

“Throwing Caution”: Some Beginnings of My Journey as a Scholar and a Believer

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I. A Fool’s Hope

“You think you can drive a car and change the world? It doesn’t work like that.”
“Maybe not, but it’s all I know how to do and I gotta do something.” –Pops and Speed Racer, *Speed Racer* (2008)

April 25th, 2008. I was not quite 18, nearing the end of my penultimate year of high school. It was approaching midnight as a few of my friends and I pulled into the near empty Edwards’ parking lot. The five of us walked in, noticing the lack of line that often accompanies these midnight premieres. We buzzed with excitement, somehow increased by the utter emptiness of the theater, the conviction that we were about to witness something truly special, unlike anything to be grace the silver screen before (or since) animated us. Entranced, just as they hoped, by the smell of popcorn, we forked over a small fortune to get enough popcorn and soda to satisfy an entire theater or 5 teenage boys. We had our pick of seats—the theater is utterly deserted, we are the only brave few with a fool’s hope for the Wachowskis’ *Speed Racer*.

The lights dim, trailers roll, and then Michael Giacchino’s riff on the anime theme kicks in with the Wachowskis live-action cartoon aesthetic and I am 100% all in on the campy, bonkers, wild, wonderful ride the film took me on for the next 2 hours and 15 minutes, into the wee hours of the morning. We laughed, we yelled, we hooped, we hollered. I will never forget the particular delight of noticing the zebras running along the design of the track in the final race. I was in love.

The epigraph that opens my paper occurs at the film’s dramatic height—the moment where our titular hero, Speed, must decide whether he can defeat Royalton Industries and restore racing to the purity he believes it once had. I’ve lost count of the times that I have reflected on this moment and the times that I have quoted it to others as an explanation of my ethics. I’ve started here because I think in many ways it is a beginning of faith shaping my scholarly journey—the conviction, shared with Speed, that I need to do something to change the world, even if it seems hopeless and foolish, even if there’s no logical connection between what it is I know how to do (which is, to be clear, read and write) and the change that I long for. Speed’s act here reminds me of Esther, choosing almost certain death in approaching Xerxes unsummoned on the slim chance that doing so will save her people.

Esther and Speed succeeded. Only time will tell if my fool’s hope will also lead to victory.

II. A Doubting Faith

“That, detective, is the right question.” –Dr. Lanning’s Hologram, *I, Robot* (2004)

I sat at my brother's, well now my, laptop. I pulled my binder onto the table, opening to my list of questions of my soul, now numbering close to 500, covering all sorts of doctrinal, cultural, procedural, theological, and other religious/spiritual topics. I flipped through the list, filled with anticipation, looking for the right one to start with. I settled on something, I can't quite recall what, opened the laptop, and began to search. Now, I could finally get some answers to these questions that had been burning in my soul.

My eyes were opened. I stumbled upon a wild, wondrous world of other people who had the same questions and interests as I did! After the past two years of somewhat mixed responses to my questions, I felt a newfound sense of belonging. The possibilities seemed endless!

As I read and listened and gobbled up everything that I could find, I began to realize that the answers I sought were unsatisfying. That no matter what answer was provided, it raised more questions. I struggled with this, as I believed in truth and knowledge, believed that if I looked and searched long and hard enough with the right blend of study and faith, I would find The Answer.

While I was becoming disillusioned with the prospect of answers, I was taking English lit classes, including some theory and writing courses. Here, I learned the value in asking better and better questions. And that sometimes the metric of a good question is what further questions it gets you to ask. I loved this approach to writing, particularly thinking about each paper as a perpetually unfinished and ongoing project, always gesturing back to the work of others before you and forward to the questions that need to be addressed in the future.

I grew to be satisfied with having questions, with the thinking through and exploration sparked by questions. Initially this satisfaction was limited to my literary analyses and other academic endeavors. However, I began to slowly bridge the gap between that and my faith, shedding the hunger for certainty that I had felt and felt pressure to adopt, and embracing a love of uncertainty, reveling in my questions for their own sake.

This new approach to questions and certainty did not always help me feel comfortable among my coreligionists. But I felt what I believe to be the influence of the Holy Spirit, guiding me better and better questions, through sometimes winding, circuitous paths, and not without descending down a rabbit hole or two (or three or four or five...).

As my academic questions began to shift, I soon realized that it wasn't only my church community that could be somewhat hostile to questions and uncertainty.

III. A Sea of Speculation with No Horizon

"I'm throwing caution

What's it gonna be?

Tonight, the winds of change are blowing wild and free

If I don't get out

Out of this town

I just might be the one who finally burns it down" –The Killers, "Caution"

"Maybe Conor will eventually get serious and leave behind the poorly grounded world of the postsecular."

“I gotta be honest with you, Conor, I just think that belief is truly toxic and dangerous. The world would be better off without it.”

“You’ll notice, Conor, that we never talk about the postsecular, or religion or secularism. My sympathies are with Paine; it’s all irrational, and we should have embraced reason and left religion behind, long ago.”

“I’d stay away from Mormon Studies, if I were you. I’ve seen too many grad students go down that path and end up burnt out and without any job prospects.”

As this chorus of voices swirls around my head, I think about a few words from the “Ghetto Gospel” of one of our urban poet-prophets, “Never forget, God isn’t finished with me yet.” I don’t know where my journey of faith will take my scholarship, nor do I know where my journey as a scholar will take my faith. But I am filled with a fire, a hunger for more. I hope to weave my scholarship and faith together in increasingly wonderful and always peculiar ways.

I’m uncertain where this journey leads, and where I once viewed the atrocity of the job market with fear and trepidation, I now see it as an opportunity—why live my life according to the impossible dictates of Gregory Semenza and the like, when I could instead follow my intuition and live the eclectic scholarly life my soul calls me too. I’ll do my dissertation on Gothic fiction in the 19th century, I’ll publish book reviews (and perhaps, hopefully, some fiction) in *Dialogue*, I’ll work with UIowa’s writing fellows, I’ll write strange Mormon literary criticism of N.K. Jemisin’s *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, and I’ll work at the intersections of Mormonism and the movies.

I take these words of W.W. Phelps from the Restoration’s most wonderful and deeply Mormon hymn as awe-inspiring and as a challenge:

“Do you think that you could ever,
Through all eternity,
Find out the generation
Where Gods began to be?”

I don’t know what I will find through all eternity, but I hope to be ready to embrace all there is that is true, that is beautiful, and that is good. And maybe, just maybe, I’ll be able to pull back those outside curtains...

Works Cited

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