

The Gardener of Gethsemane

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Thank you for that introduction, President Samuelson. Fellow students, today I feel much like King Benjamin did when he spoke to his people: “For even at this time, my whole frame doth tremble exceedingly while attempting to speak unto you.”¹ I have anticipated the anxiety of this moment for many months.

Thinking that I would get a sympathetic reaction from my library colleagues, I told them about my invitation to give a devotional address. That news, however, was met with an almost universal reaction: laughter. That was not the sort of empathy I was hoping for. My exercise buddies in the Richards Building, however, were full of advice about what I could say to you—most of it worthless. But thanks anyway, guys. I owe you one.

In the summer of 1842, the British artist William Henry Bartlett visited the Holy Land. He described his first views of the city of Jerusalem:

We descend the steep broken path on the left of our view into the valley of the Kidron; and crossing its dry bed by a small arch, reach a remarkable group of objects, venerable in the traditions of the place. On our right is a stony plot of ground surrounded by a low wall, and enclosing eight olive-trees of very great antiquity. Our sketch will give an idea of the gnarled and time-worn character of

these trees, supposed to be those of the Garden of Gethsemane. . . . The trees themselves reminded me of the celebrated cedars of Solomon on Mount Lebanon, in the disproportionate hugeness of their venerable trunks to the thin foliage above. For ages the pilgrim has knelt and kissed them with tears, carrying thence a few of the scattered fruit, or a portion of the bark, to remind him of the spot where, for his salvation, the soul of his Redeemer “was sorrowful even unto death.”²

Modern pilgrims still take away relics from this holy place. Just a few years ago my neighbors returned from Israel with olive leaves collected from the ground in the Garden of Gethsemane.

I have often thought of that holy garden and how, nearly two thousand years ago, the ancestors of today’s trees witnessed the beginning of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. If they now had a voice, what a story they could tell!

I have also often thought that surely, since it was a garden, there was no doubt a gardener who lovingly tended those trees: nourishing

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them with precious water in times of drought, carefully pruning them to encourage their fruit, and harvesting the ripened olives.

It is more than symbolic, I believe, that the scriptures often speak of the Savior as just such a gardener. Quoting the prophet Zenos, the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob said this:

Hearken, O ye house of Israel, and hear the words of me, a prophet of the Lord.

For behold, thus saith the Lord, I will liken thee, O house of Israel, like unto a tame olive-tree, which a man took and nourished in his vineyard; and it grew, and waxed old, and began to decay.

And it came to pass that the master of the vineyard went forth, and he saw that his olive-tree began to decay; and he said: I will prune it, and dig about it, and nourish it, that perhaps it may shoot forth young and tender branches, and it perish not.³

One of my favorite stories of how the Savior directs our lives is told by Elder Hugh B. Brown, who, throughout most of my teenage years, was a counselor to President David O. McKay and was much loved by Church members. I first heard this story when I was a missionary in Germany in the 1960s. One of my fellow missionaries was a grandson of President Brown and had a tape recording of his grandfather relating this experience, which he entitled “The Gardener and the Currant Bush.” I’ll use President Brown’s own words:

In the early dawn, a young gardener was pruning his trees and shrubs. He had one choice currant bush which had gone too much to wood. He feared therefore that it would produce little, if any, fruit.

Accordingly, he trimmed and pruned the bush and cut it back. In fact, when he had finished, there was little left but stumps and roots.

Tenderly he considered what was left. It looked so sad and deeply hurt. On every stump there seemed to be a tear where the pruning knife had cut away the growth of early spring. The poor bush seemed to speak to him, and he thought he heard it say, “Oh,

how could you be so cruel to me; you who claim to be my friend, who planted me and cared for me when I was young, and nurtured and encouraged me to grow? Could you not see that I was rapidly responding to your care? I was nearly half as large as the trees across the fence, and might soon have become like one of them. But now you’ve cut my branches back; the green, attractive leaves are gone, and I am in disgrace among my fellows.”

The young gardener looked at the weeping bush and heard its plea with sympathetic understanding. His voice was full of kindness as he said, “Do not cry; what I have done to you was necessary that you might be a prize currant bush in my garden. . . .

“ . . . You must not weep; all this will be for your good; and some day, when you see more clearly, when you are richly laden with luscious fruit, you will thank me and say, ‘Surely, he was a wise and loving gardener. He knew the purpose of my being, and I thank him now for what I then thought was cruelty.’”

At this point in the telling, Elder Brown’s story became a personal reflection as he looked back 40 years to when he was an officer in the Canadian army, stationed in England during World War I. An opportunity for promotion had unexpectedly come up, and he was ordered to report to his commanding officer’s quarters. Elder Brown had prepared for years for just such a position as the one he fully expected to be offered. He was confident that he would be given the promotion and the success of his military career would be assured.

As he entered the commanding officer’s quarters, President Brown noticed his own personnel file lying open on the desk in front of his superior. He also noticed a note written in a clear hand saying, “This man is a Mormon.” Elder Brown was informed that he would not be given the promotion he was expecting and was assigned what he considered a “relatively unimportant post.” He was crushed. He was convinced that his fellow soldiers would view this assignment as a sign that he had failed.

He returned to his tent and knelt next to his cot and wept. He knew that he could never achieve his goals of becoming a high-ranking military officer. He cried out to God:

“Oh, how could you be so cruel to me? You who claim to be my friend—you who brought me here and nurtured and encouraged me to grow. Could you not see that I was almost equal to the other men whom I have so long admired? But now I have been cut down. I am in disgrace among my fellows. Oh, how could you do this to me?”

Elder Brown felt humiliated, and his heart was full of bitterness. Then he seemed to hear an echo from the past. The words that were in his mind were words he had heard before—but where? Then he realized that they were the words of the currant bush, and his memory whispered: “I’m the gardener here.”

The remembrance of that long-forgotten incident in the garden came rushing back to him, and his own memory answered the bitter plea he had cast at God:

“Do not cry . . . what I have done to you was necessary . . . you were not intended for what you sought to be, . . . if I had allowed you to continue . . . you would have failed in the purpose for which I planted you and my plans for you would have been defeated. . . . Some day when you are richly laden with experience you will say, ‘He was a wise gardener. He knew the purpose of my earth life. I thank him now for what I thought was cruel.’”

Remorseful, the bitterness washed from his heart, President Brown spoke humbly to God and confessed:

“I know you now. You are the gardener, and I the currant bush. Help me, dear God, to endure the pruning, and to grow as you would have me grow; to take my allotted place in life and ever more to say, ‘Thy will not mine be done.’”⁴

When I first heard this story as a missionary, I considered it a charming, moralistic tale with little relevance to my own life and aspirations. Looking back over 40 years, however, I see it more as a pattern of my life than I had ever anticipated.

When I graduated in 1970 with a BA in history, I considered many options for a career but decided to pursue a master’s degree in library science, which was then offered here. In 1972 I began working at BYU as the assistant curator of Special Collections. The work was interesting, challenging, and satisfying. But for some reason—I can’t even imagine what it was now—I was restless and wanted to do something different and more challenging.

I told my wife I wanted to go to law school. “Are you sure?” was her reply. “Oh yes, positive. No question about it,” was no doubt my answer—or something like that. So I did everything aspiring law students do: LSAT, countless applications, prayer, fasting, and more prayer. Since my wife is from Vermont, we decided we’d apply to schools in the East. I was admitted to Syracuse University’s School of Law in 1975, so we sold our house, packed up our belongings, and moved our family—two young girls and one more baby on the way—to Syracuse, New York.

Zenos described this process of transplantation: “And behold, saith the Lord of the vineyard, I take away many of these young and tender branches, and I will graft them whithersoever I will.”⁵ And so we were grafted in, in another part of the kingdom.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but I later learned that when young BYU graduates move into communities around the world, local ward and branch leaders have great expectations that they will arrive with strong leadership skills, a solid testimony of the gospel, and the ability to assume with confidence any calling in the Church. A BYU education is outstanding preparation for graduate school and successful

careers. It also prepares you for leadership positions in the community and in the Church.

So we were welcomed by Church members in Syracuse with excitement and expectation. We felt the Lord had indeed grafted us into this ward by calling us to Church assignments of service.

But something felt surprisingly uneasy about my experience in law school. After the first year I knew I wouldn't be comfortable practicing law. When I discussed my uneasiness with my wife, she was less than sympathetic, saying something to this effect: "You've moved us halfway across the country; you're going to finish law school!" She's a tough lady; but she's also generally right.

So persevere I did, and, as instructed, I graduated. Somewhere during my last year of law school I got the idea of becoming an FBI agent. I suppose I was intrigued by what I thought would be the excitement of law enforcement and investigative work. The idea never occurred to me that perhaps I wouldn't be suited for such a profession. My patriarchal blessing contains language indicating that I would succeed at the vocation of my choice. In my own somewhat convoluted reasoning, I presumed that this meant that I only had to choose an honorable profession and success would be assured.

Those of you who have applied for a federal job know that the wheels of our national government can move painfully slow. I went through the psychological screening, personal interviews, foreign language testing, and physical examinations rather quickly. Then I waited . . . and waited . . . and waited for something to happen. Fifteen months after graduation I was finally invited to join a new agents class at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia.

Needless to say, I was excited, nervous, and optimistic about my future. I felt like I stood on the threshold of a promising and successful career. I had talked with many FBI, CIA, and

Secret Service agents and believed I truly could excel in law enforcement.

The first few weeks of new agent training went very well. There was classroom instruction in various aspects of case investigations, psychology, and constitutional law, along with challenging physical fitness goals to meet and firearms instruction. About four weeks into training we were introduced to the indoor firing range. As I stood on the firing line, ready to fire at the target some 25 yards away, the overhead lights went out. The only lights on in the range were over the target. I raised my gun and pointed it down range. I couldn't see the sight on the end of the barrel! I blinked my eyes—no change. There was just a blur where the sight should be. I fired six wildly inaccurate shots at the target. I couldn't believe what was happening! I had fired effectively on the outdoor range, but my eyes were doing strange things to me in the subdued lighting of the indoor range. My instructors pulled me aside and asked what was happening. I said I didn't know, but I was encouraged that they were willing to work with me to get through what we all thought would be a simple training problem.

One Saturday shortly after that, I checked out from the armory a "red handle," a weapon that had its firing pin removed, and went into the woods to practice dry firing at targets. It was a cloudy day, and I had the same experience as on the indoor range. The sight on the end of the barrel disappeared in a blur. "This can't be happening," I thought. "Maybe I should pray about this," I reasoned. Enos, the Book of Mormon prophet, had a "wrestle before God" that resulted in the remission of his sins.⁶ But it wasn't sin I was trying to free myself of—it was a physical condition that seriously hampered my ability to fire my weapon accurately. So for hours I wandered the woods, alternately firing and praying. Things, however, didn't get better.

As luck would have it, my wife had our fourth child just a few days later, and I was given permission to fly back for the weekend to Connecticut, where she was staying with her parents. While in Hartford I was able to visit my eye doctor about my problem on the firing range. He told me that because of the severe astigmatism that I have in each eye, I couldn't hope for any vision improvement. My wife and I discussed our options, which were basically to try to stick with it and hope I could qualify on the firing range or to resign from the Bureau. On the flight back to Washington, D.C., I thought about my situation and remembered Elder Brown and his story of the gardener and the currant bush. Why was God doing this to me? Hadn't I been promised that I would succeed in the vocation of my choosing? Why was I being subjected to this painful pruning?

The next day I met with the special agent who was our class counselor and told him of my situation. I explained how uncomfortable I felt carrying a gun that I knew I would not be able to fire accurately in certain lighting conditions. I would not only be a danger to criminals, I'd be a hazard to my fellow agents! This burden was too much for me. I decided that I would resign my position as a special agent. I wrote out a statement to this effect and handed it to him. He said he would pass it on to the FBI Academy director. I went back to my room and began to pack my bags.

As I sat alone in my room, I felt at peace in my heart, knowing I had done the right thing. I realized that the promise I had been given in my patriarchal blessing would be honored if I *carefully* and *prayerfully* chose a profession that the Lord wanted me to pursue—not one that I selected merely because it was glamorous or exciting.

As I pondered the future, my counselor returned and asked me if I would consider a non-agent position in the Bureau. There were several openings at the academy I might be qualified for, he explained. Since I didn't have

anything else lined up, I told him I would consider it. I called Cindy and asked her what she thought about a position at the Bureau. Since she was eager to be together again as a family, she told me I should accept a position if I was offered one.

I spoke with several agents who had openings in their departments—or “units,” as the Bureau calls them—and was offered a position in the Office of Institutional Research and Development. It turned out to be a valuable opportunity to meet important people in the Bureau and to learn new skills.

One of the people I eventually met was the chief of the director's speechwriting unit at FBI headquarters in Washington. A year or so later, when he had an opening in his unit for a speechwriter, he asked me to apply. I did and was offered the job.

It was the beginning of a new career for me. When people find out that for 15 years I was a speechwriter—not just for the FBI but later for the American Medical Association in Chicago, for Merck (a pharmaceutical company in New Jersey), and for Medtronic (a medical device company in Minneapolis)—they comment that this must have been interesting work. It was. But the most interesting parts of all of our experiences in these places were the wonderful people we met, both members of the Church and nonmembers. We enjoyed many choice opportunities to serve in the kingdom and to associate with some of God's noble and great ones. My wife and I have felt as though the Lord has cultivated us, just as the lord of the vineyard in Zenos' allegory had cultivated his precious olive trees. I hope that the fruit we have borne—and continue to bear—is sweet and satisfying to Him and to those we serve.

Nearly 15 years ago I went through another pruning when my position in Minnesota was restructured and I was no longer part of that structure. Again it was a trying time, but the lord of the vineyard tended to our needs through the caring hands of our neighbors and

fellow Church members. We gained new experiences and talents that would be invaluable to us as we—Cindy and I—sought to reestablish ourselves in the working world.

One job I had during this three-year period of un- and underemployment was as an 1850s farmer on a living history farm run by the Minnesota State Historical Society. What a fun job that was! It was farming just like our ancestors did 150 years ago. I came away from that job with a greater appreciation for what they had to endure and with the knowledge that I could have done it also.

That wasn't my only job. I had decided that I would try to find a library position again, since I enjoyed working with books, documents, and people. So I found several jobs that helped me get experience and gain new skills with computers that I had missed out on, having been gone from the library world for more than 20 years.

Nearly 12 years ago I was rehired at Special Collections in the Lee Library, the place I began my career decades before. During the interview process I felt an unusual calmness, a feeling that the Lord was in charge and that things would work out as they were supposed to. This was a testimony to me that God watches over us and directs us to the place where He wants us to stand.

I can honestly say that the job I have now—and I have had many others to compare it to—is the best job I've ever had. It's the place in which I am meant to be. I know that now. Let me relate an experience that gives me this assurance.

On the morning of October 13, 2003, I was in the book stacks in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections looking at a collection of 18th- and 19th-century American almanacs with Professor Madison Sowell and a few fellow librarians. I had been working with Dr. Sowell to assemble materials that we could exhibit in connection with his upcoming lecture on using almanacs as research sources. Professor Sowell

reached into a box, pulled out one from 1781, and examined it. He handed it to me and mentioned that we should use this one, because it had writing paper interleaved with the calendar pages, which allowed the almanac to be used as a diary—which it indeed had been.

As I looked at the entries, I noticed frequent references to Stockbridge. "This man lives in western Massachusetts," I thought to myself. I examined the first leaf of writing paper and saw this inscription: "Diary of my Grandfather Wm. Partridge, b. 1753. —H. W. Partridge." I was shocked! I knew I had Partridge ancestors living in Pittsfield, not far from Stockbridge, at about this time. Maybe this was one of them—a distant cousin perhaps.

I excused myself and went to my computer, called up the FamilySearch database, and entered the name William Partridge and the birth year 1753. The search results displayed names I was familiar with: William's father, Oliver Partridge; his mother, Anna Williams; his wife, Jemima Bidwell; and one of his sons, Edward, first bishop of the Mormon Church, who was my great-great-great-grandfather. In case you've lost track, that would make William Partridge my fourth great-grandfather!

My colleagues were amazed at this discovery. After they left, it occurred to me that if we had one diary, perhaps we might have more. So I looked through the 200 or so almanacs in our collection. Sure enough, there were more—45 more—each bearing William's characteristic marginal notations.

No one knows for sure how these diaries ended up at BYU. I speculate that they were acquired decades ago when the library purchased a collection of early American almanacs from a book dealer in Denver. Whatever the explanation, they were essentially lost to researchers until Dr. Sowell pulled one out of a box, examined it, and handed it to me. It was more than a coincidence.

In the April 1916 general conference, President Joseph F. Smith said this:

If we can see by the enlightening influence of the Spirit of God . . . beyond the veil that separates us from the spirit world, surely those who have passed beyond, can see more clearly . . . back here to us than it is possible for us to see to them. . . . I believe we move . . . in the presence of heavenly messengers and of heavenly beings. . . . We begin to realize more and more fully, as we become acquainted with the principles of the Gospel, . . . that we are closely related to our kindred, to our ancestors, to our friends and associates and co-laborers who have preceded us into the spirit world. We can not forget them; we do not cease to love them; we always hold them in our hearts, in memory, and thus we are associated and united to them by ties that we can not break, that we can not dissolve or free ourselves from.⁷

I have come to feel that there are indeed bands that tie me to this man William Partridge. Seven years ago he reached across the veil and placed into my hands an account of his years here on earth, an account that he had always intended for his descendants to have.

This experience is just one of the many spiritual manifestations that I have felt that lead me to believe that our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ, are aware of us and will lead us if we will listen to the Holy Spirit. If we are looking, we will see the caring hands of the Gardener of Gethsemane shaping our lives in ways we cannot now imagine. I pray that we might yield to this pruning so that we can become the people God would have us be, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Mosiah 2:30.
2. W. H. Bartlett, *Walks About the City and Environs of Jerusalem* (London: George Virtue, 1844), 105.
3. Jacob 5:2–4.
4. In Leon R. Hartshorn, comp., *Outstanding Stories by Past General Authorities* (Provo: Spring Creek, 2007), 37–39; an expanded version of this story can be found in Hugh B. Brown, “The Currant Bush,” *New Era*, January 1973, 14–15.
5. Jacob 5:8.
6. See Enos 1:2.
7. CR, April 1916, 2–3.