

# *The Crucibles of Eternal Identity*

SALLY H. BARLOW

A foundation of self-knowledge about our divine identity is critical to us. And it appears to be critical to God, since he wants us back: “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). God spends a great deal of time talking about our divine identity through his prophets in the scriptures. In fact, he communicates his love of our individual differences in a number of ways. Witness the canon of scripture in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They tell essentially the same story of the divinity of Jesus Christ. But, oh, how important these disciples’ individual testimonies are! How uniquely different each is from the other in emphasizing certain aspects of the Savior’s life. How wonderfully suited they are to different audiences—whether Gentile or Jew, male or female, rich or poor. This is just one small testament that God values us individually. Our identity—individual and unique and universally inspiring—is no accident of nature. We have been organized by God to fulfill his plan and, if we are faithful, to fill the very measure of our creation (see D&C 88:19).

There is a rich source of data from a number of disciplines about who we are as humans. From literature, Walt Whitman’s “A Song of

Joys” begins: “O to make the most jubilant song! / Full of music—full of manhood, womanhood, infancy! / Full of common employments—full of grain and trees.” William Shakespeare’s Hamlet recites, “What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a God” (*Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2). We find our human majesty reflected in the inspiring works of Michelangelo or our own Minerva Teichert, in the symphonies of Aaron Copland or Beethoven, and in the sonatas of Clara Schumann. An impressive body of research and theory from the sciences informs us in a different way from the arts about the particularities of mortals. Sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, biologists, physicists, chemists, and others educate us about this enormously complex species: humans.

Each discipline’s contribution to our understanding of our true identity, though impressive, is still puny in comparison to God’s perspective. Those man-made sources of our

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*Sally H. Barlow was a BYU professor of psychology when this devotional address was given on 8 June 1999.*

identity that are most reliable are those that testify to us of our true natures, our divine selves. This knowledge of selfhood must be guided by the precepts of God, not of man. As a psychologist, I am hopelessly narrow in my scope about what to attend to when it comes to the study of individuals. But as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I am broadened by Heavenly Father's expansive vision of us, and I am filled with joy about the possibility that I could possess "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). If I am obedient, I can count myself as one of his disciples—a most amazing premise for identity.

We are individually unique. Can you even imagine an intellect so large that it can keep track of the sands on the seashore or the very hairs of our head, which "are all numbered," according to Luke 12:7. After all, there are a lot of beaches on the planet, and there have been a lot of us humans born since the beginning of earthly time. But the scriptures testify of our uniqueness, and even though I cannot conceptualize God's capacity to have created this, I have faith it is true. God reminded us through the words he spoke to the Prophet Joseph:

*Behold, ye are little children and ye cannot bear all things now; ye must grow in grace and in the knowledge of the truth.*

*Fear not, little children, for you are mine, and I have overcome the world, and you are of them that my Father hath given me;*

*And none of them that my Father hath given me shall be lost.*

*And the Father and I are one. [D&C 50:40–43]*

That our identities are indeed eternal and unique means that godhood really can be our goal. God doesn't want fawning minions; he wants clearly identified individuals who of their own accord have come to him. My colleague Allen Bergin and I are working on a chapter on this very topic of identity. It is a tall

order, but I have been enormously enriched by working alongside him as we subsume what we have learned from years of being psychologists within the expansive and beautiful gospel framework. Allen has spent a great deal of his career forwarding the cause of spirituality in the discipline of psychology and promoting religion as healthy rather than harmful. There are many who believe that being religious means you are neurotic! Dr. Bergin has an international presence because of his humble persistence in this matter.

In our chapter we identify the elements of the eternal identity and make distinctions between what Allen has labeled the "mortal overlay" and the "preexistent character." I like this characterization because it reminds me of a poster we used to refer to in Young Women: "You are not a human being having a spiritual experience; you are a spiritual being having a mortal experience." As Allen states:

*Although we inherit or acquire weaknesses through the mortal overlay, our eternal spirits carry with them into mortality characteristics from the preexistence. These inclinations may be obvious or subtle, just as talents may be manifest or latent. . . . It is a continuing task in the development of self-knowledge to determine whether a given disposition comes from premortality or from mortality, and it is our responsibility to change it, if negative, or magnify it if positive. In this quest it is equally important to remember that regardless of past spiritual history, "Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning" (D&C 93:38). [Allen E. Bergin and Sally H. Barlow, manuscript in preparation, "Identity," in Allen E. Bergin, ed., *LDS Perspectives and Psychology*]*

We carry the spark of divinity within us. Peter taught that we may become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Alma, speaking of being born of God, asked, "Have ye received his image in your countenances?" (Alma 5:14). And Jeremiah's words remind us powerfully of

how God wishes to be part of us: “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33).

Our identity as his people encourages us to be individually strong, communally expansive. As a sociologist, Rodney Stark concluded one of his articles saying, “After a hiatus of fourteen hundred years, in our time a new world faith seems to be stirring” (“Modernization and Mormon Growth,” in Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young, eds., *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994], p. 22). The power of just who we were to become as a people apparently stretched out in a vision toward a priest in Switzerland in 1739. One of my wonderful Laurels introduced me to this interesting quote. It goes something like this:

*The old and true gospel and gifts thereof are lost. False doctrine prevails in all the churches on the face of the earth. All we can do is to exhort the people to be just, fear God, shun evil, and pray. Prayer and purity may cause an angel to visit a deep and distressed soul. But I tell you that God in one hundred years will have again spoken. He will restore the old church again. I see a little band of people led by a prophet and faithful leader. They are persecuted, burned out, and murdered. But in a valley that lies on the shore of a great lake they will build a great city and make a beautiful land, have a temple of magnificent splendor, and also possess the old priesthood with apostles, prophets, deacons, and teachers. From every nation shall the true believers be gathered by speedy messengers. And then shall the Almighty God speak to the disobedient nations with thunder, lightning, and destruction such as men have never known before. [Attributed to Samuel Lutz, alias Christophilus Gratianus or Lutius Gratiana, in *Hope of Zion* in the university library in Basel, Switzerland. There are several versions of this quote of disputed origins; see [\[land/Valley/3599/gratius.html\]\(http://www.geocities.com/heart-land/Valley/3599/gratius.html\); also see \[www.restorationhistory.com/rh/bom.html\]\(http://www.restorationhistory.com/rh/bom.html\) under The 1739 “Prediction”\]](http://www.geocities.com/heart-</a></i></p>
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Our group identity is strong (1) because of God’s identity—he has stamped himself on our very souls—(2) because of Joseph Smith’s courage as a young man, and (3) because of the love and service of our prophets and leaders from the days of Brigham Young and Eliza R. Snow to the present day. The pure in heart are being drawn to this religion by the thousands. The recent Women’s Conference on campus attested to this. Gladys Knight’s testimony in word and song is an example of just one voice among many that is singing praises to our God. Our group identity is more than just an aggregate though—it is the enormous personal power of your individual identities.

### **The Crucibles of Identity**

Our prophets have reminded us that this mortal estate is a school to learn how to be gods and goddesses, having increase and creating worlds while giving all glory to the Father. I would like to suggest that crucibles are one way in which we move toward eternity—connecting our premortal, mortal, and postmortal identities. One of the definitions of a crucible is “a severe test or trial, esp. one that causes a lasting change or influence” (*Random House Webster’s* [1995], s.v. “crucible”). There is clearly some type of critical transformation that occurs. Metallurgy uses the term to refer to a process of extreme heat. Since God is the greatest catalyst of our transformation—perhaps the divine metallurgist of men and women—his plan represents the greatest of crucibles. If we are to become like him, we must go through this sometimes excruciating refiner’s fire.

How do we survive this fire? First, with faith—faith in God the Father and in his Son Jesus Christ and in the Holy Ghost. We must have faith that we are known. Paul said, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then

face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Truman G. Madsen said in his recent Women’s Conference talk, “We are most blessed when we see ourselves as we are seen by Him” (“The Savior, the Sacrament, and Self-Worth,” BYU Women’s Conference, 29 April 1999). Because he knows us, he knows the best way for us to proceed. This is why obedience is the next important skill with which to successfully emerge from the potential crush of crucibles.

God is easier to obey because he has the proper authority. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer said that the one with authority is understood to have superior judgment and insight to oneself. “Authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to commands” (*Truth and Method*, translation revised by Joel C. Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall [New York: Continuum, 1998], p. 279). And the Prophet Joseph told us:

*As God has designed our happiness—and the happiness of all His creatures, he never has—He never will institute an ordinance or give a commandment to His people that is not calculated in its nature to promote that happiness which He has designed, and which will not end in the greatest amount of good and glory to those who become the recipients of his law and ordinances. [HC 5:135]*

So we need faith, obedience, and the next important skill—repentance—for those times we are unable or unwilling to be obedient. All of these skills increase our capacity to love, which, according to Paul, is the final goal.

For some of us obedience is not difficult. For others it is the bane of their existence! When I feel a disobedient attitude swelling up inside of me, I am reminded of George MacDonald’s words: “The one principle of Hell is ‘I am my own’ ” (in Tony Castle, ed., *The New Book of Christian Quotations* [New York:

Crossroad, 1983], p. 112). Our general response to authority can truly test us, especially when authorities are fallible. But God is not fallible. Although for others obedience to authority is not troublesome, repentance might be because it is hard to humble ourselves and admit mistakes. For others of us, relationships and love might be the struggle. We must remember that one of the clear underlying principles of the notion of a crucible is that it is our own test. What is a test for me may not be a test for you. If we consider some of the more common crucibles that many of us encounter, they could be categorized within crucibles of context and crucibles of character.

### **Crucibles of Context: Influences of Culture and Environment**

There are many definitions for *culture*, including but not limited to intellectual and aesthetic pursuits and molds that grow in laboratories. But I am particularly interested in the following definitions: “the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another” and “the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group” (*Random House Webster’s*, 1995, s.v. “culture”).

We start out in these cultures with them being stepping-stones of safety. Cultural groups are comfortable and familiar—and bounded. The kingdom of God is not. How do I become aware of individual cultures and their collective influences? Since God could have organized our mortal estate in any way he wished, we must assume that each step of development is for a divine purpose. We crawl generally before we walk. We babble before we talk. We learn basic concepts—from language grammar to mathematical addition to musical scales—before we learn the more advanced skills of essay writing, figuring differential equations, and composition. Yet each skill, predicated on the last, is incomplete still. There is more. While I learn loyalty to my family, I

also learn how to leave my family to make my own family. I attempt to manage the elements of being female first by accepting this gender assignment and believing that God, in fact, organized our spirits into male and female from the very beginning. Then I work on the refinements of being a woman—not to celebrate it above the other gender but to potentially create a perfect union. Each incomplete skill pushes us by its very incompleteness toward perfection: “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Corinthians 13:11).

In this same vein I learn to let love of country exist as a basis not for extreme nationalism but as a foundation from which to prepare for the kingdom of God. For those of us who are from the American culture, there are wonderful, in fact, inspired facets of being a United States citizen. It is interesting that the French statesman de Tocqueville coined the term *individualism* to denote this unique quality of Americans. But those of us who have the privilege of being United States citizens must make sure this individualism does not turn to self-centered provincialism. My graduate student Dianne Nielsen shared with me the following statement called *A Summary of the World*, found in various versions on the Internet:

*If we could at this time shrink the earth's population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all existing human ratios remaining the same, it would look like this:*

*There would be 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western Hemisphere (north and south), and 8 Africans;*

*51 would be female, 49 male;*

*70 would be non-white, 30 white;*

*70 would be non-Christian, 30 Christian;*

*50 percent of the entire world wealth would be in the hands of only 6 people, and all 6 would be citizens of the United States;*

*70 would be unable to read;*

*50 would suffer from malnutrition;*

*80 would live in substandard housing;*

*1 would be near death, 1 would be near birth;*

*Only 1 would have a college education;*

*When one considers our world from such a compressed perspective, [those of you sitting here are part of that one person].*

The Church started out in the United States for divine reasons. This is good, but now we are a worldwide church! If you thought for one second your behavior was keeping someone from embracing the gospel, you would change it. There are cultural things some of us do as American Mormons that unwittingly have this impact on others. In the clinical psychology graduate program we have the opportunity to train “foreign” and “domestic,” LDS and non-LDS students representing a number of nations, races, and both genders. I asked a number of those who had not come from this culture to comment on it. We can often learn much about ourselves with these kinds of exercises. Research on majority / minority group behavior corroborates this, suggesting that the minority group knows more about the majority group than the majority knows about itself. For instance, in corporate America, black or African-American workers can accurately portray patterns of behavior and attitude about their white coworkers that the white or Caucasian workers are somewhat oblivious to. My colleague Dr. Kate Kirkham, an international consultant to business on the issue of diversity, has spent a career corroborating this notion and has created an excellent paradigm to elucidate it.

When I invited these graduate student “outsiders” to comment on good and not-so-good things about Americans as well as about the Mormon culture, here is what they said: Good things about North American culture include lightheartedness, a sense of justice, and the fact that anything can be accomplished by anyone with will and determination. Less

attractive things include wastefulness of natural resources, selfishness, and not valuing older people.

What about the Mormon culture? Good things include an admirable history of perseverance, commitment to its own faith, and industriousness. Not-so-good things are an apparent mistrusting of human nature and exclusiveness. As “insiders,” we might consider how it is that we possibly contribute to these perceptions. Cultural behavior often clouds doctrinal truths and can keep others from coming to Christ.

The clinical students attempt to learn about their own cultures by keeping journals. My students tell me the ways they have changed as they have engaged in journal keeping and other exercises that make them aware of their “-isms” (racism, materialism, sexism, etc.).

Normally we move along the continuum of identity formation from identification to imitation to empathy, but we are often halted at the level of identification because something about the “other group” annoys, frightens, or even disgusts us. We are unwilling to consider how the other gender, another race, a different ethnicity, or someone in simply another set of circumstances might feel because it seems so out of our experience or comfort zone. This stops us from knowing them and eventually from knowing all of the parts of ourselves. And it keeps us from being as potent with each other as we could be.

For instance, our clinical psychology students work with male sex offenders at the prison. It takes them a long time to learn how to be effective therapists—not simply because the culture of the prison is sometimes built on punishment rather than rehabilitation, but also because the students are understandably appalled at the nature of these crimes. But after a while they begin to see what motivated some of these people to do the things they did. Notice I am not saying they agree with the behavior. They begin to understand it, and part

of this understanding is based upon accepting the “natural man” instincts inside themselves—recognizing that all of us house the potential for inappropriate aggression and sexual expression. This acceptance often comes by way of dreams that inform them about what it must be like to be these incarcerated men. Although they are shocked at first, they learn to use this knowledge to make a difference with these inmates so they are less likely to reoffend. If the Lord himself “descended below all things” to atone for us (D&C 88:6), if he understood the needs of all of us—including all manner of evil and every failing we would ever be capable of—might we, too, need to consider that such empathy is required of all of us eventually?

God has told us that we must all overcome the natural man in us. Perhaps along with appetites and lusts, this also includes forms of subtle hatred and the smugness of superiority. These are uncomfortable to notice. Here is an excerpt from one white Mormon student’s journal when she volunteered in Zimbabwe. I quote with her permission: “Most of all I fear my own racist attitude. . . . The test here is for whites not to abuse their perceived authority. I say perceived because God is the true authority. We must have righteous treatment of all people.”

We all possess at some level various forms of discrimination toward the other gender, other races, and even other IQ categories. You in this audience are at the high end of the normal curve when it comes to IQ. Rather than pretend this isn’t so because of discomfort, we need to let it be what it is and use it for good. Because it is so uncomfortable for some of us to notice many of these cultural influences, we sometimes project unwanted parts of ourselves onto other groups, who then “bear” the burden of these traits for us. Paul stated:

*Charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.*

*Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth.* [1 Corinthians 13:4–6]

Luke wrote, “Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” (6:41).

Joseph Smith had a great way of doing this difficult work. Jesse W. Crosby related this story:

*I went one day to the Prophet with a sister. She had a charge to make against one of the brethren for scandal. When her complaint had been heard the Prophet asked her if she was quite sure that what the brother had said of her was utterly untrue.*

*She was quite sure that it was.*

*He then told her to think no more about it, for it could not harm her. If untrue it could not live, but the truth will survive. Still she felt that she should have some redress.*

*Then he offered her his method of dealing with such cases for himself. When an enemy had told a scandalous story about him, which had often been done, before he rendered judgment he paused and let his mind run back to the time and place and setting of the story to see if he had not by some unguarded word or act laid the block on which the story was built. If he found that he had done so, he said that in his heart he then forgave his enemy, and felt thankful that he had received warning of a weakness that he had not known he possessed.*

*Then he said to the sister that he would have her to do the same: search her memory thoroughly and see if she had not herself unconsciously laid the foundation for the scandal that annoyed her.*

*The sister thought deeply for a few moments and then confessed that she believed that she had.*

*Then the Prophet told her that in her heart she could forgive that brother who had risked his own good name and her friendship to give her this clearer view of herself.*

*The sister thanked her advisor and went away in peace.* [In Hyrum L. and Helen Mae Andrus,

comps., *They Knew the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1999), pp. 162–63]

As a culture, we want to be able to reduce those traits that turn people away from us. Perhaps we could use the Prophet Joseph’s model so that we don’t become a provincial people, isolated geographically and intellectually. We want the hope that we possess to shine so brightly that others cannot help but be drawn to it. We can be comforted to know, however, that the truth will prevail no matter if, as individuals, we act as clear corridors to the truth or as confusing mazes.

### **The Crucibles of Character**

The next set of crucibles are crucibles of character that influence us from within. These are stated in terms of dilemmas or essential tensions and sometimes have to be tolerated while we search for resolution or transcendence.

1. *To know thyself versus “no” thyself.* On the one hand, we are admonished to know ourselves—to sharpen our countenances upon each other, to become so sure of our inner attitudes and outward behaviors that we are knowable and known. Possessing a sure identity does not mean vain selfishness. But what does it mean? We have been told that to lose ourselves is to find ourselves. We know from scripture it was important that the prodigal son “came to himself” (Luke 15:17). When Moses saw God’s universe, he realized man was pretty small, “which thing I never had supposed” (Moses 1:10). These scriptures suggest that it is wise to know ourselves but that we should avoid focusing all energy in this pursuit by also focusing on others.

2. *The pursuit of perfection versus competition.* Competition is a tough concept to consider—especially in college. Let’s start with a good lesson from D&C 7. The Lord responded to a request from Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to confirm if the disciple John tarried in the flesh. In the Lord’s inimitable way, he

gave an entirely different lesson to them by revealing the interaction that took place between Peter and John. The Lord had told the two disciples that he would grant the wish of their heart. Peter asked to come speedily to Christ. John asked to stay in mortality and bring souls to Christ. Peter apparently worried that he had asked for the wrong thing, and Christ said to him, “If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?” (D&C 7:4). The message is clear: This was not a time to compete.

There are even more dire consequences regarding certain sins that are often based on competition. Cain’s intense jealousy of and competition with Abel is just one such example. What if in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* that mental health professionals use in diagnosis there was a personality disorder called “The remains of Cain in me”—a description of debilitating competitiveness or murderous rage? Competition is part and parcel of being in college, but perhaps we would all be better off if we spent more energy on cooperation and had “an eye single to the glory of God” (D&C 4:5). As Søren Kierkegaard entitled one of his books: *The Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1938).

A particular kind of competitiveness or ill-fated search for a distorted form of perfection involves eating disorders. It is a current, critical health crisis for American college-age students—women in particular—despite a vigorous campaign at education. My colleague Dr. Spangler is an expert in this area. Early Celts used to throw humans into peat bogs to appease their gods. These were apparently human sacrifices made at times of crisis—maybe of famine, war, or weather. We know this because the recently discovered mummified remains were unintentionally preserved by the peat. Perhaps eating disorders are our culture’s sacrifices on the altars of the vain gods of beauty and distorted notions of control. We are tossing far too many young women and some

young men into this bog. We are not facing the crisis we are having as a society. These are really problems of identity. We must strive not to compete but to be “complete”—the Greek translation of *perfect*.

3. *The real self versus the true self*. The “real self” is a popular psychological term used in the last several decades based on the body of literature that supports an authentic self. Authenticity is a good thing. But the literature of authenticity is still embedded in the language of mortality. My authentic here and now emotions are to run screaming from this room. I am really nervous. But I have an overriding message coming somewhere from my pre-frontal cortex to hang in there. I said I would do this, my parents taught me to be responsible, and my teachers taught me to take risks. I tolerate the tension of these because I know that obligation is more important than mere authenticity.

The psychologist William James wrote to his wife in 1878:

*I have often thought that the best way to define a man’s character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: “This is the real me!”* [*The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 1:199; emphasis in original]

God wants us to be alive in him. If we do not choose him first, whatever we have chosen will keep us from him. Struggling with being real and authentic requires a willingness to be true to God first in order to come to our most true identity as sons and daughters of heavenly parents.

4. *The ordinary versus extraordinary*. Our context often alters our perception of what is normal or average. For instance, in this audience, how many of you are returned missionaries?

Given this number, those of you who are or will be missionaries might think, “Well, it’s pretty ordinary that I have been or am going on a mission.” But if we set you down in almost any other culture, the fact that so many of you go to the far ends of the earth is quite extraordinary. Fifteen sets of parents from my home ward alone have sent or are about to send their children on missions. My son is one of them. But if just because of the numbers we incorrectly surmised that what we do is always ordinary, we would be making a mistake.

At the 1998 BYU Women’s Conference, Sister Sheri Dew said:

[Satan] *wants us to feel insignificant—that no matter how hard we try, we’ll never make much of a difference. Oh, sure, our work is necessary but not very important. That is a big fat lie. It is a diversion designed to keep us so focused on any perceived injustices that we completely overlook the opportunities and privileges that are ours, that we underestimate the vital nature of our contribution, and that we never come to understand the power we have to change lives.* [Sheri L. Dew, “This Is a Test. It Is Only a Test,” in *May Christ Lift Thee Up* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1999], p. 195; emphasis in original]

Keeping in mind our potential divinity but at the same time not becoming over-entitled is a tough balancing act. We have to have the willingness to be at times ordinary and at other times to be extraordinary. This teaches us lessons of humility, of being followers and leaders. One challenge for you individually wonderful students in this huge institution called a university is to emerge unique despite the message large institutions can unwittingly give us that we are only a number. While standing in line to change a class, cash a check, or buy a sandwich, we often get the feeling that we are not unique. Tolerate the essential tension of this extraordinary / ordinary dilemma and remember: You are known by the Father.

Getting through these various character crucibles further refines our identity. Identity formation is initially enhanced by an outer organization, such as a cultural group, certain clear physical characteristics, etc. But for a deeper identity to emerge, an inner integration must take precedence eventually so that regardless of our exterior, our cultural group, or circumstances, our character or identity comes through. Lorenzo Snow said, “We are the offspring of God, born with the same faculties and powers as He possesses, capable of enlargement through the experience that we are now passing through in our second estate” (*Millennial Star* 56 [December 3, 1894]: 772). Successfully emerging from these crucibles will allow us to be more than mere labels, since as Erin Eldridge reminds us:

*Labeling someone as anything other than a disciple of Christ can be damaging. . . .*

*During these last days, the adversary has been trying to convince people that all kinds of trials and weaknesses are permanent. “I am anorexic.” “I’m an alcoholic.” “I am weak.” “I am gay.” And all the while stands before us and within us the Great I Am—calling us to something beyond our mortal condition. He reminds us that we were with Him long before we were with the world. [Born That Way?: A True Story of Overcoming Same-Sex Attraction, with Insights for Friends, Families, and Leaders (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1994), pp. 42, 53]*

### **When Crucibles Collide**

Many times these two crucibles of context and character collide in the dark night of the soul. In the scriptures we have accounts of those who were prepared when they came to their crucibles. The most compelling, of course, is that of Christ in Gethsemane. The stories of Moroni, Abish, Anna, Daniel, Esther, and Job also help us. We can become more aware of our own vulnerabilities if we will listen to our colleagues and friends.

If we foster competition, greed, lust, or hate, our souls may not be able to rise to the challenge of a crucible. Along with the dark night of the human soul, there have been many dark nights of society's soul when individuals' hearts have failed them and they have bent to the will of a group. In these troubled times, who do we follow so that we can have courage?

**Jesus Christ Is the True Example of Perfect Identity**

I am stunned by the personhood of Jesus Christ, the distinctness of him. Regardless of his context or culture (his gender: he was male; his religion: he was a Jew; his region of origin: he was Galilean; or any of the other particularities—his height, color, age), he reached beyond all of these to all of us. He is astonishing. He must have appeared so to the woman in Luke 7 who was so overcome by gratitude to Christ that she overcame custom to show him. She knew the difference between provincialism—or narrow-minded culturalism—and the glory of God's truth that evokes such gratitude in us. Jesus entices us to what I would like to call acts of "theotropism," bending our individual wills toward the light.

**Summary**

As the Christian apologist C. S. Lewis stated:

*It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspec-*

*tion proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. [C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 14–15; emphasis in original]*

Here we are, an incredible kaleidoscope of humans, gathered in His name at BYU, where faith, obedience, repentance, and love allow us to join in shared discipleship to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Crucibles help create these opportunities.

Recall the words of the song that Charlotte Smurthwaite sang at the beginning of this devotional:

*Are there anybody here like Mary a'weepin'? . . .  
Are there anybody here like Peter a'sinkin'? . . .  
Are there anybody here like jailors a'tremblin'?  
["Weepin' Mary," music composed and traditional text adapted by David Fletcher]*

I submit to you that we have all wept, sunk, and trembled—maybe under the weight of our own sins, from the unwitting problems brought on by misfortune, from inherited struggles that through no fault of our own have wrought havoc in our lives such as bipolar disorder, or from the exercise of someone else's agency against our innocence that has deeply wounded us, such as incest. The answer to all of these as it states in that same song is, "Call to my Jesus and he'll draw nigh." I know this to be true, and I say these things in his holy name. Amen.