

Empty Centers and the Fire of the Lord

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Many years ago, as a high school student, I had the opportunity to become acquainted with several Catholic nuns who lived in a convent in my hometown and worked in the nearby Catholic hospital. As their schedules permitted, I often spent time with them, walking in the park or visiting in the parlor of the convent.

One afternoon I happened to be talking with Sister Columba. She was a tiny, elderly woman who had been a member of the Irish Army before she became a nun. That day she was sharing with me the profound love that she had for our Savior, Jesus Christ, and as she spoke, tears were streaming down her face. It was a powerful spiritual moment that touched me in the deepest center of my being.

After I left that day, I pondered Sister Columba's testimony of Christ. I had grown up as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I had attended my church meetings and seminary classes. I had frequently borne testimony that the gospel of Jesus Christ was true. And yet I couldn't comprehend how it could be, with all of this truth, that I had never felt anything for Jesus Christ—certainly nothing like the level of worship and gratitude that I had experienced from Sister Columba.

That afternoon with this frail nun in the quiet parlor of the convent became the definitive moment of my spiritual growth, as it launched a quest to know my Savior that has shaped my entire life. The most critical point, which I have at last come to comprehend, is the absolute centrality of Jesus Christ and His Atonement to every aspect of our lives. Because of that centrality, the most significant challenge for us is to learn to grasp this center and to build our lives upon this secure foundation.

This injunction is nothing new. If we really look at it, this one fact—the centrality of Christ and the Atonement—builds the focus for all the religious instruction that the Church conveys. The question that I have been grappling with is this: Since Christ and His Atonement are so clearly the center toward which all our religious experience leads, why is it often so difficult for us to actually connect with that center and to make it our own in an active way?

Of course there are many ways to answer this question, but today I would like to share some insights that I have found as I have pondered this question in my own life.

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Mortal Perception and Spiritual Perception

We are born into this world as somewhat awkwardly composite beings in which an eternal spirit has been enclosed in a mortal, physical body. This dividedness comes, I believe, because these two disparate elements—mortal body and eternal spirit—provide us with two distinctly different mechanisms for comprehending the world. I will call these “mortal perception” and “spiritual perception.”

Mortal perception is the means of understanding that is provided by our physical body. This body is equipped with an amazing array of capabilities. These include our physical senses, such as seeing, hearing, tasting, and touching, but they also include the cognitive abilities that enable us to think, remember, hypothesize, and synthesize. As we develop this amazing wealth of abilities provided by our mortal bodies, we learn to make sense of the world and to master our environment.

However, these mortal abilities are also limited, and at times faulty, simply because they are just that—mortal. There is always something we don’t know. A pencil seems to be bent when we look at it in a cup of water. Sometimes we think we see something that isn’t there, or we don’t hear when someone speaks directly to us. Although we can understand a great deal about the world, this comprehension only extends as far as the limits of our mortal capacities. We can’t see into the future, read minds, or understand the underlying reasons for many actions. There are always huge gaps in our knowledge and understanding of that which surrounds us. Our mortal perception is always limited by the bounds of language, culture, personal baggage, and emotional states.

Fortunately, mortal perception is not the only means of coming to terms with our mortal existence. Because of our eternal spirit, we are also equipped with a great capacity for spiritual learning. Our spiritual perception provides us with a conduit of direct connection with God through the medium of His Spirit. We may

think that—because of the veil of mortality that has been drawn between us and our memories of life before birth—God has abandoned us on earth. But it is only the limitations of our mortal perceptions that give us this illusion of isolation from God. As soon as we embrace our spiritual way of knowing, we find that God is as close to us as we allow Him to be, and His communication with us is constant.

Our spiritual mode of perception is not limited by our mortal senses or rationality and therefore isn’t reducible to language, culture, or personal baggage. It is a direct link, through the Spirit, to our all-knowing and all-powerful Father, who is pleased to give us guidance when we seek it. Spiritual perception enables us to comprehend eternal truths that can’t be explained through our physical rationality because these truths belong to the realm of the divine—that is, to God. Our spiritual perception enables us to receive constant inspiration, enlightenment, and personal revelation. There are no limitations to the possibilities of our spiritual perception—except the limits that we place on our own efforts to develop this aspect of our being.

It may be that when we enter mortality our spiritual and mortal ways of perceiving are in balance, but it doesn’t take long for the seemingly more concrete mortal ways of perceiving to begin to predominate. Spiritual ways of perceiving aren’t as obvious; they can’t be rationally processed in the same way as tasting dirt or looking through a magnifying glass. As we explore our environment and school our physical capacities, the mortal way of experiencing life, with all of its apparent solidity and reasonableness, begins to seem normal. The mortal seems to be what *is*.

The Dangers of Mortal Perception

Because the mortal way of perceiving seems so powerfully real, it can happen that in our minds the mortal and spiritual ways of knowing become blurred and confused so

that sometimes we sincerely believe that we are operating in a spiritual mode when we are actually relying almost entirely on the limited mortal perception that seems most natural to us. This is the confusion that makes it possible to know the scriptures inside and out without ever being illuminated by the spiritual fire that testifies of the truth of those scriptures. This is why people can recite all that mortals can know *about* Jesus Christ without ever *knowing* Christ or being touched by His Spirit. This is why I had been able to spend my life learning about the gospel without that knowledge ever being lit by the spiritual flame of love for my Savior, until Sister Columba ignited the spark for me that afternoon.

If we don't put enough effort into untangling this confusion and consciously developing our spiritual capacities of perceiving, it doesn't take long before the seemingly normal concreteness of mortal perception takes over. It begins to encrust and to wall in the subtle internal flame of spiritual perception. When this happens, we can come to trust almost entirely in our mortal senses and intellectual abilities—our reasoning and experience—because they seem to be so concrete.

Sadly, as our spiritual way of perceiving fades behind the wall of our mortality, we often find ourselves feeling confused and bewildered in life. Because our conduit of connection with God has become clogged, we increasingly reach out to people around us—mortals like ourselves—for help and support. We gain a sense of security and direction from the opinions of others expressed through social media, blogspots, emails, self-help books, and numerous other sources. But the danger here is that all mortal knowing is by nature limited and flawed. For this very reason the scriptures warn us again and again against reliance on “the arm of flesh.”¹ Even if the “flesh” we rely on is our own mental capacity and even if we're blessed with genius-level abilities, there will still always be something that we can't see or

that we fail to understand. The flesh is always limited, unless it is complemented by the power of the Spirit.

I would never wish to discount the insight that we can gain through the wisdom shared by sincere truth seekers. I have benefited from my share of self-help books and inspirational writings. But I have also found that although such sources have helped me gain some understanding of how I can better live in the world, they leave me unsatisfied as well. It took me a long time to realize that if we engage even the wisest of words solely through the medium of our mortal perception, we will always be absorbing limitation, the wisdom of the flesh, without the transformative power supplied by the fire of the Spirit. Mortal perception allows us to fall prey to misconceptions and hidden agendas; it blinds us to lies and traps.

When we lose contact with our spiritual abilities, we are easily led to assume that truth is a matter of consensus. To the mortal mind, the more widely something is believed, the more truth it seems to have. Often, with our mortal thinking, we fail to understand that even if a particular idea has received a hundred million “likes,” if it doesn't receive the one “like” that really matters—that is, the stamp of testimony through the power of the Holy Spirit of God—it still remains merely mortal opinion and is therefore inadequate and limited. If we aren't careful, when we slip into complete trust in our mortal modes of perceiving, we will find ourselves truly on our own, reliant only on our limited personal abilities as we wander through the vast cyber-foyer of media and public opinion that can lead us subtly, but irresistibly, into the “great and spacious building”² of the world.

Another danger of allowing mortal perception to predominate is that, as our subtle spiritual senses become obscured, we soon tend to become decentered. If we cease to rely on our inner power of spiritual perception, we lose the moorings that fasten us securely to our center in Jesus Christ. As our center shifts, we find

it more and more difficult to feel the comfort, strength, and divine love that enfold us when we are close to God’s Spirit. This loss leaves us spiritually famished, so we try to fill the emptiness with approximations—music, art, nature, excitement, and adventure—but nothing mortal is sufficient to still our deepest spiritual yearnings.³

Because we need to find some meaning and direction in our life, when we become decentered from Christ, we tend to drift to other centers in the attempt to find stability: friends, a career, money, a good cause, entertainment, a spouse or family, and sometimes our own self as we pursue self-fulfillment. But the difficulty with all of these centers is that they, like us, are bound by the limitations of mortality and are of necessity temporary and unstable. We lose our job or become bored with thrills and adventure. A loved one dies, a spouse leaves, a child turns away, and we find that we can’t fill our own inmost needs. Suddenly the center that was the foundation for our life is revealed to be empty.

If this picture of life as lived through the merely mortal seems to be quite bleak, it is, because the great and spacious building is a cold place. No matter how much happiness it promises, no matter how many multitudes fill its halls, it always leaves us feeling empty and alone because we have lost our secure center and because we are only half a person—the mortal, limited half.

Developing Spiritual Perception

God has given us very powerful ways to resist the scenario I have just described. The truth is that we are not here just to be mortal. We are here to rediscover who we were before we came to this life and to learn to be that being again, enhanced by the new abilities offered by combination with our mortal body.

Because our concrete physicality tends to predominate, we are constantly reminded to take time away from our busy mortal activities so that we can develop our skills in spiritual

perception. We gain this spiritual training by immersing ourselves in engaged Church activity, temple attendance, scripture study, and sincere personal prayer. If we take these opportunities seriously and consciously try to use them as they were intended, these times of spiritual involvement become the schoolroom—the laboratory for our spiritual development. They provide us the opportunity to step away from the world and its demands so that we can actively exercise our inner spiritual ways of perceiving.

If our religious beliefs seem to be stale, mundane, or simply habitual, it is generally because we are only viewing them through our mortal perception. This is like looking at the Grand Canyon at night, when the colors are darkened, the shapes are blurred, and everything seems shadowed, indistinct, and unremarkable. The fire of the Lord, which transforms religious experience into the burning essence of our being, can only be accessed through our spiritual perception. It is the fire of the Spirit that takes what to the mortal mind may be merely interesting theological concepts or useful social habits and transforms them into breathtaking, soul-satisfying spiritual realities.

Sometimes we become so complacent in our mortal, physical sense of reality that we believe we have things under control and have no need for any deeper spiritual connection. We are willing to settle for a level of contentment and happiness in life and figure that we are doing fine. But even when we have lost our vibrant spiritual connection with God, He is still close to us. What He desires is to lead us to joy—the true joy that is only possible through the power of the Spirit. He is trying to help us develop the same kind of eternal perspective that He has, so at times He allows difficulties to shatter the complacency of our lives. As the saying goes, “There’s no growth in a comfort zone, and there’s no comfort in a growth zone.” Sometimes only redemptive pain and grief are strong enough to break down the crust of mortality that has obscured the flame of our

spiritual fire. Often refining sorrow and struggle alone have the power to disrupt our preoccupation with the merely mortal and pull our focus back to spiritual realities so that we can regain our center in Christ and be healed by the power of His Atonement.

Combining the Spiritual and the Mortal

Increasingly, as we develop our spiritual way of perceiving, we find that the truths of the gospel aren't just concepts that we know about; they are what we do. The meshing of mortal and spiritual faculties moves us beyond asking a passive question such as *What is faith?* to asking an active, challenging query such as *How can I exercise my faith more effectively?* It is the powerful combination of our mortal and spiritual ways of perceiving that lifts us beyond a lifeless inquiry such as *What is the Atonement?* to the transformative question *What do I need to do to make the gift of the Atonement into an active part of my life?* All knowledge that we acquire through our mortal faculties gains more powerful meaning and depth when it is illuminated by spiritual perception.

The development of our mortal and our spiritual ways of perceiving is not an either/or proposition. When we learn to expand our spiritual abilities through relying on God and following the direction of His Spirit, we aren't somehow being cheated out of our mortal capabilities. Our reliance on God does not mean that we have been weakened as an independently functioning individual. The gospel and the commandments of God are not a cage that keeps us from succeeding in the world. They are the wings that help us to soar to heights of success that we, with our mortal faculties, can't even dream of on our own. If we choose to follow the path laid out by Jesus Christ, which He demonstrated for us through His own example, He will help us to develop the same kind of perfect intermeshing between the mortal and the spiritual that He himself achieved and which He now possesses in a glorified form.

He wants us to be complete and whole, just as He Himself is complete and whole.

It is the skills that we develop in using our spiritual mode of perceiving that compensate for our mortal limitations and gaps. These skills are what allow a parent or leader or manager to understand another person's situation and needs, even if those needs are totally different from their own. The moments of inspiration or "strokes of genius" that lie behind inventions, artistic creations, scientific discoveries, or just plain good ideas are, in reality, sparks of insight sent through our spiritual perception and connection with God to strengthen our mortal capabilities. Spiritual perception combined with mortal perception can help us gain expanded power to use the understanding and skills we are gaining through our life experiences so that we can be more effective in all aspects of our lives, whether secular or religious, temporal or spiritual.

The scriptures and other gospel sources give us much of the "what" of the gospel—the teachings and doctrines that our mortal perceptions can understand. But it is only when we activate our spiritual mode of perceiving that we truly begin to comprehend how the gospel works in our individual lives—that is, how it makes a difference for *me*. As we develop our spiritual abilities, the Holy Spirit becomes our private tutor, whispering more profound insights about the doctrines that our mortal capabilities have mastered. It turns the teachings that we have heard about our whole lives into living, vibrant instruction tailored to our own needs and situation. There is no textbook for the deepest levels of spiritual experience because the private tutelage of the Spirit leads each person individually to needed sources of insight and direction.

The spiritual aspect of perception is much like the eyeglasses in the movie *National Treasure*, with their lenses of different colors. Each lens, when it is put into action, makes it possible to see new details, new aspects

of the map to the treasure, that were invisible before. We seek the greatest treasure of all: a deep relationship with our Savior, Jesus Christ, and rich personal application of the power of His Atonement. Only the spiritual mode of perception can enhance what we learn through our mortal perceptions and intellect so that we can reach this transformative level of understanding.

In the October 2014 general conference President Dieter F. Uchtdorf exclaimed:

I offer you my personal witness that spiritual truth will fill your heart and bring light to your spirit. It will reveal to you pure intelligence with wonderful joy and heavenly peace. . . .

. . . If you seek God's truth, that which now may appear dim, out of focus, and distant will gradually be revealed and clarified and become close to your heart by the light of God's grace. Glorious spiritual vistas, unimaginable to the human eye, will be revealed to you.⁴

When he made this powerful promise, President Uchtdorf was not just presenting religious platitudes or something pretty to say at conference. Rather, he was giving us a vision of what we can actually achieve if we work through the Spirit to activate the combination of both our mortal and our spiritual ways of perceiving.

Developing Deep Love for Christ

As I think about my experience with Sister Columba now, after many years of my own growth, I still don't know whether I have developed the same level of love for Jesus Christ as Sister Columba shared with me. But what I have discovered is that, as with all other parts of religious belief, love for our Savior is something that we *do*. One way of demonstrating intense love for Christ is to follow His injunction when He said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments."⁵ When we keep His commandments, we demonstrate actively that we love Christ

enough to sacrifice immediate physical desires and worldly temptations in order to come close to Him. But keeping the commandments also blesses us, since the purity that comes through living according to God's expectations is the force that keeps our inner connection with the Spirit of God open and clear so that we can continually expand the power of our spiritual perception.

Sister Neill F. Marriott, second counselor in the Young Women general presidency, indicated another way in which we can demonstrate love for Christ when, in her address at the 2016 general women's session, she asserted, "Love is making space in your life for someone else."⁶ This truth is valid, not just for our children or our family but for our relationship with God as well. We show love for Christ by making space in our lives for Him. This means consciously devoting time every day to seriously studying His words, meditating on the scriptures that teach of Him, and praying to know Him, utilizing both our mortal and our spiritual forms of perception.

I have been deeply touched by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's passionate expression of his desire to make space in his life for Christ. He exclaimed:

*I would walk on hot lava, I would drink broken glass to find one more word, one more phrase, one more doctrine, **any** parable that **anyone** could give me of the life of Christ the living Son of the living God. The doctrine of Christ means everything to me as a result of [my feelings] for the author of the doctrine of Christ.⁷*

As we too come to thirst for anything that can bring us a step closer to our Savior and help us act on this desire, we clearly manifest our love for Him.

In addition to making space in our lives for Christ, there is yet another way in which we demonstrate our love. As author Catherine Galasso-Vigorito asserted:

*Love is not a special way of feeling, though lovely feelings come now and then. But real love is a commitment to live and care for another person. When that love is God's love, it reaches out to all the people around you automatically. You just can't help caring and sharing from the heart.*⁸

Our service to God's children is a visible sign of our love for Him. As we willingly serve others, we become a conduit through which His love flows to touch the lives of everyone around us.

What these different ways of showing love teach me is that, as we devotedly keep God's commandments, fill our hearts and thoughts with contemplation of our Savior and His gospel, and perform His works of service, we are transformed into a living manifestation of the love for God that I experienced that day with Sister Columba.

Since I am a professor—that is, someone who professes—people often ask me about my affinity with the different concepts of critical theory that I frequently teach. They want to know whether I advocate feminism or post-structuralism or some other theoretical system. The only answer that I can give to such questions is this: I am a follower of Jesus Christ. The theoretical ideas we talk about in classes were invented by people who want to improve society, but because they were developed by mortals, these concepts all have limitations. In reality, the gospel of Jesus Christ—as Jesus Christ taught it and as He expects us to live it—is far more demanding than any mortal ideas or systems of behavior. The gospel alone has the power to transform us, and by applying its principles we can help to change the world around us.

As I see it, there can be no more significant title than that of a true disciple of Christ. I believe that it is important to develop our mortal abilities as fully as we can so that we can be successful in the careers, professions, and

lives we have chosen. However, it is far more urgent that we develop the powerfully intermeshed combination of both our mortal and our spiritual capabilities so that we can function in every aspect of our lives—professional, religious, and personal—as inspired followers of Christ who touch the lives of our Father's children with service, love, and compassion. And beyond even this, the highest pursuit of all—the most meaningful achievement in life—is to use all the combined powers of our mortal and spiritual perceptions in order to center ourselves firmly on Jesus Christ and the infinite power of His Atonement so that every aspect of our lives will be charged and illuminated by the fire of the Lord. Only this will bring us success and joy, both in this life and for the eternities to come.

This is what I have learned in my own spiritual quest, and I bear testimony of these truths. In the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. 2 Nephi 4:34; D&C 1:19.
2. 1 Nephi 8:31.
3. C. S. Lewis discusses this idea of approximations in his address "The Weight of Glory," in C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 6–9.
4. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Receiving a Testimony of Light and Truth," *Ensign*, November 2014, 23.
5. John 14:15.
6. Neill F. Marriott, "What Shall We Do?" *Ensign*, May 2016, 10.
7. Jeffrey R. Holland, Seminar for New Mission Presidents, 23 June 2013; quoted in Sheri Dew, "Sweet Above All That Is Sweet," BYU Women's Conference address, 1 May 2014; emphasis in original; see also Dew, *Amazed by Grace* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 58–59.
8. Catherine Galasso-Vigorito, *A New You: Words to Soothe the Mind, Body, and Spirit* (Avon, Massachusetts: Adams Media, 2003), 39.