

The Hungry Fires of Courage

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Last August I was in Washington, D.C., staying in a hotel just across the street from Lafayette Park and the White House. That visit was like going home. I had attended graduate school in our nation's capital thirty years ago, and I had lived just blocks from that park. That was where I went when I needed to be alone. I had been in a special journalism program and I had an illustrious writing career before me, but it didn't feel right.

On a day in December 1971 I sat for five hours in that park, eyes closed, arms folded with just an occasional glance to make sure the hordes of war protestors were keeping their distance. And I prayed. I prayed for direction and answers; I prayed for resolution to a question I had been asking for almost a year. "Should I stay and pursue the job opportunities calling my name? Or should I go home and marry that straight-arrow law student?"

It's a no-brainer now, but at the time I was confused. I was asking the Lord to tell me what to do. Today, I have a better grasp of how faith and agency work together. The Lord doesn't make decisions for us any more than he fixes what is broken or changes the rules so we can win, unless it fits the eternal plan. At that time, I just wanted to resolve my five-year courtship and get on with life—either married or not married. But no "Do this" or "Do that" was coming to me that afternoon. Finally, a settling thought entered my mind: "As soon as you see Jeff, you'll know what to do." It was the still, small voice—"Hearken to the voice of the Lord your God."

Within hours, my roommate and I had piled into her car and began hearkening home across the heartland of America with more speed than the pioneers but with about the same desire to reach Zion. We drove straight through the first night and then straight through the next, arriving early on a Sunday morning. A few hours later, Jeff rang the bell. The answer to my future stood a doorknob away. I remember opening that door and feeling peace.

"Let not your heart be troubled," said the Lord. "My peace I give unto you." As it turned out, Jeff too had been petitioning the Lord that Friday afternoon as well, and his answer was similar to mine: "As soon as you see Heidi, you will know what to do." I share the podium today with that dear friend, wise confidant, and eternal companion.

This story could be cast as a love story that begins, "Happily ever after." But our start was so much more; it was the realization that "I the Lord am with you, and will stand by you. And ye shall bear record of me, . . . that I am the Son of . . . God, that I was, that I am, and that I am to come" (D&C 68:6).

Looking back, I can see a host of other experiences in my growing-up years that led to that

understanding, but this was the point at which the dots began to connect.

I think that is the essence of faith, to draw together the many times that the Lord is with us, the many ways that he has helped us, the many gifts that we have been given. And for what purpose? That we "might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

Years later I put another scripture to that time: "Remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; . . . a sure foundation . . . whereon if men build they cannot fall" (Helaman 5:12).

Though you cannot see the end from the beginning from where you stand or see the resolution to the host of difficulties that are all about, you can feel the presence of one who was "lifted up upon the cross . . . , that [he] might draw all men unto [him]."

Jeff and I bear witness today that building upon such a foundation is the essence of a faithful family. It begins in the temple with "what . . . God hath joined together" (Matthew 19:6). Five children, three apartments, three houses, one snake, and six dogs later, faith in Jesus Christ is the center of our relationship, the driving and sustaining force in our lives.

Faith is so often described by events—like me sitting on the park bench. They serve to illustrate and give place and time to the moment we received the testimony that Jesus is the Savior. Usually they are singular, and we count our growth from them.

But faith is also constructed of the small lines that connect these dots. Faith is made up of the little things that you rarely write down, but when you stop to take stock of your life, you find that the Lord is there in between as well as on the spot. It's that journey that gives faith its resonance and strength.

So how do we connect the dots faithfully when we wonder if we can even keep going? Most of our days are made up of the stuff in between. And that's where faith is shaped and toughened. Prayer is a connector; so are patience, humility, diligence, and charity. Confidence in the Lord, that he knows us and knows "the way" back home, helps connect the dots, as does his promise "not as the world giveth, give I unto you" (John 14:27).

There is no question that the adversary is chipping away at the edges of our sensitivity, our civility, and our standards. He is compromising trust one with another. He is attacking everything that speaks of righteousness, duty, spirituality or priesthood blessings. The world is contentious and greedy, saturated with sex, and full of itself. Self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-expression have replaced the fullness of faith we find in Mary, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour" (Luke 1:46-47).

What does Christ call us to do? "Lay aside the things of this world, and seek for the things of a better" (D&C 25:10). That's what the Lord said to Emma Smith. How did she do it at a time when she had to pump water from a well and grow her own food? How do you do it in a world that measures value by dress size and paychecks?

Today, I wouldn't trade the cover of *Time* magazine or a New York Times Best-Seller that once called my name for the notes like this one from our missionary son Jonathan in England: "I received Mom's letter today," he writes, "which said that she and Dad put my name in the temple. I know that is why I have had such a great week. I have felt the Lord this week with his hands on my shoulders letting me know that he cares for me and leads me. I am striving to do my best, to do all that He asks."¹

Some of us are given connecting dots that don't seem to fit the pattern. Sometimes it's serving a mission "in the [lowliest] part of the vineyard" (Jacob 5:13) or being asked essentially to "sell all that thou hast, and . . . follow me" (Luke 18:22). Sometimes such hearkening means being childless or single. A single mother raised me; she did double duty as a parent. I remember always watching the door when I was in a school concert or a production. She would make it just in time; she'd stand at the back, over her arm the green plaid coat she wore for ten years. And she would beam at me. While so much in our lives seemed outside the box, her assurance gave me the faith in little things.

Sarah Rich, a Nauvoo refugee turned plains pioneer, is a great example of that kind of faith. She and nearly six thousand other Saints left behind the temple they had so valiantly constructed against all attacks of the adversary. She wrote:

"If it had not been for the faith and knowledge that was bestowed upon us in that temple by the influence and help of the Spirit of the Lord our journey would have been like one taking a leap in the dark."[2](#)

Faith is found in living our covenants made in the temple, the deliberate and daily practice of sacrifice, service, and complete commitment to what Joseph Smith called "the cause of Christ."[3](#) The Savior said, "I came into the world to do the will of my Father" (3 Nephi 27:13). So did we. His pattern should be our pattern. But the real question is, Do we have faith for the journey?

My great-great-great grandmother Bathsheba Bigler Smith has been an example to me of such faith.

She was a young wife and mother in Nauvoo in its fast-start years. Married to George A. Smith, the youngest member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, she was no stranger to the work of the Lord. She cared for her family with whole-souled devotion; she roofed their home when her husband was serving a mission; at age nineteen, she was in attendance at the organization of the Female Relief Society; she received her endowments in the Red Brick Store when the Prophet Joseph Smith accelerated giving the temple ordinances; she worked tirelessly in the Nauvoo Temple those six critical weeks when Saints lined up to make holy covenants with the Lord.

And then, in the midst of the storms and persecutions and in the company of her husband, family, and fellow Saints, she abandoned her home in Nauvoo. She wrote:

"We left a comfortable home, the accumulations of four years of labor and thrift and took away with us only a few much needed articles such as clothing, bedding and provisions. We left everything else behind us for our enemies.

"My last act in that precious spot was to tidy the rooms, sweep up the floor, and set the broom in its accustomed place behind the door. Then with emotions in my heart which I could not now pen and which I then strove with success to conceal, I gently closed the door and faced an unknown future, faced a new life, a greater destiny as I well knew, but I faced it with faith in God."[4](#)

There was no shaking her fist at the sky, no crying out "How could you let this happen to me?" no planting her feet to show her strength. She may have closed the door on her home, but she took with her in the wagon the foundation for another. Where does such faith to fill a wagon come from?

"Now I was going into the wilderness," she said, "but I was going with the man I loved dearer than my life. I had my little children. I had heard [the voice of the Lord], so I stepped into the wagon with a certain degree of serenity."[5](#)

That serenity was born of a testimony that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Her faith in him was the core of her existence. I've closed many doors in my life and with faith in God moved on. Faith

gets you through a very bad day or a series of them. I've buried a child—his name is Christian—and, wondering how I would go forward, found that my faith carried me. This year our last child, Ian, leaves home. Our eldest child, Cameron, and his wife, Kristin, go to medical school in the east. Our son Daniel is getting married next week to the darling girl who said the opening prayer to this session. Doors are closing all around me. Ahead is a new leg of the journey. It will take faith in God.

How is it for you? Do you recognize that the Lord has felt pain, such pain, pain beyond our understanding? And because of his atonement, we have capacity. It's a matter of faith.

One of my favorite poems, written in 1947 by a woman named Vilate Raile, pays tributes to that unfailing faith. She's talking about pioneers. She says:

They cut desire into short lengths
And fed it to the hungry fires of courage.
Long after—when the flames had died—
Molten Gold gleamed in the ashes.

They gathered it into bruised palms
And handed it to their children
And their children's children. Forever. [6](#)

"They cut desire into short lengths." It's a way of measuring faith. We progress line upon line, the Lord says. "In short lengths." If our desires are to take our journey of stops and starts, we must feed "the hungry fires of courage" along the way. And at the end—molten gold will gleam in the ashes.

I love the image. I love the gold emerging from the charred embers as if to say, "Thou shalt be lifted up at the last day." And then the thought of bruised palms—not pierced, as were the Savior's, only bruised by our lives of work and trial. Yet it is the hand of the Lord that reached out to Peter as he began to slip into the water. It is that hand that reaches out to us.

And we hand down that faith to our children and our children's children. Faith is what ties families together—forever.

It is by faith that we connect the dots to those who have gone before. I never imagined myself a family history buff. For the most part, I saw my faith being played out in different Church arenas. But something happened to me. Inside, where faith is at home. I started to research the Swinton line. Sounds logical, except Jeff isn't really a Swinton—he's a Miller. Swinton is the name adopted from his stepfather.

I remember the first day I walked into the Family History Library and looked at the books and the aisles of microfilm that make even grocery stores look malnourished. I started to work, only to find in the weeks and months ahead that it was hard. I was starting at the grandfather—it wasn't that far back. I prayed; I pawed through books; I couldn't find anything to open that line. No names, no dates, no places.

One Saturday morning, the phone rang. A sister who had recently moved from my ward said, "I was just looking on the Internet and saw a picture of Linton J. Swinton. Are you related to him"? I gasped. Linton was the name of the grandfather who couldn't have come from Washington State as family tradition suggested. I had looked. "There's a picture of him on the Internet for sale for ten dollars," she said. "Let me give you the site."

Well, we bought it and when it came, there was a clue. On the back was written, "Linton, 16-1/2 months old." On the front were the photographer's name and Brooklyn, New York. Linton J. Swinton

was from the other side of the country! I went to records in Brooklyn, 1893; there he was. Birth, parents. And it got better—but not before it got worse.

Months went by as I searched for names. Nothing. I prayed and went to the temple thinking that the names might drop down from the sky. Nothing. Yet, I loved the work. I had to set a timer so that I would get to what was pressing or I would have looked for dead Swintons all day long. They were always in the back of my mind. They had the faith I would find them.

In desperation, I posted a note on a bulletin board on a genealogy site. Can anyone connect the dots from Kenneth to Linton to the next generations? Months and months I waited. And then last October, I did my routine check of the message board, and there was an email from Australia with information that fit the sequence. I sent money for copies and for more information. In February stacks of material came in the mail. These were the Swintons from East Lothian, Scotland. They were found. William and his oldest son David had emigrated in 1839 to the United States and after a brief stop in Birmingham, Alabama, had settled in Warsaw, Illinois. Now, connect the dots!

Warsaw is forty miles south of Nauvoo, Illinois. Warsaw, the hotbed of anti-Mormon hostility. I am in the midst of writing a documentary on the Nauvoo Temple; I am steeped in Nauvoo, 1839 to 1846. Both Jeff's and my lines stream west through Nauvoo. It was no fluke that I was impressed to work on that line. I found the Swintons—seven generations so far—and now I have their cards. This is the stuff *Ensign* articles are made of. This is faith on both sides of the veil.

Faith also asks us to set aside our fears. "Be strong and of a good courage," God told Joshua as he faced giants in the promised land (Joshua 1:6). I have faced those gangly giants, and so have you. To the early Saints he spoke of faith this way: "Fear not, little flock" (D&C 6:34; 35:27). Fear—it's the opposite of faith. That's why the Lord is always cautioning, "Be of good cheer and do not fear." Fear, like the mists of darkness, is Satan's way of trying to cloud our vision. What the adversary does not understand is that those who have eyes to see, who are not looking around them, are looking ahead where the sky is illuminated with the Savior's promise, "Where I am [*there*] ye shall be also" (D&C 27:18).

Faith is found in the scriptures. It's the overriding theme of book after book. I love the faith of Isaiah:

"And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not" (Isaiah 58:11).

And the strength of Hannah:

"For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him" (1 Samuel 1:27).

While some people can open the scriptures and point to a random verse for answers, I have found that reading every day is the stuff that connects the dots. Then when I need the strength, the witness, the personal inspiration, it's right there on the page. I have read it that morning or the day before. I have underlined it with a date; the Lord knew just what I would need, what counsel, what teaching.

Now, you may be thinking, "They always ask these kind of people to speak. They aren't real. They were born with gold-tipped pages in their hands." Let me dispel that image.

There was a time, years ago, when I was teaching a Relief Society lesson. I had pristine scriptures, they were brand new, the kind a perfectionist like me would like—the pages were crisp; there were

no personal revelations written between the lines. I decided the morning of my lesson that I was going to read this passage from Moses right from the book:

"Behold my Spirit is upon you, . . . and the mountains shall flee before you, and the rivers shall turn from their course; and thou shalt abide in me, and I in you; therefore walk with me" (Moses 6:34).

A great scripture! It's a dot on my journey. I pulled out my scriptures to mark the verse, Moses 6:34, and turned to the Bible. Let's see, Moses, ought to be somewhere near the front, I thought to myself as I scrolled down those tabs. Hmm. Nothing looks like Moses. So I began leafing through the pages. No Moses. I turned to the table of contents at the front of the Bible—no Moses. I was stunned and called my mother. With great consternation I said, "You will not believe this. They left the book of Moses out of my Bible." There was a long pause and then, with the gentleness of a dear mother, she said, "Well, maybe that's because it's in the Pearl of Great Price!"

It's all a matter of faith. Faith in Jesus Christ is the first principle of the gospel. It is the essence of our earthly experience. We exercise faith in Jesus Christ, or we don't. It's that simple. Faith sustained Abraham as he climbed the mountain with Isaac; Sarah was at home. We tell the story of such faith and sacrifice through the experience of Abraham as he prepared to offer Isaac. But think for a minute of the contribution of Sarah in the midst of that whirlwind. From her, I have learned so much from about how to support and sustain my husband. The scriptures are quiet on Sarah and what she knew as if to say, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

When visiting New York in 1832, Joseph Smith wrote home to Emma: "O how long, O Lord shall this order of things exist and darkness cover the Earth and gross darkness cover the people." He continued, "I pray that God will give you [Emma] strength that you may not faint. I pray God to soften the hearts of those around you to be kind to you and take the burden off your shoulders as much as possible . . . but you must comfort yourself knowing that God is your friend in heaven and that you have one true and living friend on Earth, your husband."[7](#)

I know that counsel to be true.

I tease my husband that he defrauded me when we married. I like to talk, and he talked before we were married, I am sure of it. But over the years, he has grown quieter. Maybe it's that as a stake president he can't tell me much. But what I do hear from him is a voice of might and power when he puts his hands on my head and gives me a priesthood blessing. I hold in reverence the words that are given by the Lord through this fine man. Perhaps that is why the beginning of Doctrine and Covenants 25 touches me. The Lord says to Emma through Joseph, "Hearken unto the voice of the Lord your God, while I speak unto you, . . . my daughter" (D&C 25:1). I have heard that voice in my own home.

Last Sunday I sat in the special blue chair in our living room; Jeff and three of our five sons circled around me, their hands on my head. It was a singular spiritual experience; our youngest son, Ian, had been ordained an elder earlier that day, and he was giving his first priesthood blessing—to his mom. It was a tender and sacred moment in the Swinton home as we, a faithful family, prepared for the conference today.

I know that my Redeemer lives. I love Him; I love His work; I love His gospel. My sweetest moments are those described so beautifully by Isaiah, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). With such faith, may we connect the dots from here to eternity, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

[1](#) Letter in author's possession.

[2](#) Sarah Rich, quoted in Carol Cornwall Madsen, *Journey to Zion: Voices from the Mormon Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 173.

[3](#) *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 246.

[4](#) Bathsheba Bigler Smith, quoted in Carol Cornwall Madsen, ed., *In Their Own Words: Women and the Story of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 213; also in Heidi S. Swinton, "On Your Right Hand and on Your Left," *Every Good Thing: Talks from the 1997 BYU Women's Conference*, ed. Dawn Anderson, Dloral Dalton, and Susette Green (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 322.

[5](#) Ibid.

[6](#) Vilate Raile, in Asahel D. Woodruff, *Parent and Youth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1952), 124; also in *Selected Writings of Gerald N. Lund*, Gospel Scholars Series (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 402-3.

[7](#) *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 252-53; spelling and punctuation standardized.

