

Humble Uncertainty

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Students, one month of the semester is now past. For you beginning students, there is plenty of growth ahead, and I invite you to anticipate the time in a few years when you will assemble in this place wearing graduation robes to receive your degree. For those in the middle or finishing up, I invite you to look back on your experiences here and contemplate the value that attending college has added to your life.

What If God Gave Us What We Asked for Instead of What We Need?

Now, imagine if, during the second week of your first semester, while feeling sorry for yourself after failing a quiz, you had texted your parents about your doubts regarding college. Consider how great your relief and consolation would have been had they immediately driven to Provo, packed you up, and taken you back home, where a fake diploma, conveniently purchased online, was sitting on your bed along with a note reading, “It’s just a piece of paper anyway!” I am certain, however, that the relief would have worn off rather quickly, especially as you came to realize that you would be living the rest of your life in your parents’ basement!

College is anything but “just a piece of paper.” It is all about the unique experiences you have, the struggle and confrontation with weakness, the

self-discovery and overcoming, the ripening and growing in wisdom, and especially the learning that will happen with roommates and part-time jobs as much as—if not more than—in class.

Actually, life itself is very much like college. There may be times of fear when we wish for the tests and exams to be simplified or waived altogether and when we ignore the fact that life is a complex system designed by loving Heavenly Parents to make us into better people and prepare us to confront an eternity of expanding opportunities. Sometimes, when we pray to have our trials end quickly, we are like first-year students sending home pity-me texts. If God were to immediately grant our request and swoop in and rescue us, well, then for us eternity might just prove to be something of a basement experience.

Instead, God, like other wise parents, knows that great things will come out of the difficulties and challenges we face because He knows our eternal identity. We, on the other hand, are clueless about that identity most of the time and live our lives forever perched on the edge of a dark, inscrutable path we call the future, uncertain of what it contains. We cannot see what lies ahead,

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and most of the time that makes it discouraging, if not utterly terrifying.

This morning I would like to explore some ideas about how we might move forward into the future to become all that God knows we can become. One of the things I like most about my discipline of comparative literature is that it often brings together a variety of interesting works of literature under the same analytic microscope, often with very surprising results. In that spirit, I would like to share wisdom and beauty about facing our uncertain future from a Japanese writer and a British poet.

Kajii Motojirō on Finding Beauty in the Dark

Kajii Motojirō lived out his brief life at the beginning of the twentieth century facing the ever-present specter of an early death from tuberculosis. In one of his creative essays, written in 1927 and entitled “A Picture Scroll of the Dark,” he mentions reading about a Tokyo burglar who was successful for years because he developed the ability to rob houses in total darkness. Kajii contrasts that burglar with most of us, who are quite helpless in the dark, and he describes how darkness represents a frightening boundary:

The dark! Therein we can discern nothing; blackness shrouds all in thick, oppressive waves. Who can even think in such a state? How can we possibly move forward when there is no knowing what lies ahead? We have no other choice, however, but to proceed somehow, step by reluctant step, the first step fraught with pangs of distress, anxiety, terror. To take that step we may have to muster the passionate desperation one needs . . . to trample thistles with bare feet! [梶井基次郎、「闇の絵巻」; author’s translation]

The dread of that first step into the darkness and its inscrutable world can be quite distressing, as if one is about to stomp on prickly thistles with one’s bare feet. The resolve—or desperation—required to take that step explains why it is often easier to stay in a well-lit room rather than enter the darkness and why most of us prefer to use flashlights when we walk in dark places. Although

we often associate darkness with danger, ignorance, or evil, it makes up, on average, half of our lifetime and, as any astronomer will confirm, opens up to us billions of worlds. Our fear of the dark, however, makes us vulnerable and can even paralyze us.

Kajii, who wrote his essay at a time when he was convalescing at a remote spa town, sees darkness as a very palpable representation of his impending death. He decides to try to make peace with the darkness by willfully walking at night without a lantern, journeying home from his friend’s inn alone in the gloom. He describes some terrifying moments, yet he persists in making his way upstream along a narrow roadway. As he repeats this journey, night after night, his eyes begin to open—both literally and figuratively—as he sees poignant scenes of beauty in the darkness: the silhouette of trees against a star-filled sky, a nocturnal frog catching bugs beneath a street lamp, the odor of citrus leaves shredded by a rock he throws into the darkness. One scene in particular stands out: his discovery, one evening, of a fellow traveler in the dark. Here is the passage:

Along the way stood one solitary house with a tree in front . . . bathed in light like a magic lantern, it alone shining luxuriantly in that immense, dark landscape. The roadway itself brightened slightly at the spot, but this made the shadows ahead even darker as they swallowed up the path.

One evening I noticed a man—like me, without a lantern—walking farther up the road. I saw him because his figure suddenly appeared in the illuminated space in front of the house. The man, his back turned to the light, gradually receded into the darkness and vanished. I watched the entire scene, moved in a strange, singular way. Stirred by the man’s disappearing figure, I thought, “In a short time I’ll be walking into the darkness just like him. If someone were to stand here, observing, they’d probably see me vanish, the same way he did.”

Kajii had been discovering the hidden beauty of the dark on his own but now sees someone else on the same dark path—ahead of him, no less—walking without a lantern. He concludes that the

pathway is anything but solitary; there are others who choose to walk alone in the dark at night to discover its hidden aesthetic pleasures. As he watches the traveler disappear into the darkness, he considers—perhaps for the first time—that there could be others behind him, for whom his sudden appearance and disappearance would be equally shocking, cheering, and instructive.

Although there are many ways to read this encounter, I see it as one that inspires hope. Glimpsing someone ahead on the same path, Kajii discerns that just as one can discover beauty and tranquility in darkness, so can one hope that there is an abundance of both light and beauty in that darkness we now fear as death. Our fear of the dark, or our bias against it, can blind us to a whole world of new and edifying experiences, and Kajii demonstrates the rewards of exercising faith as we move into uncertain futures.

We may infer from this passage that the things we fear have their positive sides too and that we should not be so consumed by our fears and uncertainties that we abandon hope and never move forward. There was a reason Moses, Lehi, and Brigham Young were all commanded to leave the comfort and security of more stable, civilized societies and strike off into the wilderness. That is where the burning bush, the Liahona, and Zion were awaiting. In our own lives, when we muster the faith to confront our doubts and fears by venturing forward into the dark unknown, we may come to learn that simple faith might be as fragile as starlight but that it can also guide our journey, fixed as the North Star.

T. S. Eliot and the Darkness of God

We can discover similar insights about finding hope in darkness from an author who was contemporary to Kajii but was living halfway around the world. T. S. Eliot was a British Modernist writer whose poem “East Coker,” published on Easter Sunday of 1940, deals with Eliot’s conversion to Christianity in his thirties. Like Kajii’s venturing forth into the darkness in search of beauty, Eliot’s poem describes searching for God in the stillness of the dark:

*I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed.
[Four Quartets, no. 2, part III]*

Eliot suggests that “the darkness of God” is not an empty void but rather a place of possibility, a brooding space in which endless opportunities line up, like being in a darkened theater waiting for the next act of a play. Our spiritual quest in life involves a series of journeys between zones of light and darkness. Eliot describes a sense of dread as we move forward into “the darkness of God” in search of spiritual truth that parallels Kajii’s initial observation. Eliot writes:

*Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops
too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness
deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think
about. [Part III]*

Eliot’s passengers have grown so used to speeding forward in an artificially illuminated world that they begin to panic when faced with static darkness—a dread akin to what we might feel the moment we realize we left our phone at home and will be unable to access it for hours. As Eliot suggests, our overwhelming fear of the dark can be paralyzing, giving us the sense that we cannot even think, but he goes on to imply that some of our greatest learning opportunities happen in our darkest times. Rather than stand frozen in our fear, we may reach out and discover God in those dark moments.

Crises of Faith or Crises of Uncertainty?

What do the observations of these two very different writers share in common? Both Kajii and Eliot used light and darkness as powerful metaphors for a kind of spiritual quest: moving from the known to the unknown, from the familiar and mundane to the hidden realms of possibility. Both authors also suggested that when we are always

immersed in artificial light, we may come to expect answers to just appear all the time, accustomed as we are to the constant illumination—hence the terror on the subway passengers’ faces and our fear of stepping forward into the dark.

Such fear may explain why we are reluctant at times to move forward along the path of spiritual growth that leads into the murkiness of things we do not know or things we doubt. To echo Kajii, “How can we possibly move forward when there is no knowing what lies ahead?” Perhaps, as Kajii noted, when we stand poised to test our faith once more by stepping forward into the void, we anticipate only prickly pain. Or perhaps, like Eliot’s passengers, whose minds go blank, we hesitate out of fear of *spiritual* emptiness, a growing terror of nothing to *believe in*. This state, often described as a crisis of faith, is more accurately a crisis of uncertainty—a crisis fueled by our confrontation with different kinds of doubt, all present at the moment we stand poised at the edge of our spiritual comfort zone, staring into the dark unknown.

Although we often think of doubt simply as a synonym for willful disbelief, I would like to suggest that different kinds of doubt affect us in different ways. Let me describe three kinds: two stunting doubts rooted in pride and fear and a third, soul-expanding doubt rooted in humility and faith.

1. Dropout Doubt

Observing other people applying faith in their lives can be an exhilarating experience. It can seem so natural and easy, like the performance of a virtuoso musician, that we forget the long hours of practice that went into the performer’s acquiring that skill. This was certainly the case when Oliver Cowdery was helping Joseph Smith translate the Book of Mormon. Oliver, a gifted teacher, must have felt eager to try his hand at the miracle of translation that Joseph, his former pupil, seemed to be doing with apparent ease. After inquiring of the Lord, Joseph gave Oliver the chance to try, and the result was one of the most instructive concepts in latter-day scripture: you must study it out in your own mind and

then ask God for a response to your decision (see D&C 9:7–8). In Oliver’s case this formula worked well, until Oliver’s fear undermined his ability to translate.

The Lord did not condemn Oliver for his fear, and He in fact pointed out how Oliver and Joseph formed a well-balanced translation team. However, Oliver, who exercised faith but did not get the same results Joseph did, spent a decade brooding over his inabilities and uncertainties and struggling with his pride in the face of Joseph’s leadership before separating himself from the Church for a time. After wandering sideways, he once more returned to the comfort and blessings of his faith. The price he paid for yielding to his doubts and dropping out was high, however, given the wealth of spiritual manifestations and blessings he missed out on in his absence.

When we doubt ourselves or God because our unique spiritual journey is different from that of others or when our pride gets hurt in the day-to-day interactions with fellow wanderers along the path, we may, like Oliver, feel as though the lights have gone out and find ourselves fidgeting in our theater seats, not really sure what is going on or upset by what happened in the first act of the play. In our impatience or dissatisfaction, we may exit the theater too soon, abandoning our faith and the personal growth it will bring for some distracting sideshow. I call this crisis of uncertainty “dropout doubt” because we prematurely remove ourselves from our best opportunities to learn and grow.

2. Denial Doubt

A second kind of doubt is akin to being compulsively afraid of the dark. In this case we avoid acknowledging any uncertainty—things we do not know, things we secretly fear might not be true, or things that cannot be known at the present time—and focus instead on only what we do know for certain. We conveniently ignore Alma’s assertion that “faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things” (Alma 32:21). Being blinded by our own bias for certain knowledge, we can be blind as well to others’ struggles, either because we pretend we have none or are afraid that their doubts

will poison our tenuous faith. Such smugness can lead to self-righteousness or even persecution of others who are actually more in tune with their own limitations.

By choosing to stay put in our secure but limited place, we are not actually practicing faith but rather allowing it to lie dormant. Faith only materializes when we act upon it and move forward into the darkness one step at a time, relying upon the momentum and trajectory our faith sets for us. When we are afraid of our uncertainty, we are spiritually moving sideways because we are blind to our weaknesses and stymied by that blindness in our ability to strengthen others and feed Christ's sheep. This constitutes a crisis of both faith and humanity—or perhaps a crisis of faith in humanity—because it isolates us and prevents us from connecting with others and relieving one another's burdens.

This was true of Zoram and his followers, whose Rameumptom mantra revolved around their superiority. Their core beliefs had been cleanly excised of all faith-promoting uncertainties: no absent physical God; no future Only Begotten in the flesh; no doubt about one's standing before God, since all (with money) were saved; no guilt, since they saw themselves as “a chosen and a holy people” (Alma 31:18); and no fear of error, since God had elected them and hence they could “not be led away” (Alma 31:17; see also verses 15–18).

When we avoid confronting doubt, our very fear of it can keep us from growing spiritually. Staring into the unknown, we may fear vulnerability so much that we ignore or even try to hide our weaknesses, restrict the range of our beliefs, and distance ourselves from those whose lives are complicated by trials and tribulations. I call this crisis of uncertainty “denial doubt” because we allow fear to block our progress.

3. Humble Uncertainty

Dropout doubt and denial doubt proceed from pride and fear, limiting our growth and shrinking our faith. There is, however, a soul-expanding kind of doubt that proceeds from an attitude of

humility—the species of humility that openly admits our weaknesses. When we begin to see ourselves and our weaknesses clearly, we arrive at a state of vulnerability similar to what Joseph Smith faced as he unwittingly prepared himself for the Sacred Grove. Troubled by his own weaknesses, Joseph was concerned about his standing before God, and as he sought reassurance, his study of local religions brought on other uncertainties—most important, his question about which, if any, was true. As with Joseph Smith, our uncertainties are very often grounded in the personal and then proceed to the doctrinal: we feel our failures, wonder about our status before God, question if God really loves us, and then try to find God. This is not an uncommon conversion pathway; it is one shared by early members of the Church in this dispensation and may be similar to yours as well.

If we are honest about our own weaknesses, some of us may be more uncertain about ourselves than we are of the gospel, while others may emphasize doctrinal uncertainties to hide self-doubts. In both cases the question “Can we be true to it?” may eclipse “Can it be true?” Satan plays on our nagging sense of unworthiness and self-doubt when he invites us to compare ourselves with others, a dissonance that social media profiles often amplify.

At the core of self-doubt is a very real confrontation with the unknown darkness of who we really are, of our full potential. If we muster the faith to step on that particular thistle, to fully engage our own weaknesses as the Spirit reveals them to us, and in that humble state reach out to God in faith, we know that He will “make weak things become strong unto” us (Ether 12:27) and that we will find beauty and hope in the darkness. If we are sincerely moving forward in our spiritual progress, then we should expect and even embrace opportunities to confront questions and uncertainties that humble us and help us to expand and strengthen our faith.

God knows that, regardless of how powerful or effective our faith might have been in the past, each new experience in life requires that we draw

upon our faith in a new way. Although we may have successfully exercised great faith and even have seen miracles, the danger is very real that, if we do not actively move forward again and exercise our faith during new challenges, we might grow too comfortable in our limited knowledge or even become afraid to move forward into an uncertain future. (In fact, we might risk becoming something like Napoleon Dynamite’s Uncle Rico with faith-promoting experiences, reliving them rather than having new ones!)

Given the dangers that self-satisfaction or smugness pose to our growth potential, life offers us plenty of puzzling hints, paradoxes, and contradictions to remind us we do not yet understand the big picture. Rather than caution us to avoid these mysteries, God encourages us to look closely and observe the world around us, to study it carefully—“things both in heaven and in the earth” (D&C 88:79); “all good books, and . . . languages, tongues, and people” (D&C 90:15); as well as “the wars and the perplexities of the nations” (D&C 88:79). Along the way we will have questions—we will *need* to have questions—and will come to understand that, as in college, the more we learn, the more we come to realize how little we actually know. It is when we combine humility about the limits of our knowledge with honest questions about life’s perplexities that we demonstrate the kind of humble uncertainty that will expand our souls.

An Unexpected Answer

I would like to further illustrate this notion with a personal story about one of my own crises of uncertainty. It happened one summer in my mid-teens when I was working at a remote wilderness Scout camp, a welcome refuge from the turmoil at home, where my parents were divorcing. I lived alone in a tent and would often take my proto-iPod—a portable cassette tape player—out with me at night to a hillside overlooking the lake and play music while watching the stars and contemplating my tiny place in the cosmos. Sometimes I would even try walking to and from my destination without a flashlight, especially if the night sky was clear and the moon

was bright—a journey that was equally thrilling and frightening (and that helped me relate to Kajii when I read his essay years later). I would begin and end the day in my tent reading from the Book of Mormon, and, despite my inner turmoil, I felt a growing reassurance from the words I read.

Many evenings after dinner, some of the older, more worldly staff would air their grievances about the Church, critique various Church leaders, parrot the cynical views of their worldly professors, and generally trash people and sacred practices I held dear. I have come to learn that this is just what some people do after dinner, but at the time what they said was news to me, and I felt compelled to listen. Sometimes I tried to challenge their views, but that put me in the uncomfortable role of antagonist—not a good fit for someone my age (and height). And so I mostly just listened, mulling over their critiques.

I quickly saw that buying into their cynicism meant my own faith was at risk. Underlying the unsettling things that I heard in the dining hall were my own nagging doubts about my personal flaws and failures. These revolved around new challenges I faced while learning to teach unruly Scouts but more poignantly around my growing awareness of personal weaknesses that our family problems brought to the fore.

Confronting the terrible darkness of personal and doctrinal uncertainty, I decided to pray, framing my question simply: “Is the Church *really* true?” Behind that question was an implied one: “Can I really be true to the Church?” When the answer finally came, after some period of tension and suspense, it was not in the form of a yes or a no but in deep and profound feelings of love and inner peace accompanied by a singular and distinct impression that my soul was eternal.

That wholly unexpected answer taught me how little I know about the nature of our existence in general and God’s all-encompassing love in particular. It became an inseparable part of how I have come to interact with others and the world. My life since then has been punctuated by sporadic moments of humble uncertainty, followed by answers to prayer I do not expect—answers that

reveal the narrowness of my unreasonable expectations and that can transform me into something better than I know.

“For Us, There Is Only the Trying”

Now there is nothing so exciting as watching someone learn and grow, as any parent can testify. God feels the same way and has set up a plan to allow us all to pass our mortal schooling. God does not grade on a bell curve; in fact, God’s plan *depends* upon us making mistakes. He wants us to explore the full dimension of life, both daylight and nighttime, walking in the light of faith and making our way through periods of uncertainty.

Alexander Pope has noted that “a little learning is a dangerous thing” (*An Essay on Criticism* [1711], part II, line 15). It is sometimes easy, in the process of learning, to assume that our inadequate words or incomplete powers of reason are sufficient to describe and measure the entire cosmos, but when it comes to really understanding creation, as Joseph Smith said, we are as “a babe upon its mother’s lap” (quoted in Wilford Woodruff, *CR*, April 1898, 57). We miss opportunities for discovery when we focus only on the light of what we know and are afraid to explore what lies beyond that familiarity. Likewise, when we do make mistakes or stumble in the dark, it is tempting to retreat to our parents’ basement or to abandon our journey altogether.

Eliot concludes his poem “East Coker” with the following insight about the conversion process:

*We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion. . . .
. . . In my end is my beginning. [Part V]*

The poet eloquently captures the essence of our challenge to grow spiritually. We must “be still”—as in silent, waiting hopefully and patiently in the dark—and “still moving Into another intensity,” proceeding apace toward a union with God and communion with fellow Saints who are also walking in the darkness, propelled forward by faith. The end of the lighted path marks the beginning of our spiritual journey; to make progress is to face the darkness.

Like Kajii, as we muster the courage and faith to walk forward into that darkness, I know that, despite our fear and the challenge of there being “no knowing what lies ahead,” we will discover beauty we never suspected, as well as fellow travelers. Indeed, as we allow our faith to propel us forward beyond the boundary of our current limited knowledge into a humble uncertainty, we can discover greater things illuminated by the dim light of our faith, even Christ walking ahead of us, showing us the way forward and providing answers we do not expect.

This drama will play out over and over again in our lives if we are on the right path, because such a transformative experience is at the heart of all true learning and wisdom. Eliot’s poem describes the range of our responsibility in this process: “For us, there is only the trying” (part V). It is a principle of growth—and an article of my personal faith—that trying, always trying, will ultimately bring us to the knowledge we seek. I pray that we may have the faith to continue stepping humbly into the uncertain void, transcending our own feeble understanding, and, through faith and endurance, come to behold the marvels and beauties of all creation, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.