

“Watching It Rain”

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I’m reminded of a survey that I recently heard of in which people were asked to list their greatest fears. The majority of those surveyed listed giving a talk as that which they feared most. The second most feared activity was that of dying. I suppose that one could deduce from the study that most people would rather die than give a talk.

Preparation for this devotional has been a most interesting experience. It has given me the chance to more closely focus on an area that is becoming increasingly important to me. I seek for your faith and prayers that what I have prepared will be presented clearly and that you will find value in its content.

During my 26 years as a faculty member at BYU I have discovered that age is a relative matter. If you continue to work and absorb the beauty in the world about you, you find that age does not necessarily mean getting old. Rather it refers to a continual process of developing and maturing. In my case it refers to an ever-increasing desire to fill my mind with things that will make life more productive and meaningful. Age has taught me the importance of using all that is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” (Articles of Faith 1:13) to create a shield in my mind that can ward off

temptation and assist me in drawing closer to God and his Son Jesus Christ.

Today I want to share with you some reasons for, as well as examples of, using two areas of the fine arts—visual representation and music—to give us increased ability to make our lives better and more productive, especially as they relate to our purpose here: to become like Christ.

There is no profession more important than that of teaching. At any level it is a great responsibility. Good teachers help shape and give direction to the lives of their students.

One of the principles that plays such an important part in the process of teaching is that there are some things teachers can give to students rather easily and some things they cannot give, except as the students are willing to reach out, grab, and take hold of an object or thought—thus beginning to pay the price for making it an integral part of their lives.

It is a wonderfully rewarding experience to see the “light go on” in a student’s eyes after seeing them grapple and come to grips with a

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problem or a new experience. On the other hand, it is a disheartening experience to see a student who, when exposed to that which is “of good report or praiseworthy,” rejects it because, paraphrasing the American composer Charles Ives, they seek only that which allows the ears to “lie back in an easy chair” (Charles Ives, as quoted by Joseph Machlis in *The Enjoyment of Music* [New York: Norton, 1977], p. 566).

There are few things that require concentration or extra effort that are comfortable or convenient. Those people who do not want to put themselves out or “seek” for that which is “of good report or praiseworthy” can usually find an excuse for not participating in the experience. Self-improvement is seldom situated within easy reach. Learning requires active effort. Seeking that which is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” requires that one look for, search for, inquire after, try to discover, or try to acquire. It means being willing to carefully and thoroughly engage yourself in the process of finding and discovering.

In describing his dream, Lehi spoke of “a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy.” The fruit of the tree was “most sweet, above all that [he] ever before tasted” and it was “white, to exceed all the whiteness that [he] had ever seen.” After partaking of the wonderful fruit, his soul was filled “with exceedingly great joy” (1 Nephi 8:10–12).

Lehi also spoke of a “rod of iron” and of a path extending along the bank of a river. The rod assists one in staying on the path. Both lead to the tree containing the white, most sweet, and wonderful fruit.

During the course of Lehi’s narration it becomes obvious that reaching the tree is no easy task. It is not simple or convenient. You cannot progress down the path if you simply allow yourself to “lie back in an easy chair” (see 1 Nephi 8:19–33).

At no point in Lehi’s dream was anyone forced to take hold of the rod and proceed

down the path. Those desiring to partake of the fruit had to be willing to do so of their own volition. They had to be willing to exert all of their might, mind, and strength in seeking that which would give greater gripping power.

Being able to continually hold on requires that we fully experience the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it means that we completely understand and internalize our obligations and responsibilities.

As we thoroughly engage ourselves in making that which is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” a part of our lives, our grip on the rod becomes stronger. And when the floods descend and the mists of darkness surround us, we are able to withstand the temptation to release our grip and leave the path. We are able to hang on until we can partake of that which is the “greatest of all the gifts of God,” even eternal life (1 Nephi 15:36, D&C 14:7).

Each member of Christ’s church has the responsibility to find that which allows them to have a sturdy grip on the rod. Elder Dallin H. Oaks admonished that we have the responsibility of filling

our minds with “the things of the Spirit” — things that teach of God or promote that which is pleasing to him, things that are “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy.” [Dallin H. Oaks, *Pure in Heart* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), p. 146]

We need to seek wisdom and understanding. We need to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). We need to fill our minds with thoughts and expressions, with pictures and music and books that can be judged as worthy to draw one closer to the Spirit of Christ. “They are the daily bread of the soul, the best friends a man can have. . . . They teach us the best way of living and the noblest way of thinking” (Henry Fielding, quoted by Hugh B. Brown, *The Abundant Life* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965], p. 112).

Several individuals from this and other pulpits have told us to fill our minds with good music. They have suggested that we have a favorite hymn that we sing in our minds when the mists of darkness surround us. Others have suggested that we memorize poems or scriptures for the same purpose. Some have used works of art as contemplative material to help overcome the influence of evil. All of these interventions can help combat evil's influence. They focus our minds. They enrich us with wisdom.

We need to start filling our minds with good things. As Paul said in his letter to the Thessalonians, "Hold fast that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Dr. Arthur Henry King, an emeritus member of our faculty, said in a June 1970 forum lecture:

We have a message [for] the world. That message springs from our faith. In order to give that message, we need to select from the world the instruments which will help us to convey our faith; and at the same time, we need to study the world to understand with what we have to deal. But we need to study the world, not from the point of view of the world, because that is wrong; but from the point of view of the center which we have in the Church and in ourselves that enables us to judge clearly and firmly. One of the major tasks of our education surely is to apply the Church's standards to the great artistic works of all time in order that we may judge them in their approaches to the relationship of God and man.

Dr. King concludes:

*The Holy Spirit does not do everything for us. It is there to guide us when we are unable to do what is needed for ourselves. It is up to us in our Church to educate ourselves to the point at which we can experience the best of art. [Arthur H. King, "Some Notes on Art and Morality," *BYU Studies* 11, no. 1 (autumn 1970):48]*

"Experience the best of art"—being in the world but not of the world. We are different. Our view of life must be from the standpoint of the gospel and its teachings. We, indeed, have a message for the world—a message that we must internalize. It must become a part of our being. We must inwardly have an understanding of what it means to take upon ourselves the name of Christ. We must be convinced and certain of the message as given by the Savior.

To "experience the best of art," we must understand that "all things which are good cometh of God" and that "the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil" (Moroni 7:12, 16).

Elder Richard L. Evans wrote, "We are the sum of all our actions and attitudes and utterances, of all things stored in body and mind and memory" (Richard L. Evans, *An Open Door*, vol. 2 [Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1967], p. 100). Thus we should be continually filling our bodies, minds, and memories with that which is "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy."

Several years ago one of our older boys, who was five or six years old at the time, was sitting on the sofa in our front room. It was summer—midday—and the sun was shining through our large front windows. He was taking a few moments out from his play to read and rest. As I looked at him with the open book resting on his lap, he seemed to be sleeping. Thinking that it would be more comfortable for him to lie down, I went over to him and began putting my arms under his legs and around his back. As I touched him, he suddenly moved and said, "What ya doin', Dad?"

In response I said that I was simply trying to make him more comfortable. In his most direct way he said that he wasn't tired and didn't want to nap.

"What do you mean, Son? Your eyes were closed, and you seemed to be sleeping."

"I wasn't sleeping, Dad," he said. "I was just watching it rain."

“Watching it rain.” The book was about rain. This young boy had taken his life experiences with rain and combined them with that which he had been reading. Inside his mind, despite the fact that the sun was shining brightly through the windows, he was “watching it rain.” He had internalized the message. It had become a part of him, so much so that when he wanted he could recall and visualize in his mind the experience of rain.

During a Study Abroad experience in London in 1991, we visited many of the great art museums of Europe. It was then that my slide collection of paintings depicting events in the life of the Savior was started. Many of these paintings have made it possible for me to visualize the written word. They have given my imagination the opportunity to see how certain scenes might have been. They are snapshots of a moment in time suspended forever as seen through the artist’s eyes. They have, in Elder Boyd K. Packer’s words, “a sense of spiritual propriety” (Boyd K. Packer, “The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord,” *Speeches of the Year, 1976* [Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1977], p. 278).

Just as our young son was “watching it rain” after reading a book, so works of art can give us the opportunity to visualize particular events in the life of the Savior with greater depth and understanding. Works of art literally can bring scriptural passages to life.

The following paintings were not originally intended for display in the Marriott Center setting. Rather they were intended for settings in which those viewing them could stand close to them and bask in their visual display. Some were intended for monasteries or chapels, some were intended for small rooms in which individuals gathered for worship and contemplation, some were intended for personal or private display. All were painted with the idea of drawing the viewer into a scene and giving him or her more empathy. All were designed to

assist in giving greater individual internalization to the subject being portrayed.

[Slide 1] *Taken in Adultery*—Bruce Hixon Smith

Early one morning Jesus came into the temple. John writes that

all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.

And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,

They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? [John 8:2–5]

That is the moment Bruce Hixson Smith of our faculty was attempting to pictorialize in his *Taken in Adultery* (in personal collection of Bruce L. Christensen). Brother Smith described it this way: “The painting . . . implicitly refers to the evilness and insensitivity of the accusers; yet for me, the painting primarily reaffirms faith in repentance, and strengthens my will to repent. It illustrates the perfect understanding of our Savior and confirms his magnanimous persuasion.”

Professor Smith has purposely taken great pains not to paint this scene in a realistic style. Rather, the viewer is required to engage the imagination. The “evilness and insensitivity of the accusers” is there, but it is not on a platter. You have to put your mind to work. You have to reach out and discover what is being pictorialized by the artist.

For some time *Taken in Adultery* hung in the office of Dean Bruce Christensen. As you would walk by his open door, it was in full view. It was always difficult for me to go past his office without contemplating the painting and thinking of the Savior’s response to the scribes and Pharisees: “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” His admonition to the woman, “Go, and sin no

more,” and her response that she “glorified God from that hour, and believed on his name” have always given me cause for hope and for knowing the direction I should take as I sin and go through the repentance process (John 8:7, 11; JST John 8:11).

Close your eyes, ponder on the scriptural passage, allow yourself to visualize the moment through the eyes of the artist: All these actions will allow you the opportunity to more fully understand, envision, and internalize the lessons being taught by the Savior. You will indeed be “watching it rain.”

[Slide 2] *Crucifixion*—Francisco de Zurbarán

In 1627 Francisco de Zurbarán painted *Crucifixion* (in collection of the Art Institute of Chicago) for the monastery of San Pablo el Reale in Seville, Spain. Not intended to be a work that allows the eyes to lie back in an easy chair, *Crucifixion* gives the viewer a realistic rendering of Zurbarán’s concept of the horror of crucifixion, of nails being driven into hands and feet, of a spear being thrust into the Savior’s side, and of the agony of death. Crucifixion is not a pretty sight but is one that we must allow to become part of our visualization process. It happened. Christ hung on the cross. But there was a purpose. Eliza R. Snow wrote:

*Behold the great Redeemer die,
A broken law to satisfy.
He dies a sacrifice for sin,
That man may live and glory win.*

*While guilty men his pains deride,
They pierce his hands and feet and side;
And with insulting scoffs and scorns,
They crown his head with plaited thorns.*

*Although in agony he hung,
No murm’ring word escaped his tongue.
His high commission to fulfill,
He magnified his Father’s will.*

.....

*He died, and at the awful sight
The sun in shame withdrew its light!
Earth trembled, and all nature sighed
In dread response, “A God has died!”
[“Behold the Great Redeemer Die,” *Hymns*,
1985, no. 191]*

A snapshot of a moment in time. Can you see the sun withdraw its light, the earth tremble, and all nature sigh? Can you “watch it rain,” thunder, and lightning as the Son of God is crucified?

[Slide 3] *Doubting Thomas*—Michelangelo da Caravaggio

Following his resurrection, Christ appeared to his disciples. Thomas, one of their number, was not with them. Following the appearance, the disciples said to Thomas:

*We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them,
Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails,
and put my finger into the print of the nails, and
thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.*
[John 20:25]

Eight days later, while Thomas and the other disciples were together in a room, the doors being shut, Jesus suddenly stood in their midst and said, “Peace be unto you.” He then turned to Thomas and said, “Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing” (John 20:26–27).

The Italian painter Caravaggio painted *Doubting Thomas* in 1604 (in collection of the Potsdam Neuespalais). The painting allows us the opportunity to envision the Savior’s conversation with Thomas. It makes it possible for us to focus our minds on the event and more fully internalize the Savior’s admonition: “Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

[Slide 4] *Doubting Thomas* — Guercino

This same *Doubting Thomas* scene was painted a short while later by another Italian known as Guercino.

Neither of these two artists intended their paintings to depict events in another part of the world. They can, however, give us opportunity to better envision and incorporate within ourselves the resurrected Savior's appearance to the Nephites. You remember his appearance—after the sun withdrew its light in shame, the earth trembled, and “all nature sighed.” Picture in your mind's eye the Savior saying:

Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet. . . .

And it came to pass that the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet; and this they did do, going forth one by one until they had all gone forth, and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety . . . that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come. [3 Nephi 11:14–15]

Another snapshot of frozen time. Can you envision yourself being there? Can you see the Savior asking them to arise? Can you envision placing your hands into his side and feeling the prints of the nails in his hands? Can you “watch it rain?”

[Slide 5] *The First Vision* — Minerva Teichert

Minerva Teichert was born in Ogden, Utah, in 1888. She studied at the Chicago Art Institute from 1908 to 1912. In the 1930s, during her most productive period, her first priority was to paint the Mormon story. For her, painting was a means of telling people about her faith in Christ and of his church restored to earth by the Prophet Joseph Smith. This painting of the Father and Son's appearance to

Joseph currently hangs in the Joseph Smith Building on our campus (*The First Vision*, painted for the LDS tabernacle in Montpelier, Idaho). Unfortunately, it hangs in an area that is not all together conducive to contemplation on a personal level. But upon viewing the painting one ought to have brought to mind the experience that this painting is attempting to pictorialize.

Exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair . . . I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.

. . . When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other — This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him! [Joseph Smith—History 1:16–17; emphasis in original]

In your quiet moments can you envision the power of the enemy? Can you envision the feeling of despair of the Prophet? Can you see the pillar of light descend upon him? Can you see the “brightness and glory” of the heavenly personages as they appeared to him? Can you “watch it rain”?

Music is one of the most influential and powerful areas of the arts. It can draw us closer to the Spirit—the Spirit of Christ and the Holy Ghost. Or it can draw us closer to that spirit that causes us to do and say those things that are not of God. It has the power to persuade mankind to do evil, or it can assist us to more deeply believe in Christ. It can indeed be a great gift for good. It is our responsibility to internalize the kind of music that will assist us in becoming a child of Christ.

Music is the power of emotion expressed in sound. It can enhance our inner being. It can assist us in more vividly “watching it rain.”

Upon arriving in the Eastern Canadian Mission, I was assigned to labor in Ottawa with Elder Gary Heiner. Elder Heiner wasted no time involving me in the work. On the evening of my first day there we visited a Mrs. Groves. The experience that evening is so vivid that I remember it like it was yesterday. We entered her home, Elder Heiner gave the first discussion, and then he bore his testimony. He then turned to me and said, "Elder Randall, will you please bear your testimony?" Oh, how I wanted to bear my testimony by playing the piano. I would have found that so much easier. I had had much more experience performing in front of people than in bearing my testimony—especially to a stranger. Well, there was no piano available that night, and I found it necessary to verbally share with Mrs. Groves my testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Restoration.

Now, however, I have the opportunity, along with my fellow faculty member Robin Hancock, to play for you an expression of testimony: "I Know That My Redeemer Lives." The arrangement was done by Larry Beebe. As you

listen, allow yourself to contemplate the words of the hymn and visualize the resurrected Savior in all of his glory and majesty.

Don't allow yourselves to simply lie back in an easy chair, or be like the cow Hugh B. Brown described standing on the hillside chewing her cud "blissfully unaware of the beautiful sunset in the west" (Hugh B. Brown, *The Abundant Life*, p. 262). Be willing to seek after all that is "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy." Be willing to continually fill your mind with that which will draw you closer to the Spirit of Christ and help you resist temptation at every turn. Be willing to fill your mind with that which will allow you to more clearly "watch it rain." By doing so you will create a shield in your mind that will assist you in warding off temptation and drawing closer to God and his Son Jesus Christ.

God lives. This is his church. We live in a day when there are prophets—prophets who represent the Lord Jesus Christ. May we continually seek to do his will, that we might one day enter back into his presence, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.