

“The Far and the Near”

KAYE TERRY HANSON

Two parts of my university education introduce my subject today. The first I remember from my BYU freshman English class, where I had an excellent teacher. We wrote essays that were due every Friday, and, at that point, I hoped someday to be a writer. I had enjoyed some success with my writing during my 18 years. I had won a prize here and there, and my parents certainly thought I wrote well. So I welcomed writing that essay every week—at first.

Somehow my teacher was more critical than my parents were. No matter how I tried, I couldn't seem to please him. Finally, one week I poured everything I had into three pages and handed it in, only to receive it back simply dripping with red ink and caustic comments about choosing something to write about that could be tackled in three pages. “Limit your subject,” he wrote, and “Write about something you understand!” There were exclamation points to help me see the fervor of his comments, and I was stunned to receive what I considered a failing grade. I had hoped to touch his heart with my stirring three-page treatise encompassing all anyone would need to know about democracy.

With a crisp remembrance of that experience in my mind, I broach my subject today with real

trepidation. I will talk about eternal perspective—which brings me to the second part of my university education that I want to share with you.

As an undergraduate English major at BYU I read a lot. In an early class on learning how to analyze literature, we read a short story by Thomas Wolfe called “The Far and the Near.” Wolfe wrote about a train engineer who drove the same line for 20 years. At a certain crossing he had to blow the whistle, and then, just ahead, every day a woman stepped out of her cottage and waved to him with a high, happy hand. He looked forward to that distant encounter every day. Soon the woman came to wave with a child by her side, then, over the years, the little girl grew bigger until now she was a grown woman, too.

The cottage where the woman lived was neat and tidy with flowers growing around it. The woman waved summer or winter, sunny days or gray, and the man promised himself that someday he would go meet the woman who had been such a bright spot in his life.

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Finally the day came. Retired from responsibility, he got off the train at the little town one day and walked the country road to where the woman lived. He was shocked to find that it was all unfamiliar, not at all as he had imagined it. In fact, when he got up enough courage to knock at the door, he found the woman who greeted him at the door was not beautiful, not free. Life's hardships had made her pinched and sullen and ugly. After struggling to explain why he was there, he left disappointed, beaten, and sad.

I have thought about that story many times over the years, looking at it this way and that, considering what it means to look at something from far away and then close-up. I discover that I am uncomfortable with Thomas Wolfe's conclusions and with the "unfinished" look, which communicates that something is wonderful from far away but ugly when seen close-up. I am concerned with our often jaundiced view of one another and our assumptions that one close-up look brings enough information to make clear judgments. I now realize that both the far view and the near view by Mr. Wolfe's engineer were false because he did not look with eyes of truth. Suppose he had used eyes of truth that would allow him to see from an eternal perspective—the Lord's perspective—with an understanding heart. It is just as the Savior explained to His disciples when asked why He taught in layered parables. Instead of "he that hath ears" (see Mark 4:9–13), let us say, "He that hath eyes to see, let him see." Looking with eyes of truth, I would say two seemingly contradictory things to Mr. Wolfe's engineer: "You didn't go near enough" and "You didn't go far enough away."

Looking Nearer Through Eyes of Truth

First, about looking nearer: Last summer I took my first baby steps into family history—oh, nothing as noble as searching out lines of our family to take names to the temple to have them sealed to us forever. No, my aims were

more modest. I set out to write a simple story about my father, Andrew Jensen Terry—an ordinary man, now 94 years old, who lives in Beaver, Utah, the town where I was born and grew up. I hoped to capture his charm and his humor and some of the tales from his life that I have loved since I was a child. Interviews with him of several hours over a delightful weekend were to be the heart of my story, told in his own words and preserved for my grandchildren. I hoped Zachie, Olle, Sadie, Leif, and McKay might see that the elderly man who calls them—and all his other grandchildren—"Butch" was once a child like they are.

Soon I realized that the book wouldn't be complete without at least two other stories inseparably intertwined with my father's. First is that of my wonderful mother, Lyla Wixom Terry, who was accidentally killed more than 35 years ago while I was a missionary in the South German Mission. Second is that of my sweet stepmother, Edla Johnson Terry, who has been by my father's side since he was little more than middle-aged. They were two ordinary women—one a schoolteacher, the other a nurse—each having chosen one of the traditional roles available to women born about a century ago.

My father's tales about living in a tent in the Nevada desert with his parents and three siblings intrigued me. So I searched for histories of his parents, then of my mother's parents, then of their grandparents, until I had cobbled together small stories of each grandparent up to four generations before me. I found ordinary people: farmers, a few teachers, a lumberjack, a telegraph operator, two railroad graders, and people who were children in one story and young marrieds in the next—who then became the mothers and fathers who brought their skills and gave them freely to tame the wilderness of the American West. As I come nearer, Mr. Wolfe, I find no bitter, sullen people here. On the contrary, I discover something else entirely.

These are not ordinary people at all, though they didn't know it. These are heroes. They were

men and women who fought the elements, the economy, the challenges of the frontier. They were men and women who forged relationships through monogamy and polygamy and monogamy again to carve out lives of honor and, yes, glory.

I regret that I can't get close enough. I revel in bits of information that I find and discover that the family history center in my own stake has information to enrich my work. I have found the names of the ships on which my ancestors sailed to America. I have found census records with their names and occupations. I have found that some were involved in the Church history I already knew.

For example, Solomon Wixom, my mother's great-grandfather, was a member of the Schuyler, Illinois, militia and a member of the Church. As a militia member he was called with his unit to go to Carthage to keep the peace as Joseph Smith and Hyrum were arrested and put in jail there. He tried to explain that his allegiance to Joseph was too great, but those around him insisted that the Mormons do their duty and go to Carthage with them. He went. On June 26, 1844, he watched as Joseph and Hyrum were taken to the Carthage courthouse; then he helped keep order as they were returned to jail. On June 27, because of the seeming quiet, Solomon's group was relieved of duty and sent back home to Schuyler, Illinois. They had traveled 10 miles on their way and set up camp when a horse and rider galloped through shouting that "Joseph and Hyrum have been killed!" But Solomon hadn't had to be there. He hadn't had to choose where his allegiance lay.

My father's grandmother, Bengtha Swenson, left beautiful Sweden disowned and knowing that she may never hear from her father or mother again in this life. Did they quarrel? Did she try to explain about the gospel? After whatever words had been said and she had left for Denmark to work for a year before boarding a ship set for the golden shores of America, did her mother waken in the night

to weep for her daughter and for the words that had passed between them? They never had contact again.

The far and the near? Oh that we could draw nearer to heal the rifts we make with those we love!

This I know to be true. Family matters. The learning that comes in the laboratory of the home is one reason we have accepted this earthly existence—yes, more than accepted: rejoiced over. Yet when I look at how far we have to go, how much we have to learn to ever be like the Savior, I despair over the length of the journey. How can it ever be? How can we learn enough?

Resolving family problems lies at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East. "We are two brothers," a priest in Jerusalem said to me, "born in the same cradle." In the Jerusalem Center we employed both Israeli and Palestinian workers. They worked side by side—respectfully, for the most part; hopefully; and with responsibility. That microcosm of Holy Land society leads me to believe—to hope—that there is a solution to the anger between the two peoples. As I discussed such things with my friends on both sides of the issues, I was amazed to discover that everyone—really everyone whom I knew—wanted peace. They wanted the leaders to work out solutions. They didn't hate each other. They knew there was some way to live together to the mutual benefit of both sides without encroaching on each other's beliefs.

I watched Abdullah, a Palestinian worker, stand respectfully at attention on the balcony of the Jerusalem Center as the siren sounded for Prime Minister Rabin's funeral after he was assassinated. I saw our Israeli security chief hire Palestinian workers to help guard the center, and on one occasion when fire broke out because children were playing with matches under some nearby brush, my Israeli friend watched one of our fine Palestinian workers wade into that fire with our fire hose, remarking

to me, “When I’m in trouble, I want Ali to be right there. Ali is a brave man.”

Have you seen that, Mr. Wolfe? Do you know that when we get right up close to someone, we may see their warts but we may also see their souls? And they are brave and beautiful.

Let’s now look from farther away. What does a broader view tell us about the truth of this earthly existence?

Looking with Eyes of Truth from Farther Away

In my mind’s eye I imagine our learning about coming to earth, rejoicing, knowing we could do whatever was required and understanding that this earthly existence was the next necessary step in our eternal progression. But in that pure spiritual environment, I wonder, did we realize what it would mean to have the veil drawn, to be here without “recollection of [our] former friends and birth” (“O My Father,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 292)?

I like places here that remind me of there. The temple is one of those places. The temple lets me look at the big picture of eternity with the Savior Himself at the center. And sometimes, when I’m there, I get a glimpse of the whole thing—from the beginning to wherever “never-ending” is. And sometimes I almost understand.

One thing I understand for sure (this means our view necessarily focuses in again) is that the Savior is the key to our whole earthly existence. I think of the baby in Bethlehem, the toddler in Egypt and then in Nazareth, the stripling boy who learned to build things by Joseph’s side. I think of earthly parents teaching Him. I think of Galilee and the sea where the tempest raged; of Capernaum, where He taught and found friends like Peter and John, who followed Him. I think of Bethany, just around the shoulder of the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem, where He liked to stay with Mary and Martha and Lazarus. He ate and slept and grew and laughed and was discouraged and enjoyed friends—just as we do. He underwent this mortal experience to learn and

progress—just as we do. Because of that experience, He understands us. If we work it right, this earthly experience will lead us to understand Him, too. No, it is stronger than that: He loves us, and, if we work it right, this earthly experience will lead us to love Him. “We love him,” says John, “because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). How else could He have endured Gethsemane? He paid for your life and mine, paid for your sins and mine, with His whole self. It was all that God Himself could offer. “I stand all amazed” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 193).

Our view must come closer again to examine what it means to love God, to love the Savior, because, after all, we are caught in this finite existence and must work out our salvation from here. How? What must I do today to demonstrate that I love the Lord? John reported that the Lord said, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35). Ah, me. It is hard to even like some people, let alone love them.

But here are some ways I have found that work. The most important way is praying for the gift of the Spirit that allows love.

Here’s another. Certainly I see my students at the first of the semester differently than I do at the end. As we forge through this learning process together, I get glimpses of who they are, of what they hope, and, sometimes, of what moves them. In short, getting to know them—connecting with them, finding what truths we share and what passions we carry—is one way that helps me love them.

Here’s another way. At the Jerusalem Center we had wonderful mature couples, service couples, who came to help us run things more smoothly. They oversaw housekeeping, for example, or played the organ, led tours, helped with secretarial work in the office, and served as marvelous grandparent figures for hundreds of students. They offered themselves as role models of happy marriages, as experienced adults with listening ears and stable backgrounds. They loved the students.

I learned a lesson from a brother from one of those couples. He was a professional man—learned and wise. He was a former stake president who had clearly blessed the lives of thousands of people in his lifetime.

He told me how he and his wife had approached their time to serve a mission. He said his wife was willing to serve wherever the Lord called them. But he—in his “wisdom,” he said—had counseled the Lord about what he would be willing to do. He told the Lord and those who issue mission calls for the Lord that he couldn’t learn a language, wasn’t willing to proselyte, and would like to continue practicing his profession. So they were called as a service couple to Jerusalem. There—mingling with young people full of faith, walking where the Savior walked along the dusty roads of Palestine, and growing to love and understand the Savior’s teachings with a depth he hadn’t known before—he confided to me near the end of his stay, “Now I will go wherever the Lord wants me to go. This time I put my whole self upon the altar.” That’s another way to love our fellow travelers on this earth, by putting our whole selves upon the altar and “yielding [our] hearts unto God” (Helaman 3:35). President Ezra Taft Benson said, “Men and women who turn their lives over to God will discover that He can make a lot more out of their lives than they can” (*TETB*, 361).

I have one more way to learn to love. My story begins in first grade. I loved first grade. The windows that were decorated with our drawings for anyone to see who drove down Main Street were changed with the seasons. I loved the smell of chalk dust and pencil shavings. I loved jump rope and tag at recess, and I loved the books the teacher read to us after lunch. In our school, two first-grade classrooms on the first floor were matched by two second-grade classrooms directly above on the second floor. We first graders were not allowed to go up those stairs except on an occasional afternoon visit to the school library, carefully chaperoned by our teacher. But each day I stood on

the first floor and watched the second graders clamber up the stairs talking and laughing, the boys punching each other in the arm and the girls giggling and whispering. I longed to go up those stairs, too. Going upstairs to second grade appeared to me to be the ultimate step in maturity. Second graders knew more than we did, and somehow I understood that knowing more would be advantageous to me, so I longed for the day I could go upstairs to second grade.

That day came. I climbed the stairs on the first day of second grade and sat down in my classroom expecting maturity and understanding to unfold before me. I looked around the room and found seated there the same children I had been with in first grade. To my surprise and dismay, nothing, simply nothing, seemed different. It appeared that second grade would not unlock the mysteries of the world. Surrounding me were ordinary children. All of us apparently were no different than we were last year. What a disappointment when I had expected something much more grand.

I have lived long enough now to watch my classmates grow up, marry, raise families, wrestle with the economy, put food on the table, and set one foot in front of the other in doing the best they could. What I couldn’t see in second grade—and often miss even now—was that I was growing, too. Just because the same people were around me didn’t mean we were the same.

Understanding who those ordinary people around us are can help us love them more. C. S. Lewis understood, I feel, better than Thomas Wolfe. Lewis said:

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. . . . It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection 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. [C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 14–15; emphasis in original]

And there it is. No matter how it looks, we are no mere mortals. We must treat ourselves, and those sitting next to us in class, with more respect because of who they are—and because of who we are. We are not ordinary people. None of us is—not one. We are gods and goddesses in training. For us to move forward, we must be better than we are in our simple dealings with one another. We must love one another—not merely like them or tolerate them, but love them.

These things I know to be true. We are given time and opportunity to be molded like Jesus Christ. We are in a process. So are all those around us. By looking at this earth and its purpose from some broad perspective, we can sense the purpose of the exercise, the school—the university, if you will—that moves this earth life forward in our becoming like the Savior.

So I plan to gather my grandchildren around me and tell them stories about where they came from. I want to tell them about Anna, the little girl who grew up to live in a tent. I want to tell them about Don, the baby boy whose mother died when he was nine months old but who now tells us that never was a mother kinder to him than his father's third wife. That little boy grew up to be the kindest man many people have ever known. And, of course, I want to tell them about Andrew, the little boy who wanted to get rid of his warts so much that he stole his grandmother's only dishrag, rubbed his warts with it, and buried it in the garden because he heard that would

make warts disappear. That little boy grew up to call all of his grandchildren "Butch." I want them to understand the nobility they spring from, the richness of their heritage, the nature of their caring.

I want to tell them about Bethlehem and Nazareth and Galilee and about a little Boy who lived there and grew up to offer them life eternal. I want to help their parents teach them not to "fight and quarrel one with another" but "to love one another, and to serve one another" (Mosiah 4:14–15).

Someday this mortality will put on immortality. Someday we will see not "through a glass, darkly; but . . . face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Someday the unfolding lessons of our life will become clear to us: exactly why we failed chemistry or why that relationship didn't work out or why we lived in days of war or why we were taught the gospel in Argentina or Germany or what purpose the daily efforts of life had and why the crying babies and the pain of divorce and loneliness and heartache were allowed, making us sit in dismay with our heads in our hands. Something about all of this "shall give [us] experience" (D&C 122:7) and turn us to Him to seek solace and peace and understanding, teaching us to love Him. We love Him because He first loved us. Because He loves us, we may, we can, we must love each other.

Because we are not ordinary people as Thomas Wolfe would have us believe, we will see as John does: "Beloved, now are we the sons [and daughters] of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.