

Personal Essay

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“You just need to navigate the paradox, you don’t have to wrestle it to the ground,” an old mentor of mine once said to our group of inquisitive 20-somethings. I was probably among the most cynical of the happy-go-lucky, faith-filled Midwesterners in attendance. And, I thought smugly, I was probably the most intellectually minded young adult there. When this particular Church leader opened up the floor to questions the room was silent. Ten seconds passed, then twenty, then a full minute. My mind was racing through all the questions I had—*How do you really know there is a God—another being who is not merely a projection of what you think you want to hear? Why does a Christ-led Church marginalize groups I know Christ himself would welcome with open arms? Why is a supposedly Christ-led institution stuck in nineteenth-century definitions of gender roles? Why do we say Christ never gives us trials we can’t handle and then watch hundreds commit suicide—isn’t that the definition of something that individual could not handle?*

I could have filled pages with my questions, and yet that night, I didn’t feel like I could articulate a single one. I assumed my peers would judge me for having doubts, and my invisible defensive shield was up already. *This isn’t the place to ask those kinds of questions*, I told myself. After a belabored silence, one person raised their hand and asked a question about the Church’s process regarding changing Covid protocols. *Really?* I thought. *That’s the burning question that keeps you awake at night?* Somewhat miffed, I zoned out. As I gradually became aware of my surroundings again, of the cinder-block industrial classroom, the fluorescent lighting, the plastic collapsible table and metal chairs all denoting a learning space better suited to elementary school children than to young adults, I hear this man say, “You just need to navigate the paradox, you don’t have to wrestle it to the ground.”

I have a reputation for being directionally challenged, which is rather ironic for someone so keen on exploring. Even my happiest memories of exploring new mountains or new universities or new cities are punctuated with moments of sheer panic. My freshman year of college on BYU campus, I walked aggressively through crowds of meandering 18-year-olds around the east side of the library to get from the JSB to the JKB. Only after a full semester did I realize that was *not* the fastest route. My first time traveling abroad alone, I got on three different trains before finally heading in the right direction—north—from London to Stratford. In Bloomington, I frequently wandered around the pandemic-stricken grocery store aisles for at least 45 minutes in search of a singular item. Eventually, I gave up and boycotted the store altogether for years following.

You might think I am now going to launch into the well-worn Latter-day Saint metaphor about the Holy Ghost as a guide through our lives, or the Liahona model of finding our way through the uncharted deserts of our faith crises. This is not that essay.

For most of my life, my survival instincts have led me to separate my faith and my more scholarly way of thinking. This was not due to external pressure, per say, but due to an intense internal fear. I was scared of what would happen if I let my inquisitive brain tear at my faith, or my faith whitewash my scholarship. However, as inevitably happens when trying to rigidly compartmentalize, the questions started seeping in, throwing darts at the walls I had built around my relationship to God and my commitment to my faith.

I have frequently narrativized the past few dart-throwing years to various friends and colleagues as the consequence of spending so much time believing I could research until I had an answer. For context, in my academic work, I gravitate toward questions about collective memory in literary and national history. So, my research process has looked something like: read texts, formulate a research question, dig in an archive, find evidence, stitch together a claim, then rinse and repeat. This cycle of questioning, discovering, and narrativizing ultimately leads to interpretive answers about how and to what end literary figures and places were circulated in popular culture.

Recently, however, I came to an utter impasse, causing me to rethink the research pattern I had fallen into. I was searching through the archives at my university, when I came across the papers of Mary Berenson. I knew what inspiration felt like. I had worked through this archival method enough times to intimately know the cerebral and somatic sensation of enlightenment—of knowing when something was a good idea. I would be physically energized, I would see the connect-the-dots mapped out in my mind's eye, I would feel happy, like I wanted to shout the story I had found from the rooftops. *This*, I thought, *this is my next project*. The diaries, ephemeral clippings, and correspondence from Berenson's life revealed a woman who was clearly a force to be reckoned with. Not much had been written on her life, and the little that had spoke broadly of her genius in codifying art history as a discipline at the beginning of the twentieth century. I read every document in folder after folder after folder; I thought I knew her so well, I could recite her at will. She grew up a Quaker, married a British politician, then she left him and their two children to begin an affair with the renowned art critic Bernard Berenson in Italy. She became a renowned transatlantic lecturer. At every turn, this woman's life became clearer and clearer to me. I could visualize her at the center of her revolving social circles as evidenced by every wedding invitation and every calling card she saved. However, I had no idea what to do with all of this information. A biography was not an argument.

Months passed. Deadlines were approaching, and I still didn't feel the spark I needed to in order to run with an argument. Berenson's life itself was both quirky and revolutionary, but all that was left of her life in this particular collection were rather ordinary fragments—childhood doodles, letters to family members, grocery lists, photos, and lecture handbills. I thought I had learned everything I could about Berenson, and I was getting bored. *What could this all mean?* I constantly asked myself, flipping through more and more items from her family's collection. *How could this woman be larger than life to me, and yet at the same time be utterly mundane?*

I am a wrestler not a navigator. When I come across a question I cannot seem to answer, I grapple with it for months or even years, reading everything I can and talking to everyone I can. To this point in my life, I operated under the assumption that increasing the information I had would lead to the spark of inspiration I needed—the light that would melt the obstacle down to a

puddle and map the path forward. I still believe in the sparks, but I have come to realize I erroneously believed in my own ability to find them by digging. Understanding the power of navigation instead of solution calls for shifting the paradigms around inspiration and answers. Whereas wrestling is confined to a nine-meter circle and upholds a power dynamic of me versus the other, and victor versus loser, the act of navigating is freeing. Navigating finds a way to coexist with rather than defeat the other by moving through, around, above, across—insert your preposition of choice here. Navigating always moves towards a destination.

Navigation also, importantly, becomes less and less overwhelming and demanding the more you do it. Navigating makes the insurmountable obstacles to my searching ordinary to me. As Mary Berenson's collection became more familiar, I saw how hungry her soul was. She relentlessly pursued both private and professional artistic study in order to fill a spiritual void—one that had been carved out by exposure to an overwhelming plethora of nineteenth-century American religious movements at a young age. Upon seeing the Italian Renaissance painters for the first time during her college years at the Harvard Annex, she burst into tears, finally feeling like she had arrived at the center of all that mattered in the world. Rereading ordinary fragments of Berenson's life in the context of her own searching offered a new way around the analytical obstacle I was facing. I didn't need to spend more hours searching through everything that had been written on her life. I was wasting precious time and mental energy spinning my wheels, becoming more and more anxious as I was searching for a spark. Berenson's searching, too—at some points in her life—had led to an intense depression. Ultimately, we both had to move to new places and see our respective voids from new vantage points.

As the dark swirls of questions, doubt, and second-guessing become ordinary, I am able to find a path around them, even if there was never any spark of light bursting through to illuminate a path forward. Navigating my way around new cities takes hours on a low-power-mode phone battery. But as I compare my first memories of a new place to more recent encounters, I realized that first time, I had everything backwards. I had no conception of where each part of town was in relation to the other. In terms of my faith, I did not at first realize how the interconnected web of questions about culture and revelation was nowhere near my conviction that God loves me. I now know there is a pathway directly connecting the JSB to the JKB. There is one simple train route to get from London to Stratford. The peanut butter in Walmart is two aisles behind the bread. Once these paths have become familiar, I will never slip back into unfamiliarity—unless that is, I never revisit them. So, I choose to stay with my familiar enemies, no longer taken aback by my own questions about God and the church I belong to. I nod hello to the looming towers of doubt as I drive by, this time knowing the best way to navigate around them. I may not charter new paths through the wilderness, but I will know the old, complex, and messy paths so well that I will no longer be tempted to give up. And maybe one day, the spark will burst through, and I will see my questions in a whole new light. As T. S. Eliot said:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

— T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" (1942)