

An Immigrant's Journey Toward God

NIWAKO YAMAWAKI

Good morning, my brothers and sisters. It is my great honor and pleasure to speak at this BYU devotional today. What brought me to this incredibly inspiring and unique place? No one, including myself, could have ever imagined that I would be standing before you to talk about my journey as a convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and as an immigrant to the United States.

An Introduction to a Loving God

Once I was just a girl from a tiny Japanese fishing village called Usa (pronounced “oo-sah”). I was likely to live out my life simply and traditionally in Japan. However, I am a very different person today because of very devout and dedicated missionaries. When I was fourteen, a classmate of mine invited me to attend a free English conversation class provided by American missionaries. They were unusually kind and considerate young men. They invited me to learn of their main reason for coming to Japan—to teach that God exists and loves us all.

However, for a fourteen-year-old girl raised in a predominantly non-Christian country, it was

difficult for me to truly feel and grasp what God’s love was until I met one particular missionary, Elder Arnett. His powerful example impressed my teenage heart, soul, and mind, clearly personifying to me the loving nature of the God and the sacrificial devotion of the Jesus that he so earnestly taught me about.

Unlike today, with missionaries paying a flat fee for their expenses, missionaries at that time had to fund their service based on the local living expenses of their missions. Japanese missions were then among the most expensive in the world. Elder Arnett’s family had limited means, so he had to live very frugally. When his father passed away during his mission, Elder Arnett chose to stay in Japan to continue serving without interruption the people he had come to love. Elder Arnett did not say anything about his financial situation to me, but his companion told me that he had to limit his food expenses. For example, he divided his pasta into a daily portion using a rubber band.

Elder Arnett didn’t just talk about God’s love; he lived it. Moreover, not only did he teach me that there was a God but also that that God loved

Niwako Yamawaki, a BYU professor of psychology, delivered this devotional address on May 4, 2021.

me. This became the most important and fundamental core of my testimony, and this core has helped me whenever I have experienced pain and suffering in my life.

A Call to Practice Mercy and Withhold Judgment

After I had been baptized, I began accepting many calls to serve. My favorite calling was branch missionary. One special investigator, Brother Takezaki, opened my vision of God in an exceptionally transformative way. He was seeking God keenly and was overjoyed to learn of the saving ordinances of the temple for our beloved deceased. He became excited about the prospect of receiving baptism himself and then having his deceased mother receive baptism someday in the Tokyo temple. One well-intentioned but misguided sister in our branch discouraged his excitement for his mother to receive baptism because his mother had committed suicide. The light in his soul seemed to expire, and he stopped pursuing baptism for himself.

I was heartbroken for Brother Takezaki and for the eternal status of his beloved mother, and my own soul became troubled. I prayed for him and for his mother and searched for answers for my troubled soul every day for two years. My prayerful search eventually led me to a special feature article on this precise topic, entitled “Suicide: Some Things We Know, and Some We Do Not.” In this magazine article, Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles spoke in detail about suicide. He quoted another apostle, the late Elder Bruce R. McConkie, on the topic:

*Suicide consists in the voluntary and intentional taking of one’s own life, particularly where the person involved is accountable and has a sound mind. . . . Persons subject to great stresses may lose control of themselves and become mentally clouded to the point that they are no longer accountable for their acts. Such are not to be condemned for taking their own lives. It should also be remembered that judgment is the Lord’s; he knows the thoughts, intents, and abilities of men; and he in his infinite wisdom will make all things right in due course. [MD, s.v. “suicide,” 771; quoted in Ballard, “Suicide,” *Ensign*, October 1987]*

As Elder Ballard said in the title of his article, some things we know, and some we do not. Therefore, I have learned that practicing mercy, while withholding judgment and criticism of others, is the best way for me to serve others and be close to God. This experience was my first personal encounter with mental illness.

A Savior for Victims and Perpetrators

When I pursued the call of the Spirit to come to America to seek something more, something with which I could serve others more fully, I faced life here coming from a completely different perspective. In Japan, I had had a comfortable life. Although I had come from a small fishing village, my father had succeeded as the captain of a large fishing vessel and had traveled the world. I had wanted for nothing, neither materially nor emotionally, and was largely respected and supported by my family and community. Suddenly, however, I was nothing special. In the United States, more precisely, I was less than special. I was just an Asian woman simply pursuing her education. In college, I was hurtfully called a “token” Asian female. I felt as if I had to work twice as hard to prove myself, earning nothing less than As in every single course I took.

Though I was driven to prove myself, I felt like I could never fully measure up. No matter how much I worked, I felt like just a token minority and sometimes even a completely invisible person. I lost my confidence and self-worth and felt as if even God might not care about me since other people thought that I was nothing. But I had to push forward and live my life. Eventually I graduated from a doctoral program in counseling psychology and became a licensed psychologist in Utah.

As I said before, the fundamental and most crucial core of the testimony that I received as a convert was that God exists and loves us all. I also stated that it is better for me to practice mercy, withholding judgment and criticism of others, as the best way for me to be close to God. This testimony and conviction of mine has been tested often since I came to the United States. As a graduate student, I met countless people from diverse and

varied backgrounds. While offering counseling to inmates at a jail in Salt Lake County, I personally learned that some inmate patients had been abandoned and abused physically, emotionally, and/or sexually. Some of their life stories were excruciatingly brutal and harsh for me to hear. I also met a client who had been abused by her own father. She was completely broken and wanted to terminate her existence. She told me how agonizing it was for her when she had to sing the Primary hymn “Families Can Be Together Forever.”

I felt the pain and suffering of all of these abused children of God, and it made my head spin. With some cases, I got nauseated from hearing how evil perpetrators of abuse can be. How could I practice mercy without throwing judgment and criticism on the perpetrators? Yes, it was easy for me to practice mercy and be empathetic toward victims. However, it was nearly impossible for me to believe that our Father in Heaven even loves, unconditionally, those perpetrators. Did Jesus come for perpetrators of abuse, too? Even though I still cannot fully understand it, the answer is, “Yes, He did!” He came for all of us, no exceptions. In the end, the Lord will make things right for both victims and perpetrators. The Lord Himself said:

But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you,

Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. . . .

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. . . .

But love ye your enemies, and do good. . . .

Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven. [Luke 6:27–28, 31, 35–37]

A Savior with Scars

While serving at YWCA Utah’s Women in Jeopardy Crisis Shelter in Salt Lake City, I met many victims of domestic violence, but one woman’s abuse experience in particular still haunts me. Like me, she was a Japanese immigrant to

the United States. Like me, she had married a returned missionary from Japan. But unlike the case with me, her troubled husband had physically abused her. She was told to put ketchup and mustard on her face and apologize to her husband without knowing what she had to apologize for. Then he would hit her repeatedly. The memory of hearing about her harrowing experience, along with my interactions with many more victims of violence against women with whom I was consequently privileged to work, has fueled my passion to serve this community, particularly those who are immigrants to our country. Thus began my mission to research why domestic violence happens, how we can stop it, and what the best ways are to assist its victims.

I still see pain and struggle in the lives of people all around me today, and it troubles me. In particular, I care deeply about the suffering of my own students, especially that of my research assistants, because I work with them so closely. When hearing many stories of the suffering of my students, I have cried and felt very depressed. One was called the N-word and another who had come out as gay was reported to the Honor Code Office because he had simply been chatting with his male friends. I also had a student who was an undocumented immigrant. She was often mistreated and discriminated against. I have felt their pain, and I have suffered with them.

During painful times, somehow, I think about Jesus. The scars in His hands are the proof of His suffering and pain. Even though He was resurrected and has a perfect body, He decided to keep His scars. I think this is because He wanted to show that He is the Savior—our Savior. But I believe that He decided to keep His scars because He wants us to know that He also suffered and experienced so much pain. I feel as if He tells me, “I love each one of you so much that I was willing to become one of you, to show each of you that I was willing to take on your sufferings so that I could feel fully your pain and identify with each of you.”

I am reminded of the beautiful Book of Mormon scriptural description of our Lord’s identification with our mortal suffering:

[The Son of God] *shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.*

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. [Alma 7:11–12]

These verses help me feel extremely close to Him. God exists and loves us all, no exceptions.

A Continued Journey

BYU is a very special university. It offers me and, hopefully, many of you, the perfect place to explore the union of the Spirit with science. Some of my stories about which I have talked today are very depressing and may be discouraging. However, I want you to know that I am very hopeful. I have met many students in the BYU Department of Psychology who are young, faithful, and smart and who also have great intention and motivation to help people who are suffering and in pain. They are eager to learn how to effectively help others by studying human behavior and by preparing themselves to go into the world to serve others. I see burning testimonies in their

eyes. My role as a faculty member here is to teach and share scientific knowledge and professional skills and to raise awareness of social problems about which our Lord is concerned.

My journey to discover God goes on. I know that I will continue to experience pain and suffering, as will we all. At times, when I am suffering during my journey, I may ask, “Why me?” However, I am grateful for my pain. If I had not immigrated to or been a minority in the United States, I likely would have had a comfortable life without much pain in Japan. But my pain as an immigrant has made me who I am today. I know for sure that I can keep pushing forward on my journey because I know that God lives and that God loves me. The next step and challenge for me is to answer this question: “Do I love God enough in return?”

I am immensely blessed to have come to know the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. I am blessed to be a part of this beloved community of God seekers and this esteemed institution of higher learning, Brigham Young University. Indeed, we “enter to learn,” but may we more fully embrace our calling to then “go forth to serve.” As the Lord Himself told us, it is in the service of others and in taking up our own crosses of suffering that we will find our own selves (see Matthew 16:24–25).

Thank you so much for this wonderful opportunity. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.