

# *How I Became a Seeker*

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When I was ten years old, my best friend was a Methodist. He and I determined that we would know which of our churches was true based on whether Southern Methodist University or BYU won the Holiday Bowl game to be played on December 19, 1980.

It did not look good for the Restoration when BYU trailed by twenty points with four minutes left. Then the Cougars recovered an onside kick and scored. Then they blocked a punt and scored. Then, with no time left on the clock, quarterback Jim McMahon threw a Hail Mary pass that Clay Brown caught amid a thicket of defenders in the end zone.<sup>1</sup>

It was a miracle. Now I knew which church was true. It was that simple.

In football, as you may know, a Hail Mary is a hope-filled prayer that the trailing team offers in the form of a desperate pass into the end zone with no time remaining. I did not know while watching the game that a Hail Mary is also a Catholic prayer. That fact interrupted

my ignorance sometime after the game when I learned about Clay Brown's postgame comment: "It was a Hail Mary," he said. "That's all right, Jim and I are both Catholics."<sup>2</sup>

Wait, what? Two Catholics connected to bring to pass the miracle? My childish conclusion was less simple than I had thought.

However, everything became simple and certain again early the following spring, when the BYU men's basketball team trailed Notre Dame 49–50, facing elimination in the NCAA tournament with just a few seconds left. That is when Danny Ainge took the inbounds pass, dribbled the length of the floor, went between, around, and finally over future NBA players, and scored the winning basket with two seconds left.<sup>3</sup>

That is a true story. Well, it is actually more complex than that. It is a historical narrative.

## **Creating a Narrative**

There is nothing false in the story, but it is overstated and oversimplified. The sports facts

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are objectively true, by which I mean that they are verifiable—regardless of one’s perspective or whether you cheer for the Cougars, the Mustangs, or the Fighting Irish.

So some ingredients of a historical narrative are selected objective facts. And then some more ingredients in my narrative are subjective facts—the ones that you can’t verify, such as the conversation with my Methodist friend. I could take you right to the spot where it occurred, but did it happen just the way I remember? I don’t know, and neither do you.

Another ingredient in my story is interpretation. By *interpretation*, I mean the way that I endowed facts with meaning beyond what you or I can prove or disprove. I took all those components and arranged them to serve my present purpose of priming you to think like a seeker.

### Seeking the Right Narrative

Narratives abound in the information age. We are surrounded by, infused with, and, in one sense, even composed of stories like mine. Some narratives are simple. Some are sacred, even salvific. Some are sinister. Some are seductive. We must choose which narratives to make ours. How can we know what is true and trustworthy? The best way I know is to be a seeker precisely as the Lord prescribed in Doctrine and Covenants 88:118:

*And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.*

One way to read the first line of that verse is, “Since none of us have too much faith, we should be seekers.” The *why* of seeking is to grow our faith. The *what* of seeking is wisdom and learning. The *how* is diligently, “by study and also by faith.” And the *where* of seeking is “out of the best books.”

Becoming a seeker is hard intellectual and spiritual work. It is a long, slow, deliberate process. A seeker might google something as part of the process, but *googling* and *seeking* are not synonyms. And “just” praying about something is not seeking either. Oliver Cowdery tried that. The Lord told

him, “I will tell you in your mind *and* in your heart, by the Holy Ghost” (D&C 8:2; emphasis added).

When Oliver didn’t hear anything in either place, the Lord explained why. “You took no thought save it was to ask me,” the Lord said. And then He taught, “You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me” (D&C 9:7, 8).

Oliver assumed that all he had to do was ask God. I assumed that I could know the truth by the outcome of a football game. But seekers learn to identify and interrogate their assumptions. What are you assuming about the restored gospel? What do you know—really know? How do you know it? These are epistemological questions.

Epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge. It asks questions such as “What is knowledge?” and “How can we know?” I often ask my students what they know and how they know it because it helps them be metacognitive—meaning that they become aware of their own thought processes. When I asked you what you know and how you know it, I invited you to be metacognitive about your epistemology, because you will rely on that skill as a seeker.

So how does one become a seeker? I will get to that question a little later by telling another story. First, I will explain some concepts that inform what I am saying.

### Moving to Simplicity

In their important little book *Faith Is Not Blind*, Bruce C. and Marie K. Hafen described how faith can develop according to our heavenly parents’ plan of happiness.<sup>4</sup> We begin in simplicity, which includes faith in simple truths such as “I am a child of God, And He has sent me here.”<sup>5</sup> But simplicity also includes faith in assumed ideals such as “[God] has given me an earthly home With parents kind and dear.”<sup>6</sup> Simplicity is a perfectly fine place to begin exercising faith. We are just not supposed to stay there.

The plan is for us to “grow up” (D&C 109:15). We are meant to develop deep, mature, abiding faith in “things as they really are, and of things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13). We are supposed to learn that “truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24).

As we grow up, we learn that things are more complex than we may have been taught and more complex than we may have assumed. This is true about every subject—math and language, art and science. It is true about the gospel of Jesus Christ as well. The Restoration isn't simple, and when all goes according to plan, we confront its complexity as part of growing up. You are not odd or out of place if you are encountering complexity as you progress in the plan of happiness. Complexity introduces us to more facts that compel us to revisit our simple conclusions. Complexity shows us that the real and the ideal are often not the same. Some of you know very well, for example, the cold, hard fact that not all parents are kind and dear. When we wrestle with facts like that, it is common to question whether we are children of a God who has sent us here.

When we confront complexity, it is common to feel dissonance or tension between the ideals we thought we knew and the reality we now see. We become aware that there is more than one narrative and more than one point of view. Then we think about what we know and how we know it. We consider and experiment with options and alternatives. We choose what we will believe, how we will interpret the facts, and what narrative we will use to make sense of the facts. We choose whether our faith will continue to be childish, grow up with us, or die.

Seekers make that choice metacognitively by diligently learning from the best sources. They read the best sources, not other people's opinions about the best sources. They come to terms with what they know and how they know it. They may rely on others—parents or professors—in the beginning, but, ultimately, seekers don't let anyone else choose for them what they know and how they know it.

### Seeking from the Best Books

By sources, I mean sources of knowledge, such as Joseph Smith's manuscript history (excerpted in the Pearl of Great Price). Sources such as this one are precious. Without them we could not know the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Seekers learn to be source critics. That doesn't mean insulting a source's wardrobe choices. Source criticism is

careful thinking about sources of knowledge. It is hard work, but you are all capable of it. There are many professors on campus across the disciplines who want to help you think critically about sources of knowledge by study and by faith.

Both study and faith are vital. Seekers recognize that rationality and spiritual experience can both be reliable paths to knowledge *and* that they can both be fickle and subjective. So seekers combine both rationality and spiritual experience to complement and correct each other, to check and balance. Seekers don't privilege the head over the heart, or vice versa. They heed the Lord's command to study while they exercise faith. They trust that the Lord will reveal truth to their mind and to their heart, as He has promised. All that hard work leads seekers through complexity to what the Hafens called "simplicity on the other side of complexity."<sup>7</sup> They borrowed the terms *simplicity* and *complexity* from a paraphrasing of a quote by Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.: "The only simplicity for which I would give a straw is that which is on the other side of the complex—not that which never has divined it."<sup>8</sup>

The simplicity after complexity comes from knowing the facts and the alternative ways of interpreting them. It comes from intentionally choosing narratives that interpret the facts with faith, hope, and charity instead of interpretations that are unbelieving, cynical, or unkind. Simplicity is naïve faith. Other-side simplicity is informed faith. It is more mature than complexity. Other-side simplicity knows everything complexity knows and more. For our faith to grow and develop according to God's plan, we must come to terms with complexity but not get stuck there. The plan is for us to seek our way from simplicity through complexity, by study and by faith, until we arrive at the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

### Overcoming Bias

Someone might object that seeking, as I'm advocating it, just leads to confirmation bias. If you are seeking to know the truth of the restored gospel, they might say, you will find or focus on what you want. I grant that people have bias—all people: believers and unbelievers, pro and con, those

who are for the restored gospel and those who are against it. Becoming a seeker doesn't eliminate my biases. Seeking simply helps me be more metacognitive about my biases. Unbelief doesn't end bias either. Being biased is a human condition. Bias thrives when we ignore evidence. What I am advocating is that we be aware of our biases and educate them. Let's learn all the facts and evaluate various interpretations. Then we will have more of what Doctrine and Covenants 88 calls "wisdom" with which to intentionally choose the narratives that are the most true and trustworthy.

Bias is real, but so is the simplicity on the other side of complexity. We can seek our way to it with both disciplined brainwork and relentless spiritual work. That is what I know. And this is how I know it.

### **Putting in the Personal Work**

On my mission, I decided to become the world's greatest scripture expert. I assumed that would be sort of hard but not too hard. When I returned to BYU after my mission, I enrolled in courses on biblical Hebrew and on the Old Testament. I discovered that the Old Testament is really, really complex. I had *assumed* that Moses wrote the so-called books of Moses, or the Pentateuch. Then I actually read them and realized that if he did, he did it in a weird way, which raised some questions.

One question was epistemological: How did Moses know what happened "in the beginning" with Adam and Eve and Noah and Abraham? The Bible doesn't answer that question. The book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price answers it. It says that God revealed the beginning to Moses. The book of Moses tells how Moses knew. It doesn't tell who the author is or how they know what Moses knew. Neither the Bible nor the book of Moses answer the authorship question. Both the Pentateuch in the Old Testament and the book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price are written from an omniscient third-person perspective that doesn't disclose whose it is or how they know what they know.

The Pentateuch includes the story of Moses's death and burial in Deuteronomy 34, but Alma 45:19 says, "The Lord took Moses unto

himself." And Mormon cites "the scriptures" as his source of that knowledge, so Mormon's scriptures tell a different story than our Bible does. That should be enough Old Testament talk to illustrate my trip from simplicity to complexity. The more I studied the Old Testament, the less I knew—or, rather, the more metacognitive I became about how little I knew and about how complicated knowing actually was.

About that time I took Religion 341, the elective Church history class titled Joseph Smith and the Restoration. I decided that I had to know everything my professor knew and how she knew it. I caught up to her in the hallway of the Eyring Science Center after class one day and asked how I could do what she did. She smiled and said, "Get a PhD."

So I did. Along the way I learned that the Restoration is richly documented. There are lots of best books—meaning primary sources of knowledge. You can find many of them at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org). They include Joseph Smith's autobiographies, journals, letters, translation manuscripts, and revelation manuscripts. It was thrilling to me to realize that I could study the handwritten source material of a real live revelator. I learned how to read the sources. Literally, I learned to read the handwriting, but I also learned to be source critical so I could assess what the sources could tell me and what they couldn't. I have been reading those best books ever since.

### **Examining Assumptions**

Along the way to earning my PhD, I picked up a useful seeking tool in a philosophy class: the discipline of slowing down enough to pick a proposition apart, determine what it means, and then decide whether it can be justified. Consider, for example, the proposition that I just made: Joseph Smith was a revelator. What does it mean? Can it be justified? If, in the time since you heard me finish the questions, you have already concluded that you know what it means and that it is justified, then you have not yet grasped what I mean when I say to be a seeker. If you are slowing down and wondering what it means that Joseph Smith was a revelator and wanting to painstakingly internalize all the available evidence that could either justify

or discredit that proposition, and if you are determined to carry out that process by study and by faith for as long as it takes, then you are grasping what it means to be a seeker.

There is a lot at stake in deciding how you will define *revelator*. How would you arrive at that definition? Would you default to a definition based on one or more unsound assumptions? Would you decide, for instance, that a revelator is a perfect person, or nearly so? Would you decide that a revelator is someone who produces revelations in perfect English? Would you decide that there are no such things as revelators these days? Would you base your definition on objective facts? If so, which ones? So very much depends on the definition you choose.

So I beg you to base your definition on evidence—lots of it—good, solid, source-based evidence, including all of the knowable facts. That’s what seekers do. But some people unthinkingly base their definitions on hypotheticals, on *ifs* that are nothing but assumptions. I call that hypothetical history. But it isn’t history at all. It’s only hypothetical. It isn’t scientific. It’s not based on evidence or on any kind of sound thinking. Let me give you three examples:

- If the First Vision is true, there would be a single account of it.
- If Joseph Smith experienced the First Vision, he would have written it down at the time.
- If Joseph’s revelations were true, there would never be any changes made to them.

Those might seem like unassailable truths, but they are not. They are just unexamined assumptions posing as foregone conclusions. Seekers are not content with that kind of thinking. They are not content to let unexamined assumptions pose as truth.

### Learning from William McLellin

As a BYU student, I had an experience that catalyzed my life as a seeker. I got to work with esteemed professors, one a Methodist named Jan Shipps, the other a Latter-day Saint named John (Jack) Welch. They were copublishing the journals that William E. McLellin, an early convert to the

restored gospel, wrote from 1831 to 1836. I was assigned to help Professor Shipps compare the original journals to typed copies to ensure accuracy. I read William’s journal entries closely as I learned the historical method and document editing. Those academic disciplines were entwined with evidence that Joseph Smith was a revelator.

In the summer of 1831, William gained an enduring testimony of the Book of Mormon by what he called “examinations searches and researches” and “earnest prayr to God to direct me into truth.”<sup>9</sup> He wrote later about how he prayed for a revelation from the Lord through Joseph:

*I went before the Lord in secret, and on my knees asked him to reveal the answer to five questions through his Prophet, and that too without his having any knowledge of my having made such request. I now testify in the fear of God, that every question which I had thus lodged in the ears of the Lord . . . were answered to my full and entire satisfaction. I desired it for a testimony of Joseph’s inspiration. And I to this day consider it to me an evidence which I cannot refute.*<sup>10</sup>

William was the scribe for that revelation, now found in Doctrine and Covenants 66. He copied it carefully into his journal after these words: “The Lord condescended to hear my prayr and give me a revelation of his will, through his prophet or seer (Joseph)—And these are the words which I wrote from his mouth.”<sup>11</sup> William bore a kind of testimony at the end of the revelation when he heavily underlined the words *Joseph Smith, Revelator*.<sup>12</sup> In a letter to his relatives, William testified that Joseph Smith was “a Prophet, a Seer and Revelater to the church of christ.”<sup>13</sup>

Working with sources of knowledge like Joseph’s revelation manuscripts and William McLellin’s journals and letters showed me that brainwork could strengthen my faith. It also exposed some of my assumptions. It taught me to think more carefully and critically. My definition of a revelator became more complex and more justifiable. Working with sources of knowledge helped me to expect and to cope with ambiguity and paradox in people, including prophets like Joseph Smith and apostles like William McLellin.



## Conclusion

That is one chapter in a long story of how I became a seeker and how studying the best books with rigorous faith led to my knowledge that Joseph Smith is a revelator. It is a true story. Professor Richard L. Bushman, Joseph Smith's best-informed biographer, said, "The closer you get to Joseph Smith in the sources, the stronger he will appear, rather than the reverse, as is so often assumed by critics."<sup>14</sup>

He is right about that. I know. When I was in your shoes, I started to study those sources diligently. That work has intensified and continued ever since. That's how I know that Joseph Smith was a great revelator. I'm not asking you to accept what I say on the authority of my seeking. I'm inviting you to do your own. I have justified confidence in your abilities to seek diligently by studying the best books while exercising faith, and I have good reason to believe that the Lord will tell you in your mind and in your heart by the Holy Ghost. And I deeply desire to see each of you on the other side. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. See "Greatest Bowl Comeback Ever? 1980 Holiday Bowl: BYU vs. SMU," CBS, 20 October 2006, YouTube video, [youtube.com/watch?v=b55Tn\\_YbLK8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b55Tn_YbLK8).

2. Clay Brown, quoted in Jeffrey Parenti, "1988 Holiday Bowl: The First 10," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 December 1988.

3. See Jeff Call, "BYU Heading into Its 30th NCAA Tournament; Here's a Look at Cougars' Colorful History in Big Dance," *Deseret News*, 19 March 2021, [deseret.com/sports/2021/3/19/22334749/byu-basketball-ncaa-tournament-heres-a-look-at-cougars-colorful-history-in-big-dance-jimmer](https://www.deseret.com/sports/2021/3/19/22334749/byu-basketball-ncaa-tournament-heres-a-look-at-cougars-colorful-history-in-big-dance-jimmer); see also "Danny Ainge Buzzer Beater Sends BYU to 1981 Elite Eight," March Madness, YouTube video, 8 April 2020, [youtube.com/watch?v=j7B7HA-1hu4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7B7HA-1hu4).

4. See Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, *Faith Is Not Blind* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018).

5. "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 301.

6. "I Am a Child of God."

7. Hafen and Hafen, *Faith Is Not Blind*, 11.

8. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., letter to Lady Pollock, 24 October 1902, in *Holmes-Pollock Letters: The Correspondence of Mr. Justice Holmes and Sir Frederick Pollock, 1874–1932*, ed. Mark DeWolfe Howe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1942), 109; paraphrased in Hafen and Hafen, *Faith Is Not Blind*, 11: "I would not give a fig for the simplicity [on] this side of complexity. But I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." See also Richard John Neuhaus summarizing Whitehead's writings in *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 89: "As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead observed, the only simplicity to be trusted is the simplicity that is on the far side of complexity."

9. William E. McLellin, 20 August 1831, William E. McLellin Journal, July 18, 1831–November 20, 1831, 6, William E. McLellin papers, 1831–1878, Church History Catalog, Church of Jesus Christ, [catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/98619acf-7861-4f74-bf93-019e4b88051d/0/8](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/98619acf-7861-4f74-bf93-019e4b88051d/0/8); original spelling; also *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836*, ed. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch (Provo and Urbana, Illinois: BYU Studies and University of Illinois Press, 1994), 33.

10. William E. McLellin, *Ensign of Liberty* 1, no. 4 (January 1848): 60–61; quoted in Shipps and Welch, *Journals*, 57.

11. McLellin, Journal, 29 October 1831, 21; Shipps and Welch, *Journals*, 45.

12. See William E. McLellin notebook, "Revelation, 29 October 1831 [D&C 66]," Joseph Smith Papers, 10, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-29-october-1831-dc-66/2](https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-29-october-1831-dc-66/2).

13. William E. McLellin, letter to relatives, 4 August 1832; in Shipps and Welch, "Letter to Relatives," *Journals*, 82; see also 84, 299.

14. Richard L. Bushman, in "Quotes About the Project" (the Joseph Smith Papers project), Church History, Church of Jesus Christ, archived webpage, [web.archive.org/web/20121024102558/http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/content/0,15757,4610-1-2336%20,00.html](https://www.lds.org/churchhistory/content/0,15757,4610-1-2336%20,00.html).