

“On Earth”

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Roughly one decade after the end of World War II, Samuel Beckett completed his second play, *Endgame*. The title refers to the final portion of a chess match—the outcome pretty much decided but the pieces still needing to be moved. At one point, just over halfway through *Endgame*'s action—if one can call it that—the character Hamm, frustrated with the unassailability of his reality, utters, “You’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!” (Samuel Beckett, *Endgame: A Play in One Act* [New York: Grove Press, 1958], 53, 68).

In the decades since I first came across this line, I have spent a good deal of time thinking about its implications in the context of the play, in the context of Beckett’s life, and in the context of life in the contemporary Western world. But what have occupied my thinking much more often are the implications of this line in the context of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

I speak today as one “on earth”—as one subject to the pains, hardships, and uncertainties constituent of life on earth. As such, I do not know that I will provide many answers. Instead, what I hope to do is raise questions. More correctly, my intention today is to invite you to join me in engaging in the conditions of uncertainty that are a divinely designed part of what it means to be on earth. This is

an invitation to examine what it means to be on earth while being subject to the restrictions of being on earth. So I invite you to explore along with me. This is admittedly more difficult in a lecture environment, but I believe we can move together in thought, each making his or her own momentary excursions into familiar or uncharted waters but returning intermittently to common questions and issues.

My hope is that we can learn together. In his discussion of learning, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze asserted that there is only so much a swimming instructor can teach a student on the sand. The instructor needs to take the student into the water, where the swimmer’s body can learn to negotiate the weight and movement of the waves (see Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994], 23). By the same logic, at some point the instructor must also let go of the swimmer.

Those of us on earth know about being let go. It is frightening but exhilarating too. It is a burdensome and wonderful thing. I ask you to keep this in mind for the next little while, for

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while some patches of what I have prepared will be quite clear—maybe even a Sunday School review for us—other patches may be a bit purple as I attempt to negotiate the weight and movement of the waves that I have been experiencing. Thus it is with soberness and joy that I speak to you today as we think together here “on earth.” I pray that the Spirit of the Lord attends us.

My talk comprises three sections: (1) The Blessed Fall, (2) Thinking and Playing on Earth, and (3) The End of Art.

Part One: The Blessed Fall

To be sure, Hamm’s sentence reeks of nihilism: “You’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!” But at the same time, for one who shares the broader perspective afforded by the gospel, the two phrases also open up a space for hope. To be on the earth, to live in the world—not exactly the same thing, but close enough for our purposes today—is to live in conditions of pain, hardship, and uncertainty. It is to live among thorns and thistles and sweat, as the book of Genesis put it (see Genesis 3:18–19). Beckett had been reading Genesis during his years of writing *Endgame*—the character name Hamm being an allusion to that first book of the Bible.

In the context of the gospel, we recognize these conditions as those attendant to what we call the Fall—a duration initiated by transgression in the Garden of Eden, a duration in which the earth and its inhabitants, then and future, exist in a state of separation from the God who created them. Alma calls it a “probationary state” and a “preparatory state” (Alma 42:13), explaining that it is a period in which men and women become “subjects to follow after their own will” (Alma 42:7).

In this regard, Latter-day Saints would agree with the sentiment of Hamm’s words. Indeed, we live in a state of malady; a state of pain, hardship, and uncertainty; a state in need of a cure. But at the same time, we would also be quick to point out that, contrary to Hamm’s latter statement, there is in fact a cure for this

malady: the Savior, Jesus Christ. Amulek taught that, in response to the Fall, “it is expedient that an atonement should be made; for according to the great plan of the Eternal God there must be an atonement made, or else all mankind must unavoidably perish” (Alma 34:9). He further asserted that “that great and last sacrifice [the Atonement] will be the Son of God” (Alma 34:14). Then, seventy-five years later in another part of the world, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, meekly declared, “It is finished” (John 19:30)—an utterance soon punctuated by those miraculous words of the angel: “He is risen” (Matthew 28:6).

The Atonement of Jesus Christ conquered the physical and spiritual death ushered in by the Fall. But even though Jesus Christ can be seen as the cure, insofar as His Atonement does redeem us all from the Fall, this does not mean that humankind will not endure the fallen conditions that constitute the earth in its current state. It is essential to the exaltation of each and every one of us that we pass through this fallen condition. In this sense the Fall—with the pain, hardship, and uncertainty that define it—is in actuality a blessing.

This idea is powerfully expressed in the words of the Lord to the Prophet Joseph Smith when the Prophet was imprisoned in Liberty Jail. In Doctrine and Covenants 122 the Lord pronounced a litany of trials reflective of what the Prophet had experienced and would yet experience in his life. One glimpse of this is in verse 7:

And if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and above all, if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.

To some extent, the severity of the trials that Joseph experienced were directly proportionate to the significance and sacredness of the calling he had as prophet. We may not suffer trials as severe, but we are all, without exception, subject to trials: “You’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!”

At the time he penned this line for Hamm, even Beckett had been undergoing his own unique set of trials. Born in Dublin, Ireland, Beckett was living as an expatriate in France while writing *Endgame*. In the year prior to the completion of the first version of the play, he was in the middle of a multiyear creative block, had endured and lost a bitter land dispute involving his home, and had spent an enervating winter caring for his brother Frank, who was suffering through the final months of lung cancer (see Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* [New York: HarperCollins, 1997], 444, 458; and James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* [London: Bloomsbury, 1996], 404–5). Beckett, too, lived “on earth.” But the same promise that came to Joseph Smith came to Beckett and comes to every one of us: “Know thou, my [child], that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.” To be on earth, to exist in conditions of pain and hardship, is a profound blessing.

Latter-day Saints often share this account of Joseph Smith when discussing the trials they endure in this life, and rightfully so. Often, when sharing the account, we also continue into verse 8 of section 122, which reads, “The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?”

In this verse Joseph was reminded—and so are we—of the divine Atonement of our Savior and the saving grace that it is. Moreover, we are reminded that the Lord too lived on earth and was thus not exempt from the blessed malady that is the Fall. This, I believe, is captured by the double prepositional phrase “in and through” that occurs a handful of times in the Book of Mormon—such as, for example, in

2 Nephi 2:6: “Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth.” In order to overcome the Fall for us, Jesus had to endure the Fall as us. Being on earth was just as necessary for His exaltation as it is for ours.

There are, of course, ways to mitigate some of the trials we face in our lives. Because of what He suffered in the Atonement, the Savior can comfort us in times of need. And just knowing that Jesus Christ “hath descended below” everything can help significantly.

It helped me during my first month as a missionary in Finland, when I became immensely frustrated with my inability to speak Finnish well enough to do missionary work at the level I desperately wanted to be doing it. I would often read section 122 and find comfort in the Lord’s words to Joseph. Of course I was comforted to know that I would be blessed for continuing in the work and studying the language. I had had enough experience in the gospel to know that my obedience to the mission rules, my adherence to the teachings that I received from those with stewardship to train me as a missionary, and my alignment with the spiritual promptings my mission companion and I were receiving would provide their own blessings. Knowledge of and faith in the gospel can help to comfort us in times of pain and hardship.

But what about one who does not share this same knowledge or faith, or what about one who at one point had faith in the gospel but is now struggling or has struggled with that faith, asking, “Is the gospel true?” It can be difficult to use faith to comfort us in times of trial when it is the state of our faith that is the trial. As I have already noted, even if only cursorily, pain and hardship are part and parcel of the Fall. Uncertainty is equally essential. What is true? How do we know? Michael A. Goodman adeptly treated these and similar questions in a BYU devotional a couple of weeks ago (see “Become a Seeker: The Way, the Truth, and the Life,” BYU

devotional address, 12 July 2016). He spoke about the epistemological challenges we face when it comes to ascertaining truth in this life.

I too spend a good deal of time thinking about this. As a missionary I thought a lot about it in terms of helping others gain faith in the principles and ordinances of the gospel. Today, as a university professor and a father of five, I think a lot more about how uncertainty has led a number of those in my life to leave either their faith or their membership in the Church or both. I also think about it in terms of my own spiritual journey and why I persist stalwartly in my faith. Struggling with questions of truth in and of the world is again what it means to be “on earth.” And just as with the struggles with pain and hardship, the struggle with uncertainty is a blessed malady that is necessary for our exaltation and eternal progression in the kingdom of God.

Part Two: Thinking and Playing on Earth

As one who primarily teaches critical studies courses in the areas of theatre and performance, I have dedicated much of my teaching efforts to inspiring students to think about (1) how they think and (2) how art, performance, literature, and philosophy are or can be or should be a part of that thinking.

Thinking is tricky business. It is what we use to construct for ourselves everything that we know of the world—including the concepts of *construction*, *selves*, and *world*. Of course, because thinking also includes itself among the concepts that it constructs, we must also ask ourselves what we mean by *thinking*. The reflexivity that occurs in thinking about thinking may be disheartening in its own air of nihilism—“there’s no cure for that”—but it is also liberating in its potential for imagining the possibility of something better, truer, and more perfect. For me, thinking about thinking has been, literally, a godsend. Thinking has not been the thing that has led me out of my faith but rather the very thing that has brought me deeper into it.

Thinking is dangerous, but it is also freeing, and, more profoundly, the danger inherent in thinking is also necessary for thinking to be that liberating force that it is. This is well expressed in one of what BYU calls its foundation documents—a collection of speeches that both inform and extrapolate on BYU’s educational mission.

In an address to the BYU student body in 1969, Elder Hugh B. Brown, who at the time was First Counselor in the First Presidency, stated the following:

One of the most important things in the world is freedom of the mind; from this all other freedoms spring. Such freedom is necessarily dangerous, for one cannot think right without running the risk of thinking wrong, but generally more thinking is the antidote for the evils that spring from wrong thinking. More thinking is required, and we call upon you students to exercise your God-given right to think through every proposition that is submitted to you and to be unafraid to express your opinions, with proper respect for those to whom you talk and proper acknowledgment of your own shortcomings. [Hugh B. Brown, “An Eternal Quest—Freedom of the Mind,” BYU devotional address, 13 May 1969; see also “An Eternal Quest—Freedom of the Mind,” in John W. Welch and Don E. Norton, eds., *Educating Zion* (Provo: BYU Studies, 1996), 84]

This passage resonates with me for a number of reasons, most of all for the way it captures the paradoxical tension that is central to thinking—the way that thinking opens up a space of indeterminacy in which anything is possible for the moment.

Thinking is subjunctive. It is neither this nor that but always perhaps, if, maybe, the possibly possible. Thinking is a gesture of play. It leverages possibility from the bedrock of reality. It is perhaps not surprising that thinking about thinking as an act of play would be compelling to a theatre professor. It is, after

all, what theatre folks do: they play and they pretend, engaging in an activity that theatre maker Herbert Blau called “blooded thought” (see Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre* [New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982]).

Just as President Brown recognized the inherent dangers of thinking, theatre makers are acutely aware of the inherent dangers of their art. Allow me to illustrate with an anecdote from my home.

Years ago, one of my daughters, who was about seven years old at the time, had a friend over at our home for a play date. The two of them were playing pretend.

When my wife went to check on them, she observed that they were pretending to shoot each other. She explained to them that she was thrilled that they were using their imaginations and playing pretend but that it was not a good idea to pretend to shoot each other. “We don’t shoot people in real life, and so we don’t pretend to shoot them either,” she said.

The children nodded, and my wife left them to resume playing.

A little while later she went to check on them again, and again they were shooting each other. Patiently, my wife said, “I thought I told you that we don’t pretend to shoot people.”

My daughter responded, “I know, but now we are pretending that you didn’t say that.”

Pretending—a form of playing—allows us the liberty to imagine and live in, even if only momentarily and subjunctively, someplace better and purer than our current reality. It is the lifeblood of creativity and invention, but it also provides us with the liberty to suspend authority, defy spiritual law, and practice sin. Playing can be dangerous. And because play is not exclusive to theatre makers, it is not only theatre makers who are familiar with its dangers. The dangers are familiar to scientists, philosophers, artists, historians, and anyone with the spirit of curiosity and the courage to learn.

We should not be afraid of the danger in play. It is necessary for the blessings of play to be possible. We should not fear the danger, but we must respect it. As one committed to building up the kingdom of God here on the earth, I regularly ask myself, “Is theatre perhaps the worst thing that we could be doing for the kingdom?” Or, if I am feeling less hyperbolic, I ask, “Is theatre hurting more than it is helping?” I ask these questions not because I believe that theatre is inherently evil. On the contrary, I think that theatre, in its essence, is absolutely necessary for comprehending life itself, not because theatre shows us in its story and characters and place what life is or could be but rather because theatre is the exact opposite of life. Death is not the opposite of life; theatre is. Theatre is the life that occurs within life, making “life” appear in the disappearance of the performance.

I ask myself about the possible dangers of theatre for the building up of the kingdom of God because not to do so potentially holds theatre as something as important as or maybe even more important than the kingdom itself. Too often artists allow their romanticized notions of art to eclipse the critical thinking that is necessary to justify art. In order for LDS artists to have the courage necessary to create the type of work that truly makes significant contributions to the building of the kingdom, they need to be willing to question severely the nature and function of their art and of art itself.

Part Three: The End of Art

For all that we know about how art functions in the world, we also know so little. What we think we know, however, suggests that engagement in the various forms of artistic creation can help us to become familiar with how to negotiate the truths of the world, including a truth we presume when we say “the world.”

Art can be used to communicate messages about the world: morals, maxims, ideas, themes,

and so on. Art also presents representations of the world—representations that can be both reflections of the world and constitutive of it. Of the former, William Shakespeare, via Hamlet, explained that theatre specifically and art generally is “to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature” (*Hamlet*, act 3, scene 2, line 25).

In more recent years, the German theatre maker Bertolt Brecht is rumored to have responded, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.” We heard a fascinating exploration of this sentiment two months ago in Sarah M. Coyne’s discussion of princess and superhero representations in the media (see “The Fantasy and the Reality of Your Royal Identity,” BYU devotional address, 31 May 2016).

But beyond the messages and representations that we are familiar with and often tout as the ends of art is the material delimitation that the most profound artists embrace as the challenge of artistic engagement. Art provides an opportunity to enter into the materiality of the world and mobilize it in an act of play. The whole of this process is emblematic of the condition of being on earth. While works of art can be utilized to present messages and representations of the world, the fact that they do so through materials of the world means that the encounter the artist has in creating the art and also the encounter the audience has on the other end are, in significant ways, shaped by the materiality of the world. In artistic encounters, creator and audience are embroiled in a struggle with the material factuality of the world, a factuality that necessarily affects all involved. In other words, and to return to our earlier metaphor, the swimmer must adapt to the weight and movement of the waves.

The world does not stop while we take time to experiment in art. Sure, in the moment that Benedict Cumberbatch, while acting as Hamlet, said, “To be, or not to be,” he was not Cumberbatch, he was Hamlet—but he was also not not Cumberbatch (see Richard Schechner,

Between Theater and Anthropology [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985], 110; Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3, scene 1, line 56).

Artists, in their playing, may create and be in a second world, but they are also not not in the first world, in God’s world. They are on earth.

A similar thing may be said for the university classroom, in which we play with different ideas and experiment with different possibilities. We always run the risk of thinking wrong. We are always in the world, always working with it and through it. This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of God’s plan for us here on earth. At the same time, it is perhaps also the most magnificent aspect of that plan.

Artistic pursuits allow us the glorious opportunity to explore the divinity of creativity. Indeed, our Father in Heaven is, as the prophet Jacob called him, “the great Creator” (2 Nephi 9:5, 6). In this sense, artistic pursuits allow us opportunities to become more like God, not just as we create but as we learn to create in a world of eternal, material law and with godlike privilege and responsibility—in short, with agency. Artistic pursuits provide us the opportunity to seek for truth in the depths of ambiguity and uncertainty. Artistic pursuits let us be on earth while being on earth. Artistic pursuits do not solve the problem of uncertainty—they do not necessarily move us from not knowing to knowing—but they very well might help us to expand our understanding of what it means to know. Artistic pursuits might very well help us expand our understanding of truth.

It Is Glorious on Earth

Brothers and sisters, we live on earth. We live in the conditions of the Fall. I, for one, am grateful for that. Without the Fall, the play that is essential to our spiritual progression could not be. Without the Fall, there is no thinking—at least no thinking worthy of the name.

Brothers and sisters, the Atonement of Jesus Christ is real. I feel its power in my life. I do

not know this with mathematical certainty, nor do I know this for having, as of yet, seen and felt the wounds in the Savior's body. But I know this where it matters—in my living on earth. I have come to know it through the spiritual senses that Michelle Stott James eloquently spoke of in her devotional last month (see "Empty Centers and the Fire of the Lord," BYU devotional address, 21 June 2016).

Brothers and sisters, we know so much and we know so little. The Lord has so much to teach us. Wisdom will be in how we choose to align with His pedagogy. Will we walk with Him into the waves?

The world is a wonderful place to be. It is glorious to be on the earth. It is glorious to be on earth. I pray that we rise to the challenge. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.