

“For to Sojourn in the Land”

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Several years ago while participating in a BYU Study Abroad program, our family visited the National Gallery in London during an exhibit on contemporary art. My husband thoughtfully took the children so I could have some time alone to enjoy the galleries. At the time, the oldest of our four children was eight and our youngest was about three. Out of the corner of my eye, I observed that he kept the children quite interested, even when looking at abstract works that really challenged my own attention span.

Our youngest child, who was holding on to his hand, appeared to be making a great effort to concentrate. After a few minutes of listening and walking from one abstract work to another, she planted herself in front of my husband until she got his attention. “Daddy,” she said, “Did adults do these things?” My husband, quite puzzled, answered, “Yes, of course.” “Well, daddy,” she said, “I can do better than that.” Even at that young age she had already acquired the basics of art appreciation, and she could articulate an informed opinion! On another occasion, as we were leaving Paris, another of our children said, “Which is taller, the Eiffel Tower or the Empire Strikes Back Building?”

These and other anecdotes have found a place in our family lore due to our partici-

pation in university-sponsored programs. Associating with students at BYU has been one of the most enjoyable and rewarding things I have done professionally in my life, and it continues to have great significance for me and for my family because it has taught us principles of eternal importance. Among many such opportunities, we have especially relished our participation in Study Abroad experiences. The personal growth that comes from sharing most of the waking hours with the same group of students continues to enrich our lives and to define more clearly in my mind the educational value of these opportunities abroad and the impact that a commitment to gospel truths and practices can make in our learning process.

Having been born in Spain, my favorite Study Abroad program is, of course, the one in Madrid. I am quite passionate about Spanish culture, and I delight in introducing others to it: the beauty of the Generalife gardens of Granada, designed with intimate spaces and harmonic simplicity [picture shown]; the sense of reverence gained from ancient cloisters

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[picture shown] with moving Romanesque art representing episodes about the life of Christ [picture shown]; the old Visigothic church standing since the seventh century in a remote corner of the Castilian plain and still in use by a handful of country people [picture shown]; the magnificent vistas of the Alcazar in Segovia, redolent with knightly deeds and adventure [picture shown]; the stark row of windmills in Consuegra, La Mancha, legendary home of Don Quixote [picture shown].

While in residence in Madrid with the students, I relish the opportunity to make weekly visits to the Prado Museum. It never fails to gladden my heart to hear a student say on an optional, last-day visit to the museum, “Sister Hoskisson, I really was not very interested in art at the beginning of this program, but I really like it now. I never thought I would.”

I know that these experiences abroad can sometimes challenge our comfort zone. Through personal experience and the counsel of others, I have also learned that those who are well prepared, who have realistic expectations of themselves, who respect the role of others in the group, who understand the goals of the program, and who make a commitment to make the best of the experience seem to be successful. On the other hand, I have also seen that a selfish attitude by any participant, together with a lack of appreciation for the guidelines established, usually results in personal dissatisfaction that often also affects others negatively.

In those rare contemplative moments of life, as I have thought back and basked in the wonderful memories of our days and weeks as a family together with the students, it has seemed to me that all of us on this earth are in the midst of a form of Study Abroad. We have left our heavenly home, our familiar surroundings, where loving parents watched over our well-being. We were given a passport issued by the kingdom of heaven with which we were to travel throughout this strange land we

call mortality, and, thus, we enthusiastically embarked on a great voyage of exploration and self-discovery.

Our heavenly home prepared us through premortal experiences to come to this earth. We participated in councils where we learned about the great plan of salvation, and we knew, became acquainted with, and sustained Christ as our director, our “tour guide,” and our Redeemer. We made commitments to live on this earth in harmony with the principles that we were taught. We understood that we were going to stay with a “host family” during our sojourn on earth, and we also knew we would have to make some adjustments in submitting our will to that of our Savior’s in order to achieve our supreme goal: that of returning to our heavenly home with all the knowledge, the experience, and the talents we could acquire from our own tailor-made adventures in mortality. With this glorious opportunity to be abroad, away from our heavenly parents, to expand our perspectives, and to have our horizons broadened came the challenge to travel like strangers in a strange land, removed from our heavenly culture.

One day many years ago, I stood in a train station in Reutlingen, Germany, with our first daughter, then three and a half months old, in my arms. I felt loneliness come over me as I had never before experienced. Not even the happy reunion with my husband after three weeks of separation could contain a wave of self-pity that washed over me. I felt completely alone, vulnerable, and in a different world.

I was among total strangers. I did not speak the language and I could not communicate. I was in surroundings that were so austere, so German, that I wondered in my mind: “How can I possibly stay here for two years? I don’t want to be here. I want to go home.” I know that many of you have probably experienced such feelings at one time or another in your life. I was overwhelmed. It was not as though I had not already experienced displacement in

my life. I was born in Spain. I had moved in my preteenage years with my parents to Uruguay. In my college years I had taken up residence in the United States under trying and difficult circumstances. Even in my newly married life I had moved from Utah to Boston—talk about a culture shock! Yet, standing on that train platform in Reutlingen, Germany, that August day, I was completely overcome by feelings of loneliness and estrangement. I was weary after a long transatlantic flight; drained from caring for the baby; and tired from an interminable train ride from the Zürich, Switzerland, airport and navigating through Swiss and then German immigration and customs, all the while transporting my meager worldly belongings in a couple of suitcases. Now we had to wait for a friend to pick us up, because we ourselves had no means of transportation.

It was then, standing in the train station in my utter exhaustion, that my husband told me we were to stay that night in the apartment of a total stranger, a sister from the local LDS branch. Sensing my feelings, he quietly explained that hotel accommodations were quite scarce in the town and that our funds were somewhat meager. Therefore, he had accepted the hospitality tendered by a kind sister whom he had just met that same week.

I was dismayed, and I just wanted to get back on a train and go home, right across the Atlantic! But, of course, I couldn't, and eventually we were on our way to Sister Eberhard's home. This good sister lived with a grandson in an older but adequate apartment overlooking a quaint square. She received us very graciously. Though it was the end of August, a chill was already in the air, and she had heated her home to make it more comfortable for us. She had also prepared a lovely supper of good Swabian food, which my husband wolfed down immediately. I, on the other hand, because of my weariness, had to force myself to eat. When it came time to retire, she took us to a bedroom with immaculate feather beds

made up with pristine white bedding, together with a makeshift crib for the baby. Before leaving, she offered to take care of our daughter through the night so that we could rest undisturbed. Of course, I declined. She then visited with us about breakfast. After she left, my husband and I noticed that we had not seen signs of another spare room in the apartment.

In the morning when we awoke, she had already heated up the bathroom for my shower and had prepared a large pan of warm water so I could bathe my baby. It became clear to me then that she had given up her own room and bed and had spent the night on a very uncomfortable couch in her grandson's small bedroom. This may not seem much for some of you, but those familiar with conditions in other places will understand the time and the care she had devoted to these preparations in our behalf. She had also gone very early to the bakery and had a wonderful breakfast waiting for us. Even though my contribution to the ensuing conversation was just *ja* and *nein*—the only words I knew in German at the time—and a smile, I understood her concern and her offer of help.

I felt a great warmth fill my heart, and I knew that I was not among strangers, that I was not alone. I was going to make it in that foreign environment. Just as the Lord had declared to the early saints, in Ephesians 2:19, a promise that encompasses both the spiritual and material aspects of our lives: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God." I had felt such a bond.

Nevertheless, while on this earthly journey with fellow citizens of the kingdom of God, often among strangers and foreigners, we at times are tempted to let a self-centered attitude of cultural superiority take over. But if we do this, we reject the directions that will lead us to the joyful fulfillment of our goals while in mortality. Perhaps the promptings of our Tour Guide for this life do not match those that

we had in mind, or perhaps we think we are required to expend more effort than we believe we need to make. If we ignore the knowledgeable guidance given us to navigate this life and we strike out on our own, we will surely squander much time, waste many efforts, and suffer numerous false starts. If, however, we are willing to become “as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [us], even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19), then we will not be left to wander through unfamiliar roads, to experience anxiety and apprehension, and to end up far from our intended goal.

Like most mothers, I was and always will be anxious about my children’s safety. When our oldest child first started school only a couple of blocks away from our home, she and I prepared thoroughly for the short journey. We walked the route together, and we talked about the crossing guard and about others she could walk with. We planned as well as we could. When school began I walked there with her, and I went back later to pick her up. Soon this became very trying for her, because, like all children are preprogrammed to do, she wanted to try things on her own. So, for a while, I would wait down by the corner where I could see the children coming from school. My daughter was very independent and reassured me she could do it on her own, so together we agreed on what was acceptable.

For a week or so she kept to the routine, but as her self-confidence grew, so did her desire to explore. One day the hour of arrival passed and she was not home. I waited; I grew impatient; I walked to the corner, but I could see no sign of her. I asked other children if they had seen her, but I got no results. Finally, I ran home to call the school, but they also knew nothing. By now she was almost an hour late, and I was beginning to panic.

Shortly thereafter, in bounded my daughter. Thankful to see her safe, but also upset, I asked

her why it had taken her so long to come home. She looked at me and said brightly, “But Mom, I took the shortcut!” Her own wishes, you see, had caused her to forget the rules she had agreed to keep. This choice could have put her at great risk, and she had caused her mother great anxiety. As with all of us, she could and did choose her behavior. But she could not choose the consequences.

Because our Father in Heaven loves us deeply and wants us to succeed, He has not only given us His Beloved Son to be our earthly guide, our director, our compass, but He has given us His words and the testimony of the Holy Spirit. We read in Alma 37:44-45:

For behold, it is as easy to give heed to the word of Christ, which will point to you a straight course to eternal bliss, as it was for our fathers to give heed to this compass, which would point unto them a straight course to the promised land.

And now I say, is there not a type in this thing? For just as surely as this director did bring our fathers, by following its course, to the promised land, shall the words of Christ, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise.

With the promised constant companionship of the Holy Spirit to accompany us, if we will but pay attention to and obey that still, small voice, we can be guided every step of our way through this wonderful adventure we call mortality. We need not feel lost, unprotected, or unimportant. The Lord has promised us in 2 Nephi 32:5, “For behold, again I say unto you that if ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do.” The Lord is then willing to walk with us every step of the way if we do not wander off on our own. This benefit is freely included in the individual study program that our Heavenly Father has laid out for each of us, and it can continue to bless us while in this mortal life. Though I do not completely

understand the nature of this miracle, I know that I have felt the influence of the Holy Spirit many times in my life in a variety of circumstances, and I have a testimony that this gift is given to all of us regardless of who we are, if we are only willing to listen.

In my office I have a plaque with a favorite scripture found in Alma 26:12:

Yea, I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things; yea, behold, many mighty miracles we have wrought in this land, for which we will praise his name forever.

Alma recognized his utter dependency on the Lord, and he was firm in his determination to keep to the program.

I also know that many mighty miracles have taken place in my life. As each of us contemplates his or her own life and the many paths we all have traveled to be here today, we will see clearly the hand of the Lord and His exquisite care, even if at times we find ourselves or those we love in trying circumstances.

So, the question then becomes, what are we doing during our sojourn on this earth? Do we resist the directions of a loving, kind, and all-knowing Tour Guide, or do we embrace with our whole heart, might, mind, and strength the program God has worked out for us?

We would do well not to forget that our loving Father never promised us that this trip would be free from trouble, cares, or doubts. We often worry about our worthiness, our lack of talents, and which paths we are to take. During such times we need to remember that we are part of a divinely designed plan and that our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, want us to succeed.

In his April 2004 general conference address, Elder Bruce C. Hafen declared:

This earth is not our home. We are away at school, trying to master the lessons of “the great plan of happiness” so we can return home and know what it means to be there.

*Christ’s Atonement is at the very core of this plan. Without His dear, dear sacrifice, there would be no way home, no way to be together, no way to be like Him. [Bruce C. Hafen, “The Atonement: All for All,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 98]*

My brothers and sisters, although we are all traveling in this world, through this strange land, we are not bound to this world, because Christ has reconciled all of us to Him without consideration of language, culture, or status. He has given us a passport bought with His own life. Indeed, as Elder Neal A. Maxwell pointed out, we should always carry the passport issued to us by the kingdom of heaven as we pass through this land of mortality. We may be tempted to trade in this divine passport for one issued by the world, thinking—in error, to be sure—that it will be easier to get around in this life with this new document. But we are not ultimately of this world. Jesus has paid the price to redeem every one of us, so that we will not be left behind in a lesser sphere. He has made it possible for us, at the end of our mortal Study Abroad, to return to the safety and the glory of our heavenly home, carrying with us our heavenly credentials stamped with the experiences we gained in this world.

We know that if we keep our covenants, if we follow the plan prepared for us before we came to this earth, if we listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and keep our eyes on the Divine Guide—our Savior and Redeemer—we will complete this journey successfully, and we will honor His name, even the sacred name of Jesus Christ. I pray that we may so live and that we may help others we meet along this journey, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.