

Journey of the Soul, Anchors of the Heart: Coming unto Christ

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Brothers and sisters, aloha! Don't worry. I know I am on the right campus. I am conscious, coherent, and oriented. I thought the sunshine in that aloha greeting would warm us up here in Utah and bring smiles to our faces. I am humbled by this opportunity to stand before you and share a message from my heart. May the Holy Ghost abide with us and speak peace to our hearts.

I remember being in third grade when my sister Jean took me and two of our younger siblings to watch a movie adaptation of Homer's epic featuring the hero Odysseus. Considering how poor we were, watching a movie was an extravagance that did not happen often. But I thought we got our money's worth, because it was a long movie. The voyage home to Ithaca for Odysseus and his men proved to be anything but easy and speedy. I was mesmerized by scenes such as Odysseus blinding the one-eyed cyclops, Polyphemus, son of Poseidon, which then enraged Poseidon; the tribe of gigantic cannibals, or Laistrygonians; and the lure of the enchanting music and voices of the sea sirens.

Now that I am much older, I look at it differently. Instead of focusing on the frame-by-frame cinematography, I am drawn to the story line and the lessons it holds. For instance,

the trip to Ithaca was costly in terms of lives lost and years wasted. This was not because the voyage was not worth taking. It was their personal choices, in the face of pride and temptations, that dictated their course and the length of their voyage. In the end, more than the Trojan War, it was this journey that changed Odysseus. Hence, we refer to difficult and life-changing journeys as personal odysseys.

The Greek poet Konstantinos Kavafis likened the voyage to Ithaca to our personal odysseys. He spoke of the maturity and the wisdom that can attend such experience. To quote selected stanzas of his poem:

*When you set out for Ithaka
ask that your way be long,
full of adventure, full of instruction.
The Laistrygonians and the Cyclops,
angry Poseidon — do not fear them:
such as these you will never find
as long as your thought is lofty, as long as a rare
emotion touch[es] your spirit and your body.
The Laistrygonians and the Cyclops,*

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*angry Poseidon—you will not meet them
unless you carry them in your soul,
unless your soul raise[s] them up before you.*

...

*Have Ithaka always in your mind.
Your arrival there is what you are destined for.
But don't in the least hurry the journey.
Better it last for years,
so that when you reach the island you are old,
rich with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to give you wealth.*

*Ithaka gave you the splendid journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She hasn't anything else to give you.*

*And if you find her poor, Ithaka hasn't deceived you.
So wise have you become, of such experience,
that already you'll have understood what these
Ithakas mean.¹*

Journey of the Soul

Life itself is a journey. Setting out for our personal Ithacas is embarking on a voyage of transformation. This is a journey that we know in our hearts to be right but is somehow beset by challenges. As students, are we determined not to give up on our academic journeys despite the difficulties? For those among us in the middle of our careers and currently navigating our way into our own Ithacas, how is this defining us as individuals and our relationships with our families and our God? How we respond reveals our character and inner strength. Either we can let the setbacks define us or we can choose to move forward. If we choose to, we can arrive at our destination a far different person—hopefully much better and wiser. Going through the journey itself is a reward. The lessons therein test our capacities and strengthen our souls until we measure up to the privilege of our positions as sons or daughters of God.

The scriptures are filled with records of travel whose messages apply to our personal

journeys. In the Old Testament, several accounts are of epic proportions, one of which is the Exodus. Led by Moses, the flight of the Israelites out of Egypt to the land of Canaan was not the fastest or the shortest route by the standards of our present GPS. The stopover in the wilderness took 40 long years.² Perhaps it was from here that we heard the original version of “Are we there yet?” The grumbings were incessant. The Israelites felt stuck in the wilderness.

What lessons can we take away from the Exodus? This 40-year sojourn in the wilderness was not a side trip but a pivotal event. Humility, faith, obedience, trust, and dedication—virtues necessary for a people to be true to their eternal promises—were forged in the wilderness, not in the comforts of Canaan. It was in Sinai, not in Canaan, that Moses received the Ten Commandments. It was in the desolation of the wilderness that God walked before His people, in a pillar of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.³ Miracle after miracle attended the children of Israel. From the parting of the Red Sea to the borders of the land of Canaan and beyond, the hand of the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob had so tenderly cared for His people. Has the Lord treated us any differently now?⁴

In these journeys, we bring with us our faith and our attitude. Contrast the murmurings of the Israelites with Nephi's “I will go; I will do”⁵ attitude to the Lord's commands as recorded in the Book of Mormon. The combination of the right attitude and righteous choices allowed Nephi to be more receptive to the Spirit of the Lord. It not only made the voyage to the promised land possible, it defined Nephi as a man and as a prophet. Likewise, the journey of faith by the pioneers left behind footprints of extraordinary courage and resolve. What seemed insurmountable became possible because they hung on to their faith that their God would never forsake them. They girded up their loins and with every step took fresh

courage until this desert was transformed into a sanctuary of faith.⁶

Whether on land or on sea, in a group of thousands or of a few, life-changing journeys can truly become journeys of the soul if we desire to serve and be like Christ. Perhaps this explains why the missionary section in the Doctrine and Covenants opens up with the word *embark*.⁷ One of my favorite accounts of the journey of the soul is the first Christmas night, the prelude to the Atonement. In the New Testament, Luke gave the description of plain, unassuming people watching “their flock by night.”⁸ Upon learning of the Savior’s birth, these shepherds “came with haste” until they “found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.”⁹ Notice that Luke used the words *haste* and *found*. These shepherds set for us the example of running to the Savior with a faith pure and simple, untainted by skepticism. Matthew, on the other hand, spoke of the three Magi searching for the Christ child. Their intent was deliberate and their question direct: “Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.”¹⁰

I could not find a better example of a personal journey of the soul than that of a repentant heart. The surrendering of our hearts to the Lord is not only transforming but also sanctifying. The eye may never witness nor can the mind measure the tremendous anguish, grief, and sorrow that attend the forsaking of one’s sins. That is the Lord’s purview alone. Such agony is matched only by the strength of one’s faith to be healed and the hope for second chances. This journey of penitence can be completed only by the individual with the Savior. Only the combined love of the Father and the love of the Son, as tenderly carried out in the Atonement, has the power to make us whole again. Only such love can “heal without a scar.”¹¹ During times when we feel we are least deserving of such love, President Gordon B. Hinckley assures us:

*You are His child all the time, not just when you are good. You are His child when you are bad. You have within you . . . a portion of divinity that is real and tremendous and marvelous and wonderful.*¹²

Christ Himself affirmed this eternal truth:

Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God. . . .

*And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth!*¹³

Imagine if this soul happens to be that of a loved one, or perhaps ours.

Anchors of the Heart

Many of us who know the pain of life’s adversities—of sickness, death, divorce, failure, loss of a job, or a loved one’s wrong choices—can testify that as we carefully look back, each challenge was met with blessings. Though difficult, the journey seemed short and the burden light. It was as if the weight was not borne by us alone but by many loved ones, by angels, even by the Savior Himself. The Savior has never left us alone, even when our faith was faltering through the journey. He has been with us every step of the way. He has increased our understanding and magnified our strengths that we may “know Him firsthand” (as my sister Jean says). Elder George Q. Cannon beautifully expressed this truth:

No matter how serious the trial, how deep the distress, how great the affliction, [God] will never desert us. He never has, and He never will. He cannot do it. It is not His character [to do so]. He is an unchangeable being; the same yesterday, the same today, and He will be the same throughout the eternal ages to come. We have found that God. We have made Him our friend, by obeying His Gospel; and He will stand by us. We may pass through the fiery furnace; we may pass through deep waters; but we shall not be consumed nor overwhelmed. We shall emerge from all these trials and difficulties the

*better and purer for them, if we only trust in our God and keep His commandments.*¹⁴

Whether it is in the wilderness of Sinai, the plains crossed by latter-day pioneers, or in the seclusion of our own sacred groves, no journey of the soul can ever be completed unless our hearts are anchored by light and truth. An anchor is something that keeps us steady, secure, and stable. It is a source of support, an emblem of hope, “a sure foundation.”¹⁵ Such an anchor can only be found in Christ. As Nephi declared:

*We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, . . . that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins.*¹⁶

Throughout the uncertainties of life, only Christ and His love are constant. There is no more perfect example of love than the Atonement itself. Its power and promises are the “hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast.”¹⁷ In the end it is the Atonement that unites our journeys, for we are all in need of its power to rescue, to heal, to soften hearts, and to be made whole again. Our baptismal and temple covenants, the priesthood and its ordinances, the sacrament, the scriptures—all point to this great sacrifice. These additional anchors steady us amidst the turmoil of life.

My Own Journey of Conversion—Tended by the Lord

There is one more journey that my heart holds dear. It happens to be a story within a story: my family’s journey of conversion. In the book of 1 Kings is an account of the faith of a widow in Zarephath, who in time of drought and famine gave up her family’s remaining food for the prophet Elijah: “As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse.”¹⁸

The gospel came in our lives at a time when we had been sufficiently humbled by trials. The most that we literally could offer at the altar was not even a morsel of bread, for we had none but our very faith. It was all that we had. Thus, I liken the widow of Zarephath to a widow in the Philippines, the widow of Tondo with seven children. She is my mother. Let me tell you our story.

There are six girls and a boy in our family—a mix that does not bode well in a society where women are not regarded as men’s equals. I am the fifth child in that brood of seven. I was six when my father died of cancer. Our eldest had just turned 18, and the youngest was two years old. The memory is still vivid in my mind as though it happened just yesterday. My mother was by my father’s bedside, exhausted and with her face drenched in tears. Each of the children was summoned by name to approach our father’s side. With my mother holding my father’s right hand, each of us, from the oldest to the youngest, placed our right hand on top of our parents’ hands. There are seven children. There were seven right hands placed atop each other in a solemn act of promise. It was our father’s dying wish that we look after each other. Then there was silence—a silence broken by my mother’s wailing, then by her defeated sobs. My father had passed away.

Without a stable breadwinner and with seven children left to a mother without a job or a college degree, our finances were tenuous. We grew up in poverty—not just income poverty but also a scarcity of opportunities. We were too poor to get an education, but my mother persisted in her dream to have each of her children complete a college degree. She believed in the power of education to enlighten and transform lives, to equalize social standing, and to be the vehicle out of our dismal circumstances. She borrowed money even at high interest rates to keep us in school. I remember rejoicing in being able to take exams (yes, those were joyful, not dreadful, moments),

because it meant that my mother was able to pay our tuition. Eventually, the only way for us to go beyond high school was to qualify for scholarships.

Four years after my father died, two young American men knocked on our door looking for my mother. They introduced themselves as missionaries. Behind them was a throng of Filipino children fighting for their attention and calling out, "Hi, Joe." Under the sweltering Philippine heat, these young men stood out in their white shirts, ties, and black briefcases; to us they looked like a toss-up between James Bond and CIA agents. I was about to say to them that my mother had told me to tell them that she was not home when my mother's friends and their children, who came with the missionaries, showed up. My mom overheard and motioned to me to let them in. I quietly asked myself, "What are we getting ourselves into?" Inviting these Americans in was social suicide, as my mom was known in our community for her staunch devotion to the dominant faith.

When my father was alive, he had always invited the missionaries. Not my mother. When my father died, we knew that any opportunity to hear these missionaries died with him. "What could they possibly offer that we still do not have?" was my mother's quick retort to any previous attempts at having our family taught. The year after my father died, martial law was declared in the Philippines. On top of that there was a national shortage of rice—the country's staple food. To stave off the shortage, rice was combined with corn and rationed to five kilos per family. Food and jobs were scarce. For us to survive, my mom marshaled every inch of strength she had. She talked a friend into allowing her to be paid a meager sum for helping to deliver rice. She would leave at 4:30 in the morning and would come home at 11:00 at night. At the end of the day she would pick up grain after grain of rice and corn that had spilled on the floor of the

delivery truck. She would not stop until she had several handfuls for tomorrow's meals. Our life was already at its worst. How could listening to these Americans help? What could these missionaries offer that would make our life better?

To our surprise, our mother listened to the missionaries. She even attended an area conference at the Araneta Coliseum presided by President Spencer W. Kimball. That was an act of boldness to go against the predominant religion. This was the 1970s. People's minds were strongly averse to changes. It must have exacted much willpower from my mother to stop drinking coffee and to stop smoking—just because two foreigners barely in their twenties said so—at a time when nicotine patches were unheard of. It must have taken real faith to part with a widow's mite for tithing.

It was only out of politeness for my mom and the missionaries that I listened. My elder sisters did not want any part of this. Despite our obvious annoyance with the missionaries, they continued to visit and responded to us with love and patience. My mother, my younger sister Ruth, and myself were the first to be baptized. My older sisters followed months later. My brother was baptized when he turned eight. It took years and a temple in the Philippines for our father to be baptized by proxy and for us to be finally sealed as a family.

What did the missionaries offer? They offered us the opportunity of knowing that families can be together even beyond death—something my father had always hoped we could be. The missionaries taught us that we have a Heavenly Father who knows each of us by name and who loves us dearly—a concept so foreign to us, for the God that we knew lashed out with punishments and heard only memorized prayers. The missionaries taught us that our bodies are sacred. They taught us the value of preparedness—temporal and spiritual. The missionaries taught us about where

we came from and where we are going. The missionaries offered a message so sweet that it was “most desirable above all things.”¹⁹ It filled us with joy—not just momentary bliss, but peace and radiance that continued to sustain us through difficult times.

The fruit of the gospel is remarkably sweet, and we paid a high price for it. Following our baptism, relatives and friends distanced themselves from us. They charged my mother with blasphemy and insanity. Some refused to extend any help despite our needs. The loss of that social safety net was economic suicide for a family already living on the edge of poverty. Even as young children we were not spared from many trials, and we had to grow far beyond our years. When I was attending a private school of another religious faith, a nun confronted me in front of my sixth-grade class for choosing to be baptized as a Latter-day Saint. I came home that day in tears. My sister and I were eventually disqualified from receiving the highest academic honors. We were denied the very measure of success that we had worked hard for. This was not the end. Many more challenges came.

How did we keep the faith? First, it was never because we were smarter or stronger, nor were our lives easier. With the help of the Holy Ghost, a conversion rooted within our hearts drove the change. What helped us was that we stayed on course. We did not give up at the very first sign of adversity. We kept going even when the tempests in our lives were raging.²⁰ We kept paying tithing even when the choices came down to not having enough to eat. We kept coming to Church with the thought that if we continued to do so, eventually principles that were once unclear would make much more sense. We kept going with the understanding that people around us were not perfect but were putting forth the effort to be better.

Second, while it is true that our happiness now and forever depends on the degree of

spiritual change in our personal lives, we still needed others’ support. We were not always brave or fearless, nor could we clearly see even a step ahead into life. We had to rely on borrowed light until we mustered the strength to light our own lamps. We could not have made it this far without the love, understanding, encouragement, and kindness of members and friends.

Has the Lord been mindful of our sacrifices? Yes! He is continually involved in our lives. There was no way that a mother widowed at age 41, without a job and a college degree, could have possibly raised seven children from two to 18 years of age without divine help. Heaven must have heard her many pleadings and interceded in so many ways that it amazes us even to this very day. Through the Lord’s design and blessings, each of us was able to complete our studies: two doctors, a nurse, a lawyer, an accountant, a hotel and restaurant manager, and an IT support specialist. Thus was the promise of Elijah also fulfilled to the widow of Tondo:

And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days.

And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah.²¹

One would not understand how tenderly, patiently, and lovingly the Lord tended our family if I were to skip the sad parts. This is a story of struggles; but, most important, it is a story of faith, hope, and hard work. This is a legacy of faith that we want to leave to our children and their children’s children. The best help heaven extended to us was giving us missionaries who were motivated, who were willing to work long and hard until our hearts were ready to listen and to be touched by the Spirit. These were missionaries who were able to recognize hearts as though the Lord Himself

was there. I cannot thank these missionaries without thanking those who lent them to the Lord: their mothers and fathers. To parents of missionaries and their families, thank you for lending your sons and daughters to the Lord. Thank you for your sacrifices. You remind me of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, who stated in faith:

For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him:

*Therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord.*²²

“Whither Goest Thou?”

Our life’s ultimate journey is to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him.”²³ This is the heart of the gospel. The Savior invites us to go on a journey with Him and asks us repeatedly to “come . . . and follow [Him].”²⁴ As we do so, there will be challenges, but none that cannot be addressed by the Savior’s love. Eventually it will be His tender mercies that will save us many times over. For the sorrows that may not be readily seen on the outside, the Lord sees clearly in our hearts, and He offers love. He “sees us in terms of [eternities].”²⁵

Wherever our personal odysseys may take us, however long or short the transformation of our souls may be, there is a truth I would like to testify of “with all the energy of heart”²⁶: God lives. He loves us and loves to bless us. No matter how perilous the journey, Christ is in control. If we allow Him to navigate our lives, “[He] shall fight for [us], and [we] shall hold [our] peace.”²⁷

As we set our personal sails, let us move forward with this thought from the book of Ether: “The wind did never cease to blow towards the promised land.”²⁸ May the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, the love of your eternal companion, and your family and friends lift you up and attend your journey of the soul. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Constantine P. Cavafy, “Ithaka” (1911), in Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, trans., *Four Greek Poets* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 15–16.
2. See Exodus 16.
3. See Exodus 13:21.
4. See 2 Nephi 7:1–2.
5. “Nephi’s Courage,” *Songbook*, 120–21; see 1 Nephi 3:7.
6. See “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 30.
7. D&C 4:2.
8. Luke 2:8.
9. Luke 2:16.
10. Matthew 2:2; see also Matthew 2:1.
11. See Sheri L. Dew, “The Savior Heals Without a Scar,” *Sheri Dew Collection*, audio talks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009).
12. Gordon B. Hinckley, *TGBH*, 160; Smithfield/Logan Utah regional conference, 21 April 1996.
13. D&C 18:10, 13.
14. George Q. Cannon, “Freedom of the Saints” (1 March 1891), in Brian H. Stuy, comp. and ed., *Collected Discourses*, 5 vols. (Burbank, California: B.H.S. Publishing, 1987–1992), 2:185.
15. Helaman 5:12; see Ether 12:4.
16. 2 Nephi 25:26.
17. Hebrews 6:19.
18. 1 Kings 17:12.
19. 1 Nephi 11:22.
20. See “Master, the Tempest Is Raging,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 105.
21. 1 Kings 17:15–16.
22. 1 Samuel 1:27–28.
23. Moroni 10:32.
24. Matthew 16:24; see also “Come, Follow Me,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 116.
25. Joseph B. Wirthlin, “The Great Commandment,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 29.
26. Moroni 7:48.
27. Exodus 14:14.
28. Ether 6:8.