

## “Don’t Miss the Miracle”

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Many years ago I discovered a book of poetry entitled *In the Stillness Is the Dancing*. Within the pages of this book is a poem entitled “Don’t Miss the Miracle,” compiled from the essay “If I Had Three Days to See,” written by Helen Keller in 1933. I would like to begin my address today by sharing this poem with you:

*I, who cannot see, find hundreds of things  
to interest me through mere touch.  
I feel the delicate symmetry of a leaf.  
I pass my hands lovingly  
about the smooth skin of a silver birch,  
or the rough shaggy bark of a pine . . .  
I feel the delightful, velvety texture of a flower,  
and discover its remarkable convolutions;  
and something of the miracle of Nature  
is revealed to me.  
Occasionally, if I am very fortunate,  
I place my hand gently on a small tree and feel  
the happy quiver of a bird in full song . . .  
At times my heart cries out with longing  
to see these things.  
If I can get so much pleasure from mere touch,  
how much more beauty must be revealed  
by sight.  
Yet, those who have eyes apparently see little.  
The panorama of color and action*

*which fills the world is taken for granted . . .  
It is . . . a great pity that, in the world of light,  
the gift of sight  
is used only as a mere convenience rather than  
as a means of adding fullness to life.  
[Mark Link, *In the Stillness Is the Dancing* (Niles,  
Illinois: Argus Communications, 1972), 36–37]*

What does it mean to see? Webster’s *Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* lists 25 definitions for the word *see* ([New York: Gramercy Books, 1989], 1290). The first is “to perceive with the eyes; look at.” Being both blind and deaf, according to this definition Helen Keller indeed could not see. However, according to other Webster definitions of the word, which include “to perceive,” “discern,” “recognize,” “have insight,” and “understand intellectually or spiritually,” Helen Keller not only saw very clearly but, through her writing, admonished us to do the same.

Within the myriad of experiences we encounter every day, how much does each of us really see? How much do we allow the light

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*Catherine H. Black was a BYU professor of dance when this devotional address was given on 10 April 2007.*

that illuminates our world to permeate our beings? To what degree do we allow light to enlighten?

What is light? Again I turn to *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (828), which defines *light* as “that which makes things visible or affords illumination.” In the first chapter of John we are told:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

*The same was in the beginning with God.*

*All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.*

*In him was life; and the life was the light of men.*  
[John 1:1–4]

Speaking to the people in the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12).

The Bible Dictionary tells us:

*The light of Christ is just what the words imply: enlightenment, knowledge, and an uplifting, ennobling, persevering influence that comes upon mankind because of Jesus Christ. For instance, Christ is “the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (D&C 93:2; John 1:9). The light of Christ fills the “immensity of space” and is the means by which Christ is able to be “in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things.” It “giveth life to all things” and is “the law by which all things are governed.” It is also “the light that quickeneth” man’s understanding (see D&C 88:6–13, 41). [Bible Dictionary, s.v. “light of Christ,” 725]*

At the recent funeral of Dr. W. Ralph Andersen, BYU professor emeritus of botany and range science, I was inspired by excerpts from his journal that were read by several of his children. Brother Andersen deeply contemplated the concept of light and truth and seeing

with spiritual eyes. He believed that it was the duty of each of us to use our God-given personal authority to seek to know God and to do so by kindling our own light and then walking in that light. The brighter the light, the clearer the vision.

The gift of life and the gift of light are inseparably connected. And quality of life is directly proportional to the degree to which we use the gift of light—not, as Helen Keller says, “as a mere convenience” but “as a means of adding fullness to life.” Doing so allows us to not miss the many miracles in our lives that, in rewarding our faith, demonstrate to us that God knows us as individuals and loves us. When we turn ourselves over to Him and let Him direct our paths, we are blessed with the peace that comes from the realization that whatever we experience in life is as it was meant to be.

I would now like to share with you a few examples of occasions when I have been fortunate to perceive the hand of the Lord in my destiny. It is my hope that they will serve to rekindle within you memories of and gratitude for your own similar encounters with Him as He has directed your paths in the past. It is also my hope that they will inspire each of us to strive to sharpen our perceptions and help us rejoice in the evidence of God’s hand in our lives as our various futures unfold.

The first example relates to the passing of my mother in October 1994. Our immediate family (Mom, Dad, my younger sister, Barbara, and I) had gathered for the weekend at my sister’s home in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, to celebrate Mom and Dad’s golden wedding anniversary. Although their anniversary was on October 20th, we decided to celebrate it the weekend before—from October 14th through the 16th—because I was choreographing a musical at BYU that was scheduled to open shortly after October 20, and I needed to be back in Utah with enough time to fulfill my professional obligations.

My sister and I prepared a weekend full of surprises for our parents, beginning with four gold-colored, helium-filled balloons with Happy 50th Anniversary printed on them, each balloon symbolizing each one of us. These we tied to a banister just inside my sister's front door to greet our parents when they arrived. We enjoyed the most wonderful time that weekend that we had ever spent together as a family.

It was important to my sister and me that our parents have a final surprise on the actual date of their anniversary. This, we decided, should be a bouquet of Peace roses, a variety that Mom had chosen as her wedding flowers. As we proceeded to order these flowers, we learned that that particular variety no longer existed, but there was one that was very close—yellow with a tinge of pink around the top of the petals—and they had to be ordered from Holland. No problem. We ordered one-and-a-half dozen of them to be delivered to our parents' home in Edmonton, Alberta, on the 20th. As soon as we hung up the phone, I regretted not having thought quickly enough to order 20 roses to symbolize the date of the anniversary. However, we decided to leave the order as we had placed it. And that was that.

Early in the morning of October 17th, the day we had designated for my parents and me to return to our respective homes, Mom suffered a severe stroke that ultimately took her life just after midnight on October 19th, one day short of the 50th anniversary. When we arrived home from the hospital that night, one of the four balloons on the banister, out of helium, was lying limp at the base of the other balloons.

The flowers from Holland suddenly became funeral flowers and were rerouted to Calgary for the private funeral we held there on the 20th. When the flowers arrived at the funeral home, there were not 18 roses but in fact 20. And during the ceremony one rose began to wilt. By the time we took the flowers back to

my sister's home, that one flower had significantly withered, leaving 19—for us symbolic of the date my mother passed away. A mere coincidence? I choose to think not. For us it was the Lord's arms around us, telling us in His own way that it was time for our wife and mother to return to Him and that all was well.

My second example concerns my father, Michael Herbut, who passed away in August 1999. Throughout his life Dad liked to buy things. Shortly before he died he purchased several rosebushes from a catalog and, since he had no garden of his own, bequeathed them to my sister. Although Alberta is Wild Rose Country, domestic roses are very hard to grow there. But my sister wanted to try, and that spring I went up to help her plant the rosebushes. Being a good gardener, she did all she could to assure that the roses would survive. And they did, for a while, in what she named the Michael Herbut Rose Garden. The summer after Dad passed away, while I was visiting my sister, one of the rosebushes was coming into bloom. It was at least the second season that the bush had flowered. Never before had a flower on that bush been anything but pure yellow. At this particular time, however, the rose that was blooming was tinged with pink around the top of the petals, and subsequently the yellow flowers on this bush continued to bloom with pink edges. A tender miracle? I think so.

My final example has unfolded throughout my lifetime and as a result will be considerably longer than the previous two. In August 1972 I was hired on a one-year appointment as a faculty member in the Department of Dance at Brigham Young University. I was not yet a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was an interesting year. The students were as full of light and conviction then as now—unofficial missionaries who were grounded in their faith, lived what they believed, and extended themselves to me with love, respect, and caring. Although I was not what one would call a “golden convert,” their

efforts did bear fruit, and I was baptized on August 18, 1973.

As a child I had grown up in the Russian Orthodox faith and attended Divine Liturgy on Sundays at St. Barbara’s Cathedral in Edmonton. The service was delivered in the Russian language, which I did not understand because my parents, like so many children of immigrants at that time, chose not to speak their heritage language anywhere, in favor of English and of assimilation into Canadian culture. There were understandable reasons for this.

My mother often related stories of unkind words and deeds she and other members of her family experienced throughout their lives because they were “different.” Growing up, I was also occasionally a recipient of similar unkind acts. While I was a junior high school student, each class member was routinely required, during a roll call of sorts, to state aloud from their desk their ethnic heritage. For those of us with German and Russian ancestry it was not a particularly joyful activity as our classmates followed our declarations with taunts of “Nazi” or “Commie.”

I hated those days. I would come home from school in tears, begging my mother, “Couldn’t I *please* say I’m Ukrainian?” But even though she was reliving her pain through mine, she would always say the words I wished were not true: “No, Catherine. We are not Ukrainian. We are Russian.” The one goal I had in life was to someday marry a man with an Anglo-Saxon surname—like Brown, or White, or Green!

Although I was ashamed of my heritage, I did believe in God, and I wanted to do what was right, so I attended church regularly, even though I did not understand a word of what was being said throughout the service.

As a freshman at the University of Alberta, I began to receive gentle promptings to study the Russian language. The reason for this eluded me, but I listened, took a beginning Russian course, and—not being especially talented at language learning (then or now)—

shortly after having completed the course, promptly forgot virtually everything I had been taught. Why did I need to learn Russian?

I finished undergraduate school, worked for two years to save money for graduate school, enrolled at the University of Utah, enjoyed the two years I spent there very much, learned a great deal about modern dance, and graduated. I knew that since I was not an American citizen I needed to return to Canada, which I was not quite ready to do because I wanted to hone the dance skills I had just acquired before returning home to a more “pioneering” environment. I investigated and discovered something called a practical training visa, which allowed international students to remain in the United States for up to 18 months to practice skills they had learned in school by being employed in a discipline-related field. I resolved that the first university position offered to me in the United States would be the one I would accept. That position was offered by BYU. Thanks to the efforts of Clayne Jensen—then dean of the College of Physical Education—my practical training visa was renewed every year for four years until I met and married a wonderful widower from New Zealand who had a vibrant and talented young daughter—and a green card. Because he had a green card, I was able to obtain one, and my “year” at BYU has turned into 34 years and still counting.

Almost immediately upon becoming a member of the Church, the Spirit of Elijah began to burn deeply within me. I not only faced the fact that I had Russian ancestry but began to embrace it. I became overwhelmingly grateful for all of the sacrifices that both sets of grandparents had made in eking out a better existence for themselves and their posterity in a new land.

I started studying Russian again—between babies and BYU obligations—learning and forgetting and learning again. I cannot tell you how many times I asked myself, “Why

am I doing this? This is crazy. I don't have anyone with whom to speak the language. It must be so that I can read genealogical records someday—if I can ever gain access to them from behind the Iron Curtain."

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1989, a wonderful opportunity was made available to me. I was invited to accompany the BYU International Folk Dance Ensemble on their tour to Russia, Poland, and England. As the plane touched down at the Sheremetyevo International Airport in Moscow, I remember thinking, "We could just as well be landing somewhere on the Canadian prairies. It looks exactly the same." No wonder so many Slavic people settled in western Canada at the beginning of the 20th century. They must have felt a measure of security in the midst of geographically familiar surroundings, in spite of the many hardships they had to face.

My mother's father had always wanted to return to Russia for a visit before he died, but unfortunately that never happened. For me, going to Russia with the folk dancers was going back for him. I thought about him continually the entire time I was there. I loved being surrounded by the Russian people and their culture. And I got to practice the language! But something told me that the real purpose for my learning Russian had not yet been fulfilled.

In my excitement to experience Russia, I had completely underplayed my pending opportunity to experience the people and culture of Poland—until I remembered that my father's parents had been born in what today is Poland. I wondered if the folk dancers would be performing anywhere near where these grandparents grew up. As I looked at the map, I remember the following rapidly developing chain of thoughts: (1) Hmmm, interesting, not too far; (2) I wonder if there would be any way I could work it out to get to their villages; (3) No, I HAVE to find a way to get there; (4) No matter what, I WILL find a way!

The plane landed in Warsaw. We boarded a bus that had been reserved to take us to Mragowo in the north of Poland. I was sitting in the front seat across from the driver when our tour guide, Danuta, boarded the bus with a clipboard in her hands. As she was looking over the ensemble roster, I heard her say, "Cathy Black."

Sitting directly in front of her, I responded, "That's me."

To which she replied, "I see you are from Canada. I worked in Montreal for two years learning English."

The two of us bonded immediately.

After just a few hours with the Folk Dance Ensemble, Danuta noticed that there was something special about the group compared to others she had been assigned in the past. She said that the performers and leaders were not self-centered, that they were kind and polite to each other, and that they did not ask for anything unless they really needed it.

One of the things we did ask for was a room—one that we could use for a church meeting the next morning. Danuta procured the room and asked whether guests could attend this church meeting. Of course the answer was yes, and she was warmly encouraged to join us, which she did. It was a beautiful testimony meeting during which Danuta was moved to tears a number of times. Following the meeting I gave her my triple combination, and she immediately began to read about Joseph Smith. The next day we boarded the bus back to Warsaw. At the end of that journey Danuta informed us that we would have a different guide to accompany us to the Carpathian Mountains in southeastern Poland and that she would come the next day to say good-bye to us.

Before she left that day I explained to her my obsession about going to visit my grandparents' villages and asked her if there would be any way that she might help me do so. Danuta took down the last names of my



ancestors and the names of their villages and told me she would see me tomorrow.

As had been the case in Russia, 1989 was also a very difficult time economically for Poland. Shelves were bare of essential merchandise, and having a telephone, let alone a car, was a luxury. When Danuta arrived to meet us at the bus the next day, she had acquired a car, a driver, and two contacts she had called who agreed to meet with me in the Carpathian Mountains. One of these people was a priest and the other a gentleman by the name of Mieczysław Herbut, who said that he was sure we were not related because he came from a different part of Poland than my grandparents. Pressing him, Danuta asked if he would be willing to meet with me anyway, in spite of his reservations. He said he would.

We were scheduled to meet at a restaurant in Nowy Sącz. Danuta, our driver, and I arrived first and visited while we waited for Mr. Herbut. As he walked through the door, tears welled up in my eyes. Let me show you two photos—one of Mieczysław Herbut and one of my father, Michael Herbut. This is one miracle that nobody could miss! Even more uncanny than the remarkable physical resemblance of these two men was the identical nature of their mannerisms. It was absolutely unbelievable! After receiving the photograph of my father, Mieczysław, who learned English during World War II while a German prisoner of war, wrote to my father informing him that he knew he had discovered a twin brother. The two men continued to correspond with each other until Mieczysław's death in the mid-1990s. Although we have not yet been able to verify a genetic relationship between these two men, I am working on it.

In addition to visiting my grandparents' villages and meeting with people there, Danuta and I searched genealogical records, and I was able to add a generation to my family tree. Since then Danuta has joined the Church, has become proficient in genealogy, and has helped

many Americans find their Polish ancestors. By searching Polish records on my behalf, she has helped me access several generations to add to my family tree. In 2005 she was called to codirect the newly created LDS Warsaw Family History Center. I never cease to marvel at the privilege that has been mine to have been part of this amazing series of events.

And there is yet another dimension to this story. On the 1989 trip we discovered that the family names on my father's side were not in fact Russian names but belonged to a Slavic minority population known as Lemkos, who had identified themselves as Russians at the time my grandparents left for North America. This discovery has resulted in a serious academic research agenda for me, which has included trips back to Poland for the express purpose of studying the dance and rituals of the Lemko people.

In the latter part of the 1990s the prompting to study Russian arose yet again. This time I hired a tutor to speak with me once a week over several months. Then, on Sunday, March 19, 2000, while reading a front-page feature article in the *Deseret News* entitled "The Orphans of Vladivostok," I was overcome by the desire to adopt a Russian orphan. I shared my thoughts with my husband, positive he would say, "We're too old." We were almost empty nesters. To my surprise he replied, "Why not?" As we discussed it further, we decided that it would be best for us to adopt two children rather than one and that we would like them to be sisters between the ages of six and 10.

We had never before talked about adoption of any kind; we did not even know where to begin. We decided to start by contacting our adult children to seek their approval. That obtained, we were led, through a series of timely events, to an agency specializing in Russian adoptions. Interestingly, one of the directors of the agency told us that on the very weekend that I was reading the article

in the *Deseret News*, they had e-mailed their contact in Russia to ask if they could get two or three more children, whom they felt certain they could place. They were told that two sisters, ages seven and eight, had just been approved for adoption.

We were able to afford this adoption because of an inheritance left to us following my father's passing. The first piece of physical documentation we received concerning the children was a photograph. One of the little girls bore a striking resemblance to my mother's youngest sister. The photograph was followed by written information about the girls. In it we discovered that the one who looked so much like my mother's sister also had the same birthday as my father. When we discovered the girls' surname, it turned out that it was the very name that my parents had planned to give my sister had she been a boy. These, and other similar "coincidences"—some too personal to share—made it clear to my husband and me beyond a shadow of a doubt that these two beautiful children were meant to be part of our family.

Although the process was anything but smooth, miracles continued to happen, and in late October 2000 the judge in Russia pounded her gavel and those two little Russian sisters became legally ours. It was wonderful to have basic Russian language skills to be able to help ease the girls into their new environment. As they have become fluent in English, my promptings to learn Russian have stilled, and I am at peace in knowing what the ultimate purpose was for which I needed to know the language.

The longer I live, the more deeply I appreciate my relationship with the Lord. I marvel that He knows me, cares about me, and literally leads me, guides me, and walks beside me every step of the way—just as He does for each of you (see "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 301). There are evidences of His presence all around us, just waiting to be discovered and acknowledged. What joy and peace we can receive from the recognition of the many miracles in our lives! May we strive constantly not to miss them but to see them clearly is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

