheless persevered and only after Ceaușescu came to power and in spite of his “origine nesănătoasă” (unhealthy origin), he attained a good career. We lived in a small apartment on the 8th floor of a tall building in Bucharest and we never owned a car while growing up. In fact, when I met my wife, she would take me on dates with her car. She would come, pick me up and later drop me off at my place. She says it was kind of embarrassing, I thought it was great!

My mother was an English teacher by training and worked at the Ana Aslan Geriatric Institute. There she met an American bodyguard working for a Utah politician who came for treatments. As she was assigned as their translator, she went with them on some tours around the city. This bodyguard took a certain liking to my mother and while he was prohibited to talk religion due to restrictions imposed by our communist government, before he left the country, he left her a book. He told her it was very special to him and that she should read it. My mother liked the book because it had the bodyguard’s name engraved on the front in golden letters,

something that was thoroughly unusual in Romania. Later, she told me that she tried to read it, but it did not make much sense to her, and because the English was difficult, so she just placed it in her bookcase as a keepsake.

The communist dictatorship in Romanian lasted too long. My mother was denied a passport to visit her friend in America and all his letters and presents to us were inspected. My mother was called in to interrogation from time to time to say why she continued to communicate with an American. In time, light came into our country and in 1989 through a violent revolution, our country opened up to a incipient democracy. With political freedom, the doors were also opened to the world and in no time, two young men knocked on our door and shouted from the building's hallway that they had a letter from our friend in America. The letter was about one year old when they handed it to us. By chance, these elders found it in their apartment and decided to deliver it. Some previous elders tried to bring it to us but did not find us home and the letter got forgotten. Elder Leavitt of Utah, and Elder McFarland of Arizona, gave us the letter and we invited them in. My mother, who's parental grandfather had been an Orthodox priest, looked at them with suspicion and asked them why their names were Elder, when they were so young? They responded that they were missionaries teaching about Christ. To be hospitable, we offered them coffee, they said no. Then maybe some tea, and they refused. With some trepidation we asked if wine worked, but alas it was also rejected. They instead asked for water which we though very strange. We gave them some carbonated water as plain water from the tap was simply out of the question along with some homemade jam on a small plate. They promptly taught us the Word of Wisdom in return. But, because the scriptures had not yet been translated into Romanian, they could not read us Doctrine and Covenants 89 as they wished. To their surprise, when they said D&C, a light turned on as if to light my mother's countenance and she went straight to her bookcase, opened it, and pulled out a book that had the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price inscribed on its binding. The elders looked at the book in shock, and upon inspecting the date of the printing of the book, one of them exclaimed: "This book is older than I am, where did you get it?". My mother told them it had belonged to the man whose letter they had just delivered. She then helped them quickly translate D&C 89 into Romanian and that was the first principle we learned about the gospel. Giving up coffee, tea, and alcohol was a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. We were much more suspicions of the audacity of these young men to proclaim that on top of having the world's greatest economy and democracy, they also had hold of the only religious truth, American living prophets, and on top of that Christ had also visited the place. Preposterous! Only weeks later we committed to pray about the truth of their claims. My father and I remember that we felt a great warmth over us confirm the truth of the Book of Mormon, my mother said she felt a pair of hands come over her head as she prayed, and lastly, I cannot remember what my sister said, but we were all thoroughly converted to the gospel. When the Elders came again and with semi-sarcasm asked whether we had prayed expecting no change in our answer, they were surprised when we said yes and told them of our experiences. Lucky for us, they were good missionaries and promptly asked us if would be baptized. To our surprise, we said yes, and our lives changed forever.

This was my introduction to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My parents had had faith before, but for me it was breaking new ground. What had struck me was Joseph Smith story asking for wisdom. The "[n]ever did any passage of scripture come with more power

to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine” (JSH 1:12) was precisely how I felt about the revelation that one could seek for wisdom and get it. It became part of every prayer I believe I have ever said since the missionaries shared the story with us. I loved the idea that religion was open to more, “as all have not faith,” and that “words of wisdom” can come “out of the best books” by “learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). It all feels banal now, but it was a complete revelation to me, and... I put it in practice. I remember reading the Ricoeur’s masters of suspicion when I was around 12 years old because I was starving for knowledge. I can say with some confidence that I did not really understand Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche then, but they did shape my incipient understanding of the world in ways that made me read critically many aspects of life. The masters fit perfectly with my family’s mistrust of political background and my aversion to authority. My wife tells me that some books are inappropriate for certain ages when she found Oliver, my 12-year-old son, reading Paul Bloom’s *Against Empathy* and I think she may be right, but I had no such supervision and the virus of mistrust and critique had borrowed inside of me before I knew better. My uncontrolled search for wisdom, while being a bit out of order in terms of order and depth, has led me to a somewhat insatiable desire to seek more.

Despite my discovery of pre-anti-foundational texts, I saw little contradiction with the church. It had been the literal reason of my search of knowledge, and I could not deny my spirituality and testimony of the Book of Mormon. As I grew up, I finished high school and was looking to continue my education abroad. My sister had already left for BYU and was waiting for me to join her. I applied, and through a miracle, I was accepted, even though my high school grades were not stellar. It was hard to want to be part of system of education that constantly abused those it was supposed to serve. After the revolution, Romania passed through a period of political anarchy where there was little rule of law. This made everyone do things like walk by you in the street, punch you, to then declare: “I am free,” or “This is the meaning of freedom.” This unrestrained “freedom” made our teachers small tyrants who, held us captive to their whims and perversion. Physical and emotional abuse were the absolute norm. I and my student peers, were called stupid, retarded, hit over our palms, had our hair pulled, and embarrassed in front of the class as a show of power. I had no desire to show how much I loved learning under these auspices. This abuse led me to seek escape in youthful traps that I know look upon with the ambivalence of regret and uniqueness of experience. But I persevered, and with the goal of leaving such a place, I changed my learning habits and proved to my teachers I was the opposite of who they thought I was. After the last year of high school in Romania we take the “Examen de Bacalaureat” or our Baccalaureate Exams, tests not unlike the ACT in the United States of America. These exams function as a benchmark to university readiness and are used by university to accept or reject students. I obtained the second highest score from our high school. This came to a shock to my professors who considered me little less than nothing, but to me it was a small validation to my prayers of wisdom, my dedication, and God’s grace. I was led away to a better land where I could finally pursue an education with my mind and my heart.

I made it to America with two suitcases, a cheap one of Asian manufacturing that soon came apart and one of fine leather that my grandfather had taken with him to World War II. It was old, but it was solid and smelled of history. I had \$2,000 dollars kept in a small bag tied around my neck and hidden underneath my shirt. I was like the unaccompanied children of the Second Spanish Republic sent to safety on ships to Great Britain during the Spanish Civil War. I

knew very little of America, but I was unafraid. At BYU, I learned that my love of knowledge was not singular, nor something to hide. I finally started getting good grades and learned to be at ease with who I was. My past experiences made me different and rejected by some, but in general I found acceptance and respect. While at BYU, I was called to continue my mother's translation leadership (she was part of the team to translate the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants and all the other materials that the Church needed in Romanian) and interpret in Romanian for the General Conference of the Church. This was a very special calling for me as I was able to communicate with the members in Romania. My voice was a proxy to prophets and apostles to a faraway land. It was an amazing experience that I continued from 2001 until the US based Romanian translation team was disbanded in 2014 to allow the interpretation work to be done inside Romania by the same people who also translated the talks. In fact, and to my utter disbelief, I had become a small celebrity inside the church in Romania. After I got married and went to Romania with my wife, we had a tender moment when the Elders Quorum president, the old district president that interviewed me before coming to BYU, got emotional reading a conference talk and asked me to continue reading while he wiped his tears. As I started reading the talk, I could see many heads in the room stop looking at the Liahona magazine, and instead look at me. A small murmur started going through the room that was a bit distracting. I stopped to see what the matter was, to discover that the whole class was looking at me rather strangely. Brother Doru Vasile realized what was happening and told me that the members had recognized my voice reading the words of the prophets as the voice on they heard on TV at General Conference. The spirit in the room was overwhelming and I was so gratified I had played a small role in their journeys of faith akin to my mother when she translated the words of the prophets to our people.

I served a mission in Washington DC that was pivotal in my learning Spanish and establishing my commitment to the gospel. It was also a time when I realized that not all immigrants were as lucky and blessed as I had been in spite of my own difficulties. I saw firsthand their troubles, discrimination, and their impossibility of entering the law. I served them as best as I could in hopes that the gospel will afford them the same wondrous blessings I had enjoyed. The mission experience solidified my desire for my scholarship to be socially engaged and not simply theoretical. I wanted to make a difference. Thus, while in my Ph.D. program, I finally was able to shape the path I was to take as a scholar. Because I was a foreigner, a Mormon, and a bit weird, I always felt I needed to prove myself and emphasizing my religion in my studies never appealed to me as I hated being put in the Mormon box as a stereotype to be studied. Nevertheless, my religion, my immigration story, and my mission experience were ever-present as a subtext to my research. When I chose contemporary representation of immigration in Spanish novels, film, music, and political speech as my research focus, it was not simply as a study, but as a way to shape immigration discourse for the better. I wanted to be of help. It is my professional goal today when I write to reinscribe the representation of the "other" as "one of us" and as "a person" that has the same moral value as any other in the vein of Richard Rorty's "sentimental education." As I look back at my publications, my master's thesis, my dissertation, and my current book edition *El diablo de Yudis*, religion and the representation of the "other" has always been a subtext that I argued should not be overlooked and understood as a value-add and not a negative. My tyrannical upbringing led me to seek freedom and equality. My bad early education led me to be a better educator. My religion has led me to a more refined scholarship. My immigration experience led me to my work with local refugees and teach

immigration representation. My journey as a scholar of faith has truly been blessed and I have only the Lord and those in his service to thank. I only hope my future will be as bright as my past.

I am not perfect in any way, and I am not sure why the Lord chose me with his blessings, but I am grateful to him. To end, the lyrics of the song “Because I have been given much” become as a motto to my mission on this singular “mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.” (Carl Sagan) The lyrics read:

*Because I have been given much, I too must give; Because of thy great bounty
Lord, Each day I live; I shall divide my gifts from thee With every brother that I
see Who has the need of help from me. Because I have been sheltered, fed By thy
good care; I cannot see another's lack and I not share; My glowing fire, my loaf
of bread, my roof's safe shelter overhead That he too may be comforted. Because I
have been blessed by thy great love dear Lord; I'll share thy love again According
to thy word; I shall give love to those in need, I'll show that love by word and
deed; Thus shall my thanks be thanks in deed.*

Reiterating, my life is not perfect, nor has it ever been; however, I see the hand of the Lord in it and recognize His blessings. I love that the Lord does not forsake us nor forgets us in all aspects of our lives if we continue to seek him. “I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands” (Isaiah 49:16) is His way of showing His never-ending care for us and I pray I can do the same with those I can influence on my path as a scholar of faith.