

The Intimate Restoration

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If you ever visit Segovia in Spain, turn left as you approach the 2,000-year-old Roman aqueduct, climb the hill that rises through a centuries-old neighborhood, and call at the Church of San Justo. A friendly caretaker will welcome you to his church, now in its ninth century. With reverent enthusiasm he will show you the frescoes that adorn the walls of the building's single Romanesque apse. The church narrates with a moving symbolic vocabulary the story of the redemption and the Resurrection.

The paintings first invite us to the Garden of Eden. We see the tree and the serpent, and standing on the back of an elephant are Adam and Eve—fig leaves in place. The artist portrays the elephant as meek, as a bearer of burdens, and as the creation best equipped to crush the serpent's head. It is, in other words, a symbol of Christ, and by having the first parents stand on its back in the moments following their transgression, the painter reflects his understanding of the relationship between the Fall and the promised redemption. Behind the Eden scenes we discover murals of Christ's passion: the Last Supper, Gethsemane, the betrayal, and the Crucifixion.

When I visit this church, I am moved by the sincerity of this painted witness. Until recently,

however, this testimony had been lost. Centuries earlier, changing fashions resulted in a tasteless plastering over of the walls and the construction of a gilded altar that hid the simple story of the redemption. Thirty years ago a benefactor of the church discovered some painting fragments and put into motion a process of restoration. In some places that process involved applying mild cleansers that removed centuries of accumulated grime. In other cases the restoration demanded more radical measures: pounding, chiseling, and scraping away hardened plaster and wood. For me, this modest church's history is an allegory of the changing tastes and philosophies that threaten to cover my testimony. I remember my own restorations—the painful scraping away of the remnants of my more serious mistakes—and reflect gratefully on the gentle solvent of the sacrament that rinses away the weekly accumulations of my worldliness. San Justo's murals quietly remind me of my need to return daily to the image of Christ and to submit to his restoring hand.

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Today, April 6, marks the 169th anniversary of a meeting set in another humble building, a log farmhouse in Fayette, New York. During that gathering the Prophet Joseph formalized the restoration of the gospel, beginning the process of redrawing, repairing, and finishing the mural of Christianity. Although this grand restoration frames what I want to say today, my emphasis will be on the “intimate restoration”—private and personal transformations that help us recover our purity, our godly identity, and our faith. I love Paul’s counsel: “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed.” His play on the words *conform* and *transform* tells us to resist the pressures brought on by the world of contingency and to experience an intimate restoration that involves more than returning to a better past. It is a restoration, a “renewing of . . . mind,” as Paul calls it, that nudges us gently toward our potential (Romans 12:2).

At about the same time that San Justo was built and consecrated, the psuedoscience known as alchemy became popular throughout Europe. It searched for its own restorations: to transform base metals into gold, to discover a universal cure for disease, and to prolong life indefinitely. Its practitioners attempted to heal, to make what is common precious, and to find eternal life. Today we see their error—not in their objective, but in their impatience; in their attempt to coerce the bestowal of gifts that are real but uniquely divine; in their unwillingness to wait patiently on the Lord for the endowment of his grace. These processes are part of the intimate restoration, a process that exalts what is low; that binds the wounds of disappointment and discouragement; and that extends unbreakable, eternal promises. I bear testimony of these intimate restorations.

I have been thinking about the varied transformations of memory. King Benjamin concludes his sermon by asking us to “remember, and perish not” (Mosiah 4:30). In contrast to his reminder, we have Lot’s wife, who paused and

longingly turned back to her past. Her transformation into a pillar of salt is emblematic of the paralysis that overcomes us when we live too much in memories. Often we resist letting go of the sin or the sadness or the offenses that are an inevitable consequence of life outside Eden. Sometimes we idealize our past in such a way that the present cannot compete with it: we make icons of the “good old days,” of the former sweetheart, or of a favorite ward and shut out contemporaries who might otherwise bless us. Conversely, when we properly submit our memories to the transformations of grace, we begin to experience intimate restorations.

One way to ensure spiritually vital memory is through writing. President Kimball suggested that writing helps us “keep the Lord in remembrance” (TSWK, p. 349), and the scriptures both teach about the power of writing and themselves function as the mnemonic device for all things eternal. Job contemplated the durability of written memory when he wished that his words might be “graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!” (Job 19:23–24). In Exodus we find the law written with Jehovah’s finger. These images of indelible writing cause me to wonder at the incident recorded in John 8. Christ’s enemies, in this case scribes, presented a woman caught in the act of adultery. They demanded justice, based on the premises of that law written by Christ’s premortal finger into Sinai’s stone. John recorded the Lord’s response:

But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.

So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. [John 8:6–8]

The scribes filed away, and the Savior, left alone with the woman, asked:

Where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. [John 8:10–11; emphasis added]

John did not describe the details of the woman's repentance, and we know something of the destructive consequences that result from the violation of the marriage covenant. John chose instead to emphasize the Lord's grace. We are not told what he wrote in the sand, but the *image* of him writing is both eloquent and instructive. Was he recording her sin in the first instance and the scribes' sin in the second? What became of that record? Footsteps blurred it, and the afternoon winds erased it forever. This erasure is a hopeful metaphor for the Savior's merciful memory and for the potential transformation of our sinfulness into acceptability. The Lord has told us that sincere repentance produces messianic forgetfulness: "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more" (Hebrews 8:12). Could any transformation be more miraculous than this, that he, for whom all things are present, could forget our lapses?

When I was a bishop I experienced a portion of this forgetfulness. Nearly every day for four years I heard stories of transgression. As I listened to each confession, the Lord shared with me a portion of his love for the confes- sant; after the process of repentance was complete, the only residue of that experience was what Mormon calls "charity." I found that my memory was cleansed simultaneously with the cleansing of their life.

Although Christ's mercy produces trans- forming forgetfulness, his justice endows him with perfect remembrance. He told his follow- ers gathered at Bountiful that even though their land had been torn apart by earthquakes, he would remain constant: "For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but my

kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed" (3 Nephi 22:10; see also Isaiah 40:4). Elsewhere, the Lord used a metaphor of writing to empha- size this constancy: "Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:16). In the ancient world one of the most common writing technologies was engraving. The engraver pressed the sharp point of a stylus into the soft surface of clay or metal sheets. Christ metaphorically transforms these imple- ments of writing into the Roman nails and his tender hands. When we think of these two images of a writing Savior, once in sand and once in his own flesh, we begin to understand Paul's description of Christ as "the *author* of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Hebrews 5:9; emphasis added).

A few years ago I saw how these images of constancy and forgetfulness had come together in the life of a BYU student. He had grown up in Southeast Asia during years of unspeakable violence and cruelty. When he was a young boy, soldiers entered his town one day and car- ried away his father. He never saw him again. His playgrounds were not soccer fields but the killing fields and the squalid conditions of refugee camps. Eventually his mother man- aged to relocate the family in the United States, and here they accepted the gospel. I asked him how he coped with this burden of memories. Did he suffer from nightmares? Was he haunted by post-traumatic stress? His response was simple, yet powerful: the Atonement had cleansed his memory. The testimony he bore of the cleansing power of the Atonement remains perhaps the most moving witness of spiritual transformation I have ever heard. And his story reinforced the truth that the Atonement must restore both the sinner and those who suffer from the sinner's actions. Christ's perfect fairness requires that victims receive a share of his grace at least as bounteous as that offered to the fully repentant sinner. The Savior's promise that he will remember us allows us to

start the process of this intimate restoration of forgetting.

A wise friend shared with me another image of intimate restoration. More than nine-teen hundred years ago, darkness covered the land inhabited by Lehi’s descendants: “And there was not any light seen, neither fire, nor glimmer, neither the sun, nor the moon, nor the stars, for so great were the mists of darkness.” As a result, “there was great mourning and howling and weeping among all the people continually; yea, great were the groanings of the people, because of the darkness” (3 Nephi 8:22–23). Divine alchemy began to work an intimate restoration:

And it was in the morning [literally and figuratively a new day], and the darkness dispersed from off the face of the land, and the earth did cease to tremble, and the rocks did cease to rend, and the dreadful groanings did cease, and all the tumultuous noises did pass away.

And the earth did cleave together again, that it stood [I love that simple expression of stability and strength: that it stood]; and the mourning, and the weeping, and the wailing of the people who were spared alive did cease; and their mourning was turned into joy, and their lamentations [were turned] into . . . praise. [3 Nephi 10:9–10; emphasis added]

This public event becomes a model for an intimate restoration. How common this most singular scene! How often have we fought with darkness? How many have felt their heart rend, like Bountiful’s rocks, because of losing something or someone? What power less than that of Jesus Christ can transform the lead of mourning into a gold morning? The scriptures bear testimony of his ability to change us and our experiences. Could the magical transmutation of lead to gold be half as wondrous as these restorations described by Isaiah, “to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit

of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord” (Isaiah 61:3). Could any universal cure of disease be as healing as that transformation that takes place when our scarlet sins become white as snow? I see a miraculous circle of grace in Christ’s condescension that makes possible our ascension. He humbled himself to become like us, suffering “temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue” (Mosiah 3:7) so that we might become like him: exalted, whole, perfectly at one with him and with ourselves—the amazing alchemy of grace.

This circle of grace marks off my testimony and in my life has been the symmetry that makes the crooked straight and the rough places smooth (see Luke 3:5). Nowhere is that process more apparent than in the transformations that led to the creation of my family. It is a common story; to me it is a miraculous story. I share it with you as a private parable.

Like most of you, early in my life I had designed a calendar of events. I believed that I with my agency was in control of what would happen and had no reason to believe that the chronology of high school, mission, marriage, degrees, children, and profession should be disrupted. But finding a wife proved to be somewhat problematic. I remember reading stories of Old Testament patriarchs who found wives at wells, and I used to hang around campus drinking fountains hoping a maiden would offer me a drink. And the years passed. Most of us have experienced, or will experience, what it feels like to be unable to bridge our dreams and our daily experience or to find that our best effort is insufficient. During what surely was the low point of these years, I had my own experience in that mist described in 3 Nephi. It seemed that the heavens were indifferent, that prayers went unanswered, that promises were not kept. If there is a circle of grace, I thought, then most certainly I am outside it.

Out of this darkness came an epiphany, a revelation so personal and poignant it seemed

to me that the Savior himself had uttered it directly to me:

[My friend], *fear not, let your [heart] be comforted; yea, rejoice evermore, and in everything give thanks;*

Waiting patiently on the Lord, for your prayers have entered into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, and are recorded with this seal and testament—the Lord hath sworn and decreed that they shall be granted.

Therefore, he giveth this promise unto you, with an immutable covenant that they shall be fulfilled; and all things wherewith you have been afflicted shall work together for your good, and to my name's glory. [D&C 98:1–3]

I had never felt language as emphatic as this. The words were given originally to the Prophet Joseph in 1833; this experience taught me how the scriptures are sources of personal and personalized revelation. God had heard my prayers. He not only heard them, but they were recorded with a seal and testament. All the Lord expected of me was to wait patiently on him. Reassured, I learned that for me, “waiting” was both quiet submission to God’s calendar *and* an active service: I was required to be God’s waiter. And I was expected to do all that I could to bring about the fulfillment of the promise, filling the empty spaces with faithful service when immediate results were not forthcoming. Three more years passed before the day—seven years ago this month—when I knelt with my wife at the temple’s altar. In her features I see grace. I suspect that waiting patiently is a lesson the Lord teaches all of us. What we wait for, and the duration of the waiting, varies for each of us. I can witness however, that the Promised Messiah fulfills his promises.

Because my marriage came through grace, it also has been my tutor about grace. If atonement is about the process of becoming one—with ourselves and with our Redeemer—then

those same processes are at work as we become “one flesh” with our spouse. Some of our difficulties in relationships come because we forget the “Genesis Principle” of marriage. God intends for us to be creators. Our experience with godlike creation begins with our eternal marriage. Just as the creation of our earth home required seven stages, so our marriages must pass through periods of work, transformation, and restoration before they are finished. Yet we expect our relationships on day one to exhibit the security and surety that only come on restful day seven. We forget that the only way we can successfully pass through the stages of creation is by employing the principles of the Atonement. No two gospel subjects are more closely linked than these. When Jehovah wanted to describe his sacred relationship with Israel, he compared discipleship to the marriage covenant. John repeats that same imagery in his Revelation. In what way does marriage operate according to the principles of atonement?

The answer is another intimate restoration. Like Charles H. Gabriel,

*I marvel that he would descend from his throne
divine*

*To rescue a soul so rebellious and proud as mine,
That he should extend his great love unto such as I,
Sufficient to own, to redeem, and to justify.*

[“I Stand All Amazed,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 193]

I am amazed that even though Christ understands perfectly my imperfections, he also loves me perfectly. Divine charity is the most fundamental intimate restoration. It gives me hope to work through my weaknesses. I have found the same pattern at work in my marriage. Next to the Savior, no one knows my weaknesses better than my wife. She sees the flaws I am able to conceal from others. She senses the rift between my behaviors and my understanding. Likewise, I know her imperfections better than any other—better than her

parents, her siblings, her friends. Equipped with this knowledge, each of us has two choices. We can follow Satan’s pattern and use it to bury our spouse’s self-esteem—adding layers of disapproval like the plaster that covered San Justo’s frescoes. Or we can follow Christ’s model, loving perfectly through our shared imperfections, using our unconditional acceptance to cleanse away the accumulations of life. By forgiving each other, we lift each other from our sins, thereby receiving *and* imitating the intimate restoration of the Atonement. When we hold hands “gracefully,” we sense, sacredly, engravings on our own palms, reminding us that the Atonement is the binding power of our marriage.

No longer single, Gaylamarie and I waited, certain that children would come. One year. Two. A third. Waiting. We did our best to wait patiently. Our pleading became more intense, but still no child.

In another place a young, single daughter of our Heavenly Father experienced her own journey through Bountiful’s mists. Forgetting for a time who she was, she conceived a child. Her prayers began a long process of remembering. She determined that *for her*, the fullest expression of her love for the child would be not only the gift of life but a life with a father and a mother, united in grace and the sealing power. Like Christ, she made a sacrifice. An intimate restoration was set in motion by Providence that transformed her heartache into the answer to our prayers. This circle of grace made two rotations, bringing both our daughters into our home. Karen Marie and Eliza tutor me about atoning transformations. The Atonement is the only force I know that can make straight what is spiritually crooked. Of course Christ does not want us to err, and when we do, we suffer consequences—consequences I have found to be in proportion to the seriousness of the mistake. But the Atonement assures us of two things: that those consequences need not be eternal, and that Christ’s

gentle alchemy can turn our transgression into something that works both to our good and to his name’s glory. Six months after each daughter’s birth, we knelt together at an altar. There the priesthood performed another restoration: through its power we and they were changed; we were declared to be bound together, sealed, “*as if*” Karen Marie and Eliza had been born to us. I have spent many hours reflecting on that “*as if*” and find in that simple conjunction the power that potentially binds us forever to the Lord.

“For unto us a child is born” (Isaiah 9:6). Isaiah’s phrase predicts and celebrates the birth of the Savior: the key event of universal restoration. Gaylamarie and I repeat the same phrase, intimately. These births that resulted in our rebirth are part of the same story, conceived by the same author. When our girls look at us, we see in their countenance the outline of grace; and when we feel their arms around us, we understand Amulek’s description of the Atonement, which “encircles [us] in the arms of safety” (Alma 34:16). Often as I leave for work, three-year-old Karen Marie reminds me, “Be obedient today, Daddy.” My daughters find physical safety in my arms; I find spiritual safety in theirs.

Of course, our arms are full, although for the time being the birth mothers’ arms are empty. How shall they embrace—and be embraced—in safety? The answer to that question requires more time than I have available. A partial response comes in the pleas of a three-year-old whom we have taught to pray for her and her sister’s birth mothers. A few months ago she told us: “Mommy loves me. Daddy loves me. Lizzy loves me. Everyone loves me.” Pressing her cheek next to her mother’s, she promised, “I will not break your heart.” Then, with an eye to eternity that sobered us, speaking of her birth mother, she said, “I will not break her heart either.”

I believe in the power of a child’s prayer. I believe in a loving Father’s equity that

promises that all arms will be full, if we will wait patiently on the Lord. I know that sometime in eternity our daughters will *finish* the process of their birth mothers' healing. These finishings will be intimate restorations.

I conclude by returning to the little Church of San Justo. If you walk past the altar and approach the eastern wall, you will notice that all the images are complete, except for one—that of the descent from the cross. Nearly a thousand years ago the painter scribbled in Latin above his unfinished sketch the words, loosely translated, "I cannot finish the painting." I have wondered at his statement. Did his patrons in the church run out of funds to pay his wages? Did he become ill in the freezing humidity of Segovia's winters? Did arthritis in his hands and back prevent any more hours working on top of the scaffolding? Whatever the explanation, I relate to this incompleteness, to this imperfection—finding often that my efforts as a father, a husband, a teacher, and a colleague fall short. I suspect that at this time of year you have your own concerns about finishing—papers, projects, exams, degrees—and that those anxieties are layered on top of more compelling questions about the completeness of relationships, of families, of health, of promises, and of promise.

A few years ago I had another experience with finishing in another Spanish church. I was admiring a display of medieval Bibles at the cathedral in Burgos. One copy—as old as San Justo—stood out. Like most of the other artifacts on display, this Bible was a stunning example of artful calligraphy and brilliant illustrations. What caught my eye was the Bible's final leaf, on which the copyist and the

illustrator had drawn self-portraits. Their backs were curved and their hands withered from arthritis. The drawings told us that finishing this volume of scripture literally cost them their lives. Their "waiting" transformed imperfect bodies into this perfect book—their flesh made Word. They had lived out Paul's promise: "Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ . . . , written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart" (2 Corinthians 3:3; emphasis added). I think often of my medieval brothers. Their devotion inspires me. The perfection of their offering stands in contrast to the unfinished panel at San Justo—a reminder that, left alone, even my best efforts will always be incomplete.

I bear witness that our life's painting, in any of its panels or dimensions, need not remain unfinished. I recall that Christ has written my sins in sand and engraved my image in his palms. I testify of the truth of Paul's words that the Lord Jesus Christ is both "the author and *finisher* of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2, also Moroni 6:4; emphasis added). When from the cross he promised, "It is finished" (John 19:30), he invited us to become perfected *in* him and to submit to and hope for the finishing touches of grace.

On this day when we commemorate the restoration of the gospel, I bear witness of and express my gratitude for the intimate restoration. I testify that he who will bring about the universal restoration of all things also brings to pass those intimate restorations that heal our wounds, cleanse our sins, and fulfill divine promises. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.