

The Light Through the Dark Glass

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In considering what I might say today, my mind kept turning to what the Apostle Paul said in his first epistle to the Corinthians: “For now we see through a glass, darkly.”¹ Over many years I have thought a great deal about this statement and its meaning. The word *seeing* is often used to describe the action of visually or mentally perceiving or discerning. It can also mean to perceive or discern spiritually, and how we see is critical in shaping who we are, the choices we make, and who we become.

Research on seeing and perception is conducted in a number of different fields. In the visual arts we spend a considerable amount of time looking at things: we frequently discuss the process of seeing and carefully work to develop our abilities to see in an artistic context. It is clear that although we may see much in common, as humans we often see in vastly different ways. To illustrate this I invite you to carefully look at four works of art. As you do, consciously consider your response.

Seeing Differently—Four Still-Life Paintings

The first work was executed in blue-black ink on paper and is entitled *Six Persimmons*. It was painted by the Chinese monk Mu Qi (Chi)

in the thirteenth century. Mu Qi was a Zen monk who lived during the Song dynasty and worked toward a highly reduced form of brush painting. It is said that Zen Buddhism—a school of thought that highly valued meditation as an avenue for enlightenment—was the most stripped-down form of Buddhism and greatly influenced the artist’s views. This painting became famous for its skilled and minimal brushstrokes and its painterly simplicity and was considered an unprecedented artistic innovation.²

The second work is a seventeenth-century Italian baroque watercolor painting on parchment entitled *A Bowl with Peaches and Plums*. In the baroque period, naturalistic and highly detailed painting flourished, and still-life painting was often symbolic, teaching moral lessons. This work is by the artist Giovanna Garzoni. The fact that Garzoni was a very successful female artist made her quite unusual for her time. She was also one of the first women to focus on still-life painting.³

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The third work is by the French artist Paul Cézanne. It is an oil painting entitled *Ginger Pot with Pomegranate and Pears* and was completed sometime around 1890. Cézanne was considered a Postimpressionist and was one of the most important painters of the second half of the nineteenth century. His brushwork, planes of color, and explorations of geometric simplicity laid the foundation for the transition from nineteenth-century artistic ideas to a new and very different twentieth-century art world.⁴

The fourth and final work is an oil painting entitled *Still Life Portuguese*. It was painted in 1917 by Robert Delaunay, a French artist who with his artist wife, Sonia, and others cofounded the Cubist-influenced art movement called Orphism, which emphasized the optical characteristics of bright and bold colors. Delaunay played a key role in establishing abstraction as a stylistic expression and was one of the earliest nonrepresentational painters.⁵

Though all of these pieces of art are similar in that they are paintings of still-life subjects, they are also significantly different in terms of how the subjects are seen, interpreted, and presented. There were numerous factors that influenced the decisions of each of these artists—factors that both enabled and limited their ability to see. As you look at these paintings, how do you see them? Do you make connections between the paintings? Perhaps you respond with greater interest to some rather than to others. Are you indifferent? What are the reasons you respond the way you do? Does the minimal information I have provided affect how you see the individual works? I hope you enjoy them.

Just like these artists, our vision is influenced by many factors that ultimately impact how we think, feel, and act. Each of us has strengths, limitations, and personal lenses that filter and color how we see and perceive. In many ways it is important that we as individuals see things differently. This allows

for insight and innovation, enables us to learn and benefit from each other, and also tends to make things more interesting. This is certainly something I have learned in my marriage. Just ask my wife, Jennifer.

Seeing Through a Glass Darkly

We live in an incredible time with so much available to us and so many possibilities. At moments, however, it can be extremely challenging to see our way clearly with the abundance of information, perspectives, attitudes, feelings, criticisms, forces, and beliefs that surround us. It can seem as if we are seeing through a glass darkly.

Years ago when I was an undergraduate art student here at BYU, I was offered a job working as a metal chaser in a local bronze foundry that cast and finished sculptures for artists. Given that I had virtually no experience with the bronze-casting process, I was somewhat surprised I was offered the job and also a little apprehensive about what it would require. But after being assured that I would receive training in the techniques required for my particular responsibilities—and anticipating that this knowledge might be useful in my future as an artist—I accepted the job.

Initially one of the most daunting duties for me was welding. As a result of the bronze-casting process, there were frequently several different parts of a sculpture that needed to be welded back together. Given the fact that there is a long list of real dangers associated with welding and I had no idea of what I was doing, this part of my job made me a little nervous. Ignorance and danger can be a bad combination!

As I mentioned earlier, I was promised I would receive training, and I did. My supervisor gave me instructions on the use of the welder, on safety, and on welding technique. He even demonstrated the process for me. But being told or even shown how to do something isn't the same as doing it, let alone doing it well.

For my initiation into welding I was encouraged to practice with some bronze scraps under the guidance of my supervisor. As instructed, I properly prepared the work area and tools and carefully adorned myself with all of the necessary safety gear, which included thick leather gloves, a special leather jacket, and a protective welding helmet with a glass lens. As I readied myself to begin, I pulled the helmet down over my face—and it was completely dark. I couldn't see anything through the glass lens.

The lens on a welding helmet is very darkly tinted in order to protect the eyes of the person welding from the extremely bright light produced by the welder. How could I weld if I couldn't see? I lifted the helmet, turned to my supervisor, and shared my dilemma. He patiently explained that in order to see through the lens, I must rely on the light produced by the welder. I must learn to use the light. What a revelation!

I again checked to make sure everything was prepared, lowered the helmet, and, as perspiration trickled down my face, started the welder. With a flash I could see. My vision wasn't clear, but I was able to see well enough to learn.

I actually failed miserably on that first welding attempt. I melted a big hole in the piece of bronze, and it wasn't the last time I made a mistake. However, with effort, practice, and the tolerance of my supervisor, I was able to improve my skills as a welder, and, in the process, I came to better understand the light and to use it more effectively to see through the dark glass lens. In a sense, the lens became clearer.

As we are confronted with difficult choices and decisions, especially those related to our eternal progress, we must prepare ourselves, act in faith, and learn to use and rely on the light. As we do so, the personal lens through which each of us sees can become clearer, and we will be better able to make decisions that will bless our lives and lead us to Christ.

Sources of Light

There are two important sources of light that I would like to discuss: the Light of Christ and the Holy Ghost.

Each of us has been blessed with the Light of Christ. The scriptures teach that the Light of Christ is "the Spirit [which] giveth light to every man [and woman] that cometh into the world."⁶ It is the "light [which] proceedeth forth from the presence of God [through Jesus Christ] to fill the immensity of space"⁷ and "the light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed."⁸ It is "the light which shineth [and] enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings."⁹

The Light of Christ is sometimes called "the Spirit of Jesus Christ,"¹⁰ "the Spirit of the Lord,"¹¹ or "the Spirit of God."¹² It is also referred to as our conscience and "is given to every man [and woman], that [they] may know good from evil."¹³ It is "the light by which [we] may judge,"¹⁴ and it can be a powerful source of inspiration.

President Boyd K. Packer taught:

The Spirit of Christ can enlighten the inventor, the scientist, the painter, the sculptor, the composer, the performer, the architect, the author to produce great, even inspired things for the blessing and good of all mankind.

This Spirit can prompt the farmer in his field and the fisherman on his boat. It can inspire the teacher in the classroom, the missionary in presenting his discussion. It can inspire the student who listens. And of enormous importance, it can inspire husband and wife, and father and mother.

This inner Light can warn and guard and guide.¹⁵

The Light of Christ also helps to prepare people for the message of the gospel, and it leads them to repent, be baptized, and receive an even greater source of light: the gift of the

Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost and the Light of Christ are two distinct influences, but, in addition to the constancy of the Light of Christ, the Holy Ghost may, from time to time, manifest Himself to any man or woman—regardless of their circumstances—who is honestly seeking truth about the Lord and His gospel. In this sense the Holy Ghost works in concert with the Light of Christ.

Though we might make choices that lead us down very dark paths, the Light of Christ continues to abide with us. President Harold B. Lee explained that the Light of Christ

*never entirely goes out unless we commit the unpardonable sin. Its glow may be so dim that we can hardly perceive it, but it is there for us to fan into a flame that shall burn brighter with understanding and with knowledge.*¹⁶

With his permission I would like to share a story a good friend recently told me. This friend was raised in the Church, and, while young, he was baptized, given the gift of the Holy Ghost, and ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood. During his teenage years he made some friends who had values dramatically different from those he had been taught in his home and at church. Over a number of years he made some poor decisions and became involved in behaviors that were deceptive, destructive, and not aligned with the teachings of the gospel. As a result he didn't enjoy the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost and turned from much of the light available to him.

As he approached mission age he continued to be involved in these poor behaviors but also began to have questions about the direction of his life. One day while under the influence of an illegal substance, he had an experience—a very powerful spiritual experience—that he recognized as coming through the Holy Ghost. Although it came under surprising circumstances, that experience provided clarity for him and ultimately changed the course of his

life. He repented, served a mission, and was married in the temple. He has a wonderful family and a powerful testimony and is an active and contributing member of the Church.

Some may dismiss or make light of my friend's experience upon hearing it, but I was perplexed. How could the Holy Ghost speak to someone who was not only disobeying commandments but was also at that moment under the influence of a mind-altering substance? Perhaps we can understand how this is possible when we comprehend "that the Holy Ghost can work [with and] through the Light of Christ"¹⁷ to manifest truth and light.

As many of you are aware, the Holy Ghost "is a personage of Spirit"¹⁸ and the third member of the Godhead. As such, He plays a unique role and can be a great blessing in our lives. He is a messenger and a witness of our Father in Heaven and His Son Jesus Christ,¹⁹ and He testifies of the truths of the gospel. He is the source of spiritual gifts.²⁰ He can reveal the will of the Lord in our lives, He acts as a "cleansing agent to purify . . . and sanctify [us] from . . . sin,"²¹ and, as the Comforter, He brings "peace to our souls."²² Through His power our minds can be enlightened,²³ we can be blessed with new ideas,²⁴ and we "may know the truth of all things."²⁵

The fulness of the blessings given through the Holy Ghost are only available to those who receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is bestowed by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood after a person is baptized into the Church. After receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, we have the right to His constant companionship and the blessings associated with it if we keep the commandments and remain worthy.²⁶

We frequently call the spiritual manifestations of the Holy Ghost inspiration or personal revelation, and these communications may come to us in a variety of ways, including impressions, promptings, thoughts, and feelings. Most often the still, small voice of

the Holy Ghost whispers to our hearts and minds²⁷ and brings feelings of peace, assurance, and confirmation.

The Holy Ghost can direct us in all of the important aspects of our lives if we are prepared. Learning to recognize and rely on the Spirit, however, requires faith, humility, and continued practice. Rather than receiving clarity on all matters simultaneously, we typically receive guidance on specific questions.

Seeking Direction and Receiving Guidance

Though many things are unclear to me, I recognize that I have been blessed on countless occasions through the power and influence of the Holy Ghost. I also understand the importance of continually seeking to better understand and use the remarkable gift of light that comes from Him. Let me share another experience.

Many times throughout my life I have felt prompted that I should pursue my interests in art and develop my abilities. As a result of these promptings and as a result of careful and prayerful consideration, Jennifer and I agreed that I should pursue graduate studies in art after completing my degree at BYU. When the time came I researched numerous programs across the country, pondered options, fasted, prayed, and selected several programs to which I submitted applications. Given all of the factors, this was not an easy task, but we were excited about the possibilities.

After waiting several months I started to receive letters from the various programs I had applied to. Good news: I had options! But Jennifer and I then faced the dilemma of making a decision. We carefully reviewed the pros and cons of the individual programs and we prayed, earnestly seeking divine guidance.

On one occasion during this period of time I walked into an office here on campus and noticed on a desk a letter with the logo for The Ohio State University. Immediately a distinct thought popped into my head: “You should

apply there.” I hadn’t previously considered Ohio State. I thought about it for a second, but it was quite late in the year to apply to programs, and given that I already had offers from other schools, I dismissed the thought.

Within a few days of that experience I was walking down a hall here in the Harris Fine Arts Center and saw a poster. You guessed it—the poster featured an Ohio State logo. Again the thought immediately popped into my head: “You should apply there.” I started to get the idea, so I immediately found a computer, did a little bit of research, and, with some disappointment, discovered that the graduate application deadline for Ohio State had passed.

The following day I ran into one of my BYU professors who was—and still is—an influential mentor. He told me that he had been looking for me and explained that he had just gotten off the phone with a colleague from The Ohio State University. The colleague had called seeking recommendations for potential graduate students for his program. My mentor then explained that he had recommended me, and if interested, I should give the professor a call.

Long story short, it turns out that I made the call and things worked out very well. I was offered a most advantageous situation in an excellent art program. The lens was very clear at that moment. We accepted the offer and had a very challenging but valuable experience. I don’t know what would have happened had I attended a different school, but I did know in that moment, as I do today, that our Father in Heaven watches over us and will guide us in important things when we seek His direction.

Several of our Church leaders have reminded us “that the Lord will speak to us through the Spirit in his own time and in his own way.”²⁸ Answers to prayers or other righteous desires may not come immediately or may not come how we expect them to.²⁹ Exercising faith, we must submit ourselves to the will of the Lord and be patient. We should

also understand that personal revelation is not constant and will not be given on every matter.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks cautioned:

*The Spirit of the Lord is not likely to give us revelations on matters that are trivial. I once heard a young woman in testimony meeting praise the spirituality of her husband, indicating that he submitted every question to the Lord. She told how he accompanied her shopping and would not even choose between different brands of canned vegetables without making his selection a matter of prayer. That strikes me as improper. I believe the Lord expects us to use the intelligence and experience he has given us to make these kinds of choices.*³⁰

Elder Oaks also taught:

*Revelations from God—the teachings and directions of the Spirit—are not constant. We believe in continuing revelation, not continuous revelation. We are often left to work out problems without the dictation or specific direction of the Spirit. That is part of the experience we must have in mortality. Fortunately, we are never out of our Savior’s sight, and if our judgment leads us to actions beyond the limits of what is permissible and if we are listening to the still, small voice, the Lord will restrain us by the promptings of his Spirit.*³¹

Navigating the Darkness

Some may question the purpose of this mortal condition in which the lens through which we see can be dark and unclear. They may ask, “Why does it have to be this way?” “Why is it that we have to so often struggle through the uncertainty, confusion, conflict, and pain of this world and this life?” I don’t think there is a simple way to answer these questions completely, but let me share a few ideas.

We have been taught by holy prophets and through scripture that we are the spirit children of God and have great potential—even divine potential. Our Father in Heaven loves and has a plan for all of His children. It is His

desire and work for all of us to become like He is, to be with Him again, and to have joy. For various reasons, many that I’m sure we don’t comprehend, it was critical for us to gain a mortal body and to live in a state in which we are separated from Him—a state in which we have experiences and challenges that are unique to mortality and important for our growth. I suggest that this life is the only way to learn and develop important and necessary attributes of the divine.

It dawns on me now, as I look back on my experience welding in the bronze foundry many years ago, that the darkened glass lens of the welding helmet not only protected my eyes from the bright light of the arc welder but actually enabled my vision. It allowed me to see, understand, and do things that I would not have otherwise been capable of doing, given the physical limitations of my eyes. Perhaps this can give us some insight into the need for a dark glass in mortality, especially as we recognize the importance of cultivating the qualities of faith, hope, and charity, as the Apostle Paul taught in his epistle to the Corinthians.³² As we prepare ourselves through righteousness and learn to rely on the light of the Holy Ghost, we have an increased ability to see clearly those things we need to know and do in our lives.

Elder Oaks has also taught:

*As faithful members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have a distinctive way of looking at life. We view our experiences in terms of eternity. As we draw farther from worldliness, we feel closer to our Father in Heaven and more able to be guided by his Spirit. We call this quality of life **spirituality**.*

To the faithful, spirituality is a lens through which we view life and a gauge by which we evaluate it. . . .

Each of us has a personal lens through which we view the world. Our lens gives its special tint to all we see. It can suppress some features and emphasize

others. It can also reveal things otherwise invisible. Through the lens of spirituality, we can know “the things of God” by “the Spirit of God.” (1 Cor. 2:11.) As the Apostle Paul taught, such things are “foolishness” to the “natural man.” He cannot see them “because they are spiritually discerned.” (See 1 Cor. 2:14.)

How we **interpret** our experiences is also a function of our degree of spirituality. Some interpret mortality solely in terms of worldly accomplishments and possessions. In contrast, we who have a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ should interpret our experiences in terms of our knowledge of the purpose of life, the mission of our Savior, and the eternal destiny of the children of God.³³

President James E. Faust said:

Often we do not have even a glimpse of our potential for happiness and accomplishment in this life and in eternity because, as the Apostle Paul said, “Now we see through a glass, darkly.” But the lens can be lightened and become crystal clear through the influence of the Holy Ghost. The Savior promised us that the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, will “teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance,” and “guide you into all truth.”³⁴

Each of us has our own unique way of seeing that is influenced by many factors. There may be times when our paths seem very unclear. We will likely make mistakes. But as we repent, are faithful, and learn to recognize and rely on the light that is available to us through the Light of Christ and the Holy Ghost, the path that leads us to the presence of our Heavenly Father will be illuminated and our ability to see with an eternal perspective will be enhanced. For those who struggle to see and who feel they walk in darkness, our Savior has said, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.”³⁵ As we follow our Savior, darkness will fade, and, step-by-step, we will receive that light that “groweth

brighter and brighter until the perfect day.”³⁶ I testify of these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. 1 Corinthians 13:12.
2. See “Zen Painting—An Exceptional Tradition,” Chinese *Literati* Painting, page 8, indiana.edu/~ealc100/Art8.html; and “Six Persimmons,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_Persimmons.
3. See “Artists: Giovanna Garzoni,” J. Paul Getty Museum, getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artMakerDetails?maker=21178.
4. See “The Collection: Paul Cézanne,” Museum of Modern Art, moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=1053; and “Paul Cézanne,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_C%C3%A9zanne.
5. See “The Collection: Robert Delaunay,” Museum of Modern Art, moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=1479; and “Robert Delaunay,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Delaunay.
6. D&C 84:46.
7. D&C 88:12.
8. D&C 88:13.
9. D&C 88:11.
10. D&C 84:45.
11. 2 Corinthians 3:18.
12. D&C 46:17.
13. Moroni 7:16.
14. Moroni 7:18.
15. Boyd K. Packer, “The Light of Christ,” *Ensign*, April 2005, 10.
16. Harold B. Lee, *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 102.
17. Packer, “The Light of Christ,” 10.
18. D&C 130:22.
19. See 2 Nephi 31:18.
20. See 1 Corinthians 12:4–10.
21. Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Holy Ghost,” 704.
22. Alma 58:11.
23. See D&C 6:15.
24. See *TPJS*, 151.

25. Moroni 10:5.
26. See *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 83.
27. See D&C 8:2.
28. Dallin H. Oaks, “Teaching and Learning by the Spirit,” *Ensign*, March 1997, 10.
29. See Neal A. Maxwell, “Plow in Hope,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 59–60.
30. Dallin H. Oaks, “Revelation,” BYU devotional address, 29 September 1981; see also Oaks, “Revelation,” *New Era*, September 1982, 46.
31. Oaks, “Teaching and Learning,” 14.
32. See 1 Corinthians 13:13.
33. Dallin H. Oaks, “Spirituality,” *Ensign*, November 1985, 61; emphasis in original.
34. James E. Faust, “It Can’t Happen to Me,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 47; quoting 1 Corinthians 13:12, John 14:26, and John 16:13.
35. John 8:12.
36. D&C 50:24.