

Seeing Our Blindness:
The Impact of Personal History on our Understanding of God

by
Wendy Ulrich
2007 FAIR Conference

Hopefully you have had a few minutes to consider the questions on page one [located at the end of this paper] that look like this. Let me explain number six just a little, if you are wondering what the heck I am talking about. What I mean by that is just the ordinary frustrations that you experience as a child. My parents made me go to bed when I didn't want to. I was always trying to get my father's approval. My mother wouldn't shut up and listen to me. Just the normal things. Then, what was your typical response in those situations? If you work on those questions for just a few minutes, the rest of this discussion will, perhaps, be a little bit meaningful.

Jesus opened his ministry with the words from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted to preach deliverance to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind." Healing the blind was one of Christ's most often repeated and most spectacular miracles.

I have a friend who developed serious eye problems as a child. Her vision was 20/800, which basically meant she could barely read the big E on an eye chart. Without coke-bottle thick glasses she couldn't read anything, from road signs to the expression on her grandson's face. Then a few months ago a 1- minute Lasik procedure restored her sight completely. She wakes up for the first time able to read her alarm clock without glasses.

Unfortunately there is no Lasik surgery as yet for the psychological and spiritual myopias that we deal with. Jesus taught that he had come not only to heal the physically blind but to unveil the spiritual blindness of those who thought they could see quite clearly. When the Pharisees asked him sarcastically: "Are we blind, also?" he replied, "If ye were blind ye should have no sin, but now you say, 'we see', therefore your sin remains."

The Pharisees, said Christ, were not only blind, but even more detrimentally, blind to their own blindness. They not only could not see the Savior for who He was, but they saw Him through a glass darkly, as someone He was not: a blasphemous, demonic, Sabbath-breaker, doing magic tricks to mislead people. Their blindness to their blindness led them to condemn and crucify Him instead of seeking Him out for healing and sight.

Not being able or willing to see our blindness prevents us from seeking the corrective lenses and healing surgeries we need as well. For example, we might not see how our experience on a high school basketball team is skewing our view of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Or how

our relationship with an emotionally distant mother causes us to misperceive our stake president. We may be blind to the ways we choose the questions we ignore and the questions we think matter, or the options we can think of for answering those questions.

Our spiritual and emotional blindness alters our vision of God and affects our relationships with one another. It affects what we perceive as sin and how serious a sin. It limits our ability to recognize the Spirit, even when we think we are honestly searching for truth. Even if we are not totally blind we may be shortsighted or have poor peripheral vision or be color blind or need bifocals that allow us to look at some things one way and other things another way. There are spiritual and emotional counterparts to all of these vision deficits.

Of course, there are hundreds of legitimate questions, problems, organizational flaws that deserve legitimate inquiry and remedy, but when we are frustrated or doubtful or questioning, it is at least worth wondering if our history, our organizational structure, our biology, the meaning we give our experience, may be creating a blindness we cannot see that limits our options for resolving our concerns.

As we add self-reflection to our repertoire of coping skills when we are questioning our faith, we enlarge the range of answers we are open to. Some of our blindness is idiosyncratic and specific to certain issues. For example, someone who is upset and confused by early practices of polygamy may think nothing of the fact that Joseph Smith wrote apparently conflicting accounts of the First Vision. Joseph Smith, Senior's drinking may deeply frighten one person, while amusing or even comforting another.

An interaction with a Church leader that frustrates and infuriates me may leave you wondering why I am overreacting. From where each of us sits, our particular questions and frustration seem not only reasonable, but like the only rational response unless one is deluded or has blinders on. Yet someone else with a different background or temperament may have a completely different set of sensibilities. For this reason it helps to consider the personal and psychological as well as the historical or scientific aspects of issues that trouble us. So today I would like to explore briefly some of the sources of blindness that might interrupt our ability to resolve our spiritual crisis or questions. And some of the corrective lenses we might consider help us learn to see the face of God in clear focus.

As we look at the influence, then, of our early experience, we become quickly aware that experience has tremendous impact on our capacities for spiritual sight. For example, when I walk out into the desert on a clear night, I can pick out a few constellations, but I will never see the stars the way my father does, and they will never have the same meaning to me. I have had people tell me, probably a hundred times, how to find the North Star from the Big Dipper, but I can never keep it straight. I can't see the North Star unless someone is actively pointing it out to me. I am North Star blind, if you will.

But my pilot father learned to navigate by the stars in the days before radar. He remembers clearly when his life depended on finding the tiny dot of an aircraft carrier and an endless night sea by the wits of celestial navigation. He has 20-20 vision for the night, for the North Star, because his prior experience with it is much different than mine. His early experience with the stars is different and it leads him to a different way of seeing the world we share. 'Some types of blindness are more common to the human experience than others, like the creeping blurriness of age. Others are more idiosyncratic like the particular combination of two directional astigmatism that plague contact lens makers for one of my sight-challenged colleagues. But when the explanations about a problem with Church history, policy, or doctrine, that satisfy one person do not satisfy me, I am left to wonder which of us needs the glasses.

Some questions that help me recognize and accommodate my possible spiritual blind spots include numbers seven through eleven on the other side of your sheet. What is the question, issue or situation in the Church that troubles me? What is it about this issue that stands out to me as the problem? What is the problem this issue creates or exemplifies for me? When have I faced a similar problem, and how did I face it? If the Church is true, what does this issue make me wonder about God?

If I accept the Church's viewpoint on this issue, what might it mean about me? Maybe you could write down a one sentence descriptions under number seven of a question or issue or situation in the Church that has troubled you or troubles you currently. May I give you some quick examples:

- DNA research on Book of Mormon people seems to contradict the book's claims about its origins.
- I don't understand the Church's position on homosexuality in today's world;
- How can God be behind the choice of my bishop who is not ethical in a business dealing with me?
- I hate everything about polygamy.

So you might make a note of which one of those issues has been for you.

I am not trying to suggest that we don't have every right to take a hard look at the science of DNA research, or the holes in our understanding of homosexuality, of the nature of revelations about Church callings, or the history of polygamy. I am suggesting that we may have an easier time exploring these issues logically, helpfully and creatively if we have a reasonably clear understanding of how the issue affects us personally, how it taps into our historical injuries or betrayals and thus how our vision may be blurred about that subject.

As an example, let's take polygamy, often a loaded issue for people. But what I've learned as a psychologist is that it is loaded very differently for different folks. When I ask Pat what stands out for her as a problem with polygamy her attention goes primarily to Joseph Smith apparently having lied to his wife and others about his polygamous relationships. For someone else the

bigger problem may be Joseph Smith's involvement with young women, or the potential for abuses of power, or the possibility of having to live polygamy again.

For now let's consider how Pat might answer these questions:

- What is the question? We will look at polygamy. For her it was specifically about his lies to his wife.
- What's the personal problem this issue exemplifies or creates for me? If my husband were doing this, I would feel betrayed. This exemplifies the way men cheat on their wives and justify it any way they can.
- When have I faced a similar problem? My father cheated on my mother and lied about it for years. I felt betrayed and like men could not be trusted when I learned about it.
- If the Church is true, what does this issue make you wonder about God? Makes me wonder if God can be trusted either. I can't tolerate a God like that. I am not sure I can stay in a Church that makes me think God would allow a prophet to lie to his wife.
- If I accept the Church's viewpoint what might it mean about me? It might mean that I am one of those women who let men walk all over them and are so dependent on them they will tolerate deceiving lies.

So we began to see how Pat's background and history affects the options that she can see, the options that she can legitimize, the options that she can tolerate. This issue was one that Pat began to explore, look at in her own history, realizing that her history with the promiscuous parent colored somewhat how she viewed Joseph Smith and in turn how she viewed God.

After some thought about this she writes:

I realized as I approach the topic of polygamy that I have a real sensitivity to the issue of men lying to their wives about sexuality. This issue has impacted me personally and deeply. I've had a hard time imagining that Joseph Smith could have had any other motivation than self-indulgence and self-protection in his handling of polygamy, but I can also see that someone without my background might not jump so quickly to that conclusion, and might be free to see different meaning in his behavior. I once had a strong testimony of Joseph Smith, just as I had a strong love for my father, so I tend to assume similarities, but there may be important differences I don't see as well.

As Pat considers the possibility that there might be other ways to see polygamy even though she cannot as yet imagine them very well, she at least has the option of holding on to both her testimony of Joseph Smith and her desire to not tolerate deceit and lies from men she loves. She may not yet know how to reconcile these images, but as she takes into account her own possible blind spots she can begin to explore this issue with a little less defensiveness and a little more openness to other ways of seeing.

As another way to explore how our prior history affects our view of god and the church, let's go back to questions number one through six, in case you are thinking that you are off the hook here, the ones I asked you to complete before I began. I'd like you to take a moment and review your answers to those questions. They are adapted from some exercises used by marital therapy theorist Harville Hendrix, who is quite well-known for some of his ideas. He believes that each of us is inexorably attracted to a partner who will recreate with us the primary challenges of our childhood. We invest this person with the hope that this time the outcomes will be different. However, this is a false hope, I might add.

In other words, we are specifically drawn to people with whom we are by definition completely incompatible. You think this is funny? You have been married 20 years. It is kind of funny, isn't it? People that we are drawn to as marriage partners are those who will help us to recreate the exact puzzling, problematic issues that hurt us as children and that we are consciously determined to avoid in adulthood. But we are drawn to the people who help us recreate these problems in just enough of a different guise to fool us into thinking we have finally found someone utterly unlike our parents and who will at last meet our deepest needs.

They will indeed meet our deepest needs, but only if we assume that our deepest needs are to figure out how to solve the unsolved problems of the past generations by our own courageous effort to change, and learn, and grow, into the solutions we never could pull off as a child, and not that our deepest needs are for someone else to finally stop treating us the way our family did and thus make us feel safe and secure at last.

Not laughing anymore, are we? To be sure my spouse's repetition of my familiar and familial patterns may take a different form from what I saw at home, but it will still evoke similar feelings, beliefs, self-images and responses in me. My spouse will also be attracted to me because I evoke familiar but troubling feelings, beliefs, self-images and responses that plagued him. He is here today so we will see how this goes when I get home. And we will then both have the challenge of finding a response other than to assume it is now the other person who must change.

Let me give you an example of this. Luke is a dentist. He was the youngest child in a large family in which children were no longer a novelty. His father was critical of the children, preoccupied with work, and his mother was sad and almost invisible, leaving Luke anxious about this place. He learned to get attention by friendliness that bordered on intrusiveness and antics that bordered on goofiness to which his parents responded with either mild amusement or irritation. Luke was initially attracted to Sandy because of her calm, self-effacing manner, so unlike his self-centered father, but after years of marriage, Sandy's aloof style is making him feel as invisible as he did as a child unless he is provoking her to irritation with his inappropriate behavior. He blames her for being bored and preoccupied with her work, but the more he acts out, the more she criticizes or withdraws, making him feel yet more invisible and ignored.

Luke vaguely suspects that his behavior evokes the very reactions he desires, but when he feels anxious about his place with Sandy, he really can't imagine anything to do other than provoke some response from her by his silliness. The response he wants is her attention, amusement and engagement, but the response he gets, inexplicably to him, is withdrawal and criticism. I am fascinated by Hendrix's theory because it explains so much about what is otherwise inexplicable about marriage, including my own marriage, but I also think that it may help explain a few things about how we relate to God and even to the Church.

Let's go down to questions 12 through 17:

Number 12: I have unconsciously spent my life searching for a God, a church, a religion with these traits: write in the answers you circled from number one.

Number 13: What I tend to both look for, and fear, however, are evidences that God, Church, or religious leaders are really: write in the answers you wrote and circled for number two. Getting more interesting.

Number 14: I unconsciously expect God, Church, and leaders to make me feel: write in what you circled for number three.

Number 15: I wish God, Church or leaders would give me: write the answers to number four.

Number 16: Unconsciously I don't think they will. Then when my needs are not met, or I am under stress, I often feel: write down the answer to number five. Then I assume that God or the Church is responsible for my feelings. Interesting.

Number 17: Then I respond this way: write in what you wrote down in the right column for number six. What I really need to do to heal and grow is whatever you think the opposite of number six would be. Again this is adapted from Harville Hendrix Getting the Love You Want.

Let me give you some examples of what I mean by the opposite of number six, because this is really important, because this is where we can really grow. Let's say that one of the frustrations you experienced with your parents was that you felt like they ignored you, like Luke's parents above. His response was to get nervous and act out to try to get attention. So what would be the opposite of acting out to get attention?

It might be asking more directly for time and involvement from his parents. It might be acting responsibly and courteously rather than acting goofy. It might mean acknowledging the anxiety he feels and finding more ways to soothe and comfort himself. Those could all be opposites to what he learned to do. So if you can't think of a good opposite to what you wrote down in the right hand column of number six, maybe you could ask the person next to you to help you figure one out to expand your repertoire a bit.

Does anyone have a response that they wrote down? Something that they did as a child that they can't think of a good opposite for, that you would be willing to admit to other people that you don't know? Yeah. Escaped into books. What would be an opposite to escaping into a book? What's that? Illiteracy? No, we don't want to go there. Anyway, to do something instead of just escaping into a book, to do something active, to engage the person that you were involved with.

Probably you learned, however, that didn't work very well when you were a child, or you would have figured that out. So this is part of the reason that these responses are very challenging for us as adults. We probably tried some of those opposite things and got nowhere with them when we were kids, or we may have gotten criticized or we may have gotten anger. So we are kind of nervous about trying something opposite to what we learned to do when we were children.

Now not everyone will have a major "ah ha" moment with this exercise, but it can give us another perspective from which to see. Of course, Harville Hendrix uses this exercise to help us better understand our relationship with our spouse, but I found that it works for me, at least, quite well in trying to understand better my relationship with my God; my Church; my church leaders, and the things that are two or three that I have come to expect from them; the feelings that I have that are evoked whenever I am under stress, but that I ascribe to them; and the things that I can do differently that might help me have a better response from them than what I am used to.

This exercise, however, was developed for people who are in love with each other, and I might even propose that many of us fell in love with the Church, precisely because we thought it solved a major heartache, or deficiency, or problem we once faced. Our love affair is later threatened by precisely the situations that we feel put us right back where we were, in terms of feeling helpless, abandoned, blamed, betrayed, and stuck. Coming to this understanding does not solve our problems with the Church, of course, but it does open up the possibility that we are misperceiving some aspects of these problems from old and familiar blind spots that we can make an effort to correct for.

Especially helpful to me is the second part of that number 17 question that suggests that what I really need to do in these situations, in order to grow, is the opposite of what I learned to do as a child. That over-learned childhood response is probably responsible for keeping me stuck with an old and unworkable solution in my present life. The opposite response will generally be the hardest, most counterintuitive response for me, but the one that will help me get unstuck; the one that increases my agency instead of leaving me at the mercy of other people or God or the Church to change, in order for me to feel better.

Exploring the idea of what caused us to fall in love with the Church a bit more, consider the question, what are two or three things that attracted you to the Church when you first began exploring it for yourself? For example, if I fell in love with the Church because it promised me personal revelation and a sense of belonging, then I may feel particularly betrayed when the

process of personal revelation seems to backfire or be untrustworthy or when I feel left out or ignored.

If I fell in love with the Church because it provided answers to my important questions, then I may especially struggle when it seems there are important questions which the Church isn't answering.

If I fell in love with the Church because it promised I would again see my dead brother, whom I fought with right before he died, then I may have a particularly hard time accepting unresolved conflicts. So you may want, also, to consider the question of how the things in the Church that trouble you may feel like a betrayal of that early promise.

Another common challenge in marital couples is that the very things that attract them to each other become the things that drive them crazy over time. I was very attracted to my husband when I first met him because of his work ethic. He is extraordinarily hardworking. I knew I would never starve married to this man because whatever it took he will bring home an income. Guess what drives me crazy about my husband today. Any guesses? He is never at home, right? That's not true, but, yeah, that's the thing, and that, over time, the flipside of whatever it is that attracted us to the person becomes the thing that starts to get on our nerves. This is often because there is a weakness that goes with any strength, a flipside of the coin that is the exaggeration of the dark twist on the trait that we love. So if I am drawn to my spouse because of his outgoing personality and friendliness with strangers, in time I could find myself becoming infuriated that he is always drawing me into conversations I prefer to avoid, or because casual acquaintances seem to matter to him more than I do.

Number 18: What did you love about the Church when you first decided to embrace it? What would be the flipside of that coin? What is the problem created by having too much of that thing you loved, or of it getting out of balance? For example, if you loved the idea of God coming to a prophet today to provide direction and guidance in a troubled world, are you also bothered by the constraints of too many rules to follow? Or do you get annoyed that people don't seem to think for themselves? From another angle, do you get overly frustrated with people who don't seem to be following the prophet, or annoyed that the Prophet won't be clear about what is expected on some things? We really can't get the side of the coin we like without getting the other side of the coin that we don't like so well.

As we look at the things that irritate us in others, including spouses, God, and Church leaders, sometimes we find that we also tend to get angry with people for things we don't give ourselves permission to do, even though we sometimes need to do that thing. For example, I may get annoyed with my friendly, outgoing husband, because I really don't give myself permission to be friendly, but insist instead on seeing myself as too shy to act that way.

I may get irritated with Church leaders who are dogmatic or rule-bound precisely because I don't really stick to my guns on things that matter to me. I don't give myself permission to insist on some things when it is difficult, or when I confront opposition, or admit that sometimes I have to take a stand and act even when there are other legitimate points of view.

I have a fun example of this one, lately, with my daughter, who is into colors. Everybody's got a color: you are a red and you are a yellow and you are a blue, etc. We were talking about the fact that neither one of us did very well with yellow people. I started thinking about this issue: why do yellow people irritate me? Well, yellow people (just in case you are into this) are people who are motivated by having fun. I thought, "Why do yellow people annoy me?" That seems like that should be a good thing.

I started thinking. I don't do so well at having fun. I don't really give myself a lot of permission to have fun. I see fun as being sort of a frivolous thing that we don't have time for if we are going to be serious and important, and so I don't let myself do that. I don't let myself be very yellow.. So yellow people annoy me, but really what it boils down to is I need more yellow in my life.

So are there ways that you get angry with the Church for behavior, attitudes, you actually need more of in your life but don't allow yourself? Do you get upset with other people's blind obedience when in fact trust and things you don't fully understand is something you don't allow yourself to do because it seems too dangerous. But your lack of trust is actually creating problems in keeping you out of balance or whatever it might be.

Recognizing blind spots, of course, does not cure them, but it does allow for the possibility of tackling these issues from a different angle. As long as we assume that we are being reasonable and conscientious when we tackle a doubt or question, then our solution would be to examine the science and the logic and the reasonableness of the available answers. But when we assume that at least some of the questions that trouble us may be affected by our blind spots, as well as by history or logic, we get new options. We probably won't like the options very much, but we at least have new options.

The good news is that as we see the places of where our perceptions of the Church are unduly impacted by our own history, by our prior betrayals or unmet needs, we can begin to work on what we can control rather than waiting for God or the Church to change things we don't control. Once I begin to imagine that I may have some spiritual blind spots, and what some of them might be, how can I begin to access the healing that Christ came to earth to provide? Let me suggest some possibilities.

First, we can remember that blindness is not a cause for shame. In fact, we are all blind in one degree or another, in one way or another, and correcting our blindness is a major goal of mortality. Feeling ashamed of our blindness tends to lead us to hiding it, and defending it, not correcting it. Instead we can work to accept our blindness as part of mortality, to learn about and

compensate for, rather than to hide and defend. When we feel less shame about being blind, we are also free to concentrate on the beam in our own eyes and not the mote in other's.

Second, we can ask for help in seeing our blindness. Self-awareness takes effort and skill that gives us options we don't have, and we are ignorant of our blindness. Self-awareness is facilitated by specific prayer for help in seeing our blindness and then actively and humbly searching it out rather than ignoring, hiding, or defending it.

Friends, spouses, parents, children, therapists, and bishops are often very astute at teaching us about our blindness, if we ask them to do so. If we can listen non-defensively to the spirit and other people, we can begin to see differently.

Third, we can look for bigger stories than the ones we live in. Sometimes our stories are just not big enough to hold both the problems or questions that plague us, and the best answers for them. We lose our peripheral vision. We can no longer see a clear path between where we are and where we are trying to go.

Let me give you an example I share with permission, the story of a young man of unusual intellectual capacity, facing some serious doubts and questions about the Church and his experiences in it. He is hesitant to accept a scholarship to a Church school, given his struggles, and he spent several months removed from Church activity, determined to "get over" the Church, even though he assumes there will be a period of deeply missing it after having lived within it all his life. He does miss it, but he can see no reasonable alternative to distancing from it when it no longer fits with his experience and worldview.

But a caring friend shares some articles with him that suggest he is not alone in his struggles, and that even those who don't face his specific issue know what it means to doubt and to question. This is a very different view of what it means to be a faithful Latter-day Saint than the ones he has grown up with. After reading the articles, the young man writes, "I truly thought that hardly any other Mormons had ever doubted. We always teach that all mankind sins, but I thought that to doubt was to simply be infernal and devilish. I am not kidding. I still have this remnant feeling. Mormon culture never discusses these philosophical doubts and how to approach them. [He is 18.] As I read these words, however, I realized that there is much hope for my spiritual journey."

Why was this simple insight that other Mormons sometimes doubt so valuable to this man? I think it is because that insight made room for a bigger story than the one he had lived in. This new story had room in it for Mormons who doubt, who are not infernal and devilish and who find ways to approach their doubts, sometimes resolve them, and sometimes live with them unresolved and still remain in the Church.

The articles he read gave him a new set of possibilities of how other people's stories unfold, giving him new options for how his own story might continue. As Latter-day Saints we are

sometimes inclined to see religion as what helps us avoid hardship and tragedy, the “yellow brick road” that will keep us from lung cancer, alcohol addiction, AIDS; that will keep us happily connected in loving families; that will keep us moving steadily toward the future promise and hope.

Early Saints, however, in our history makes it clear that they knew that hardship and tragedy are inherent to the mortal condition. They had a big enough story to hold getting kicked out of Missouri, having their Prophet killed, crossing the Plains, confronting Johnson’s army, being sent to colonize a desert, or at least the one who stayed in the Church through these events had a big enough story.

That story was called “building Zion” in the face of persecution, and it served the Saints very, very well and it serves us well, too. We still need a bigger story than the one that only keeps us safe from doubt and trial, tragedy, illness, death, questions and disagreements. We need stories big enough to hold losing a loved one, having a heart attack, failing an exam, not getting the job or the spouse we wanted. We need a story big enough to hold a bishop who is wrong, an historical question that is not answered, a predisposition to addiction or mental illness or illicit sexual longings or whatever it is that seems to make our lives not fit with the cheery messages of cheery people whose prayers are always answered, whose children always succeed, and whose lives always turn out well.

The Willie & Martin handcart companies, stranded in early snow after a late start across the Plains, offer me such a story. Several hundred people died from those companies, and the suffering of all of them was enormous. The wisdom of having sent people across the Plains ill prepared, late in the season, in hand carts instead of ox-drawn wagons was debated thereafter by many. It was not an interesting intellectual debate. Lives were at stake. And not only the lives of those who had crossed the Plains already, but the lives of people who are yet being called upon by their Prophet to make additional sacrifices.

One of those debates took place in a Sunday school class, some years later. Opinions about the foolhardiness of the leaders were shared with increasing intensity, and then a simple comment from a calm and extremely earnest elderly man who had been in the Martin handcart company opened up a bigger story than the ones those in the Sunday school class had previously considered. His name was Francis Webster and he said:

“I ask you to stop this criticism. You are discussing a matter you know nothing about. Cold, historic facts mean nothing here. They give no proper interpretation of the questions involved. A mistake to send the handcart company so late in the season? Yes. But I was in that company. My wife was in it. We suffered beyond anything you can imagine, and many died of exposure and starvation, but we came through with the knowledge that God lives, for we became acquainted with Him in our extremities.

"I have pulled my handcart when I was so weak and weary from illness and lack of food that I could hardly put one foot ahead of the other. I have looked ahead and seen a patch of sand or a hill slope and I have said, 'I can only go that far and there I must give up for I cannot pull the load through it.' I have gone to that sand dune, and when I reached it, the cart began pushing me. I have looked back many times to see who was pushing my cart but my eyes saw no one. I knew that the angels of God were there.

"Was I sorry that I chose to come by handcart? No. Not then nor any minute of my life since. The price we paid to become acquainted with God was a privilege to pay, and I am thankful that I was privileged to come in the Martin handcart company."

Francis Webster did more that day than quiet a heated Sunday school class. He opened up a story, a story big enough to hold both leaders who make mistakes, and a God who can turn all things to our good! In fact, he opened up a story for all of us. A story that includes the possibility that we, too, may come to know God in our extremities. They find the hand of angels in our most difficult hours. They come to see the price we pay for mortality as a privilege, for it can open our blind eyes to see the face of God.

For instance, Webster's story is one of many stories, however, among the handcart pioneers. Some of those pioneers may not have felt the hand of angels or come to know God in a tangible way. Some of them may have simply finished the trek, and moved on with their lives. Some may have simply given up, some may have never made much sense out of what happened, and others may never have really questioned at all.

But for Francis Webster, the bigger story was one of unseen angels, and acquaintance with God. For others, the bigger story may be one of personal stamina, and extraordinary luck; for others the bigger story may be one of the power of friendship and human compassion. It may have taken 40 years for some to learn to see the hand of God in some redemptive way in that experience, or that clear vision may not come until the dawning of a much brighter day. But the stories we create of our experience, stories shaped by our past but invested with our creativity and hope, these are what in turn shape our future.

At Sixteen Stones Center For Growth, my colleagues Chris Packard and Kerry Kelly and I offer seminar retreats for faithful people seeking personal growth. As we tackle issues like loss, forgiveness, disappointment, transition, and creating an abundant life, I've become acutely aware that some of our personal stories of challenges and opportunity seem handpicked for us by God. Others seem to be part of the time and chance that Solomon says happen to us all, a phrase that ironically comes from Ecclesiastes 9:11.

But this much I have come to believe: God's signature strength, the clearest mark of His presence, His absolute genius, is His ability to take garbage, and turn it into art; to take loss, and turn it into gain; to take struggle, sin, failure and even tragedy, even if He did not instigate them, and help us weave these dark realities into stories of wisdom, compassion, growth, and

goodness. He can make beauty from ashes, joy from mourning, garments of praise from heaviness.

In one of our recent seminars we asked participants to create a model of their personal version of the plan of salvation and the purpose of life. None of these bore much resemblance to the diagrams we draw for investigators of the preexistence and the three degrees of glory. Each person made a very personal statement of how God has worked with them, and how they have come to see the roles of adversity and heartache in the larger story of their life.

But as I try to imagine how I personally will portray the plan of salvation and the purpose of life, as I understand it, I realize that I believe a huge purpose of life is to come to see the face of God and live. I no longer believe this phrase is limited for its fulfillment to a transcendent vision such as that seen by Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove. In fact, I think Joseph's vision was only the beginning, even for him, of learning to see the face of God.

I believe a major purpose of mortality is to teach us to see the face of a God we only thought we could see before we came to earth, and that most of us don't think we can see very well while we are here. But it is when we come to see the face of God in our story, or see His face more clearly and accurately because of His involvement in our story, that our lives acquire meaning and purpose.

What is the story you are currently living in? Have you also taken off across the hostile land on the advice of a prophet? Only defined yourself in this snow storm pushing a handcart that lacks the provisions you need to make it to the promised land? Does the handcart hold too much that you hold dear to simply leave it behind, even though it seems like more of an encumbrance than a protection or help? Then you may also have a place in the story of the handcart companies, and perhaps those who cross the Plains in those companies are still expanding their story of what that trek meant, not only for them, but for us. Is it not possible that the day can come when you, too, may look back on your trek with wonder at the time when you walked with angels and became acquainted with God in a new and unexpected way. Such a vision may not come in a 10 minute "spiritual Lasik surgery" or by the simple donning of a new pair of glasses, but I have great faith that the great story of the Savior's mission is still unfolding, the Savior who was anointed to preach the gospel to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind. We have been reminded today of the story in John, chapter 9, of the blind man, and the question: why were we born blind? Were you born blind? Was I born blind? Because of our sin? Because of our parents' sin? Or that the works of God, the hand of God, the face of God might be made manifest? I believe it is the latter. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

1. List 6-7 positive traits of any of your parents or caretakers. Circle the three best traits.
2. List 6- negative traits of any of your parents or caretakers. Circle the three worst traits.
3. What did you want but not get from your parents or caretakers? Circle the deepest unfulfilled desire.
4. What were your deepest fears with any of your parents or caretakers? Circle the worst fear.
5. As a child relating to your parents or caretakers, what negative feelings or thoughts about yourself did you have over and over? Circle the worst feeling
6. Left columns. List three frustrations you experienced as a child in your home.

Right column. For each frustration, write two-ways you typically responded.

7. What is a question, issue, or situation in the Church that troubles you, and what specifically about this issue stands out to you as a problem?
8. What problem does this issue create or exemplify for you?
9. When have you faced a similar problem? How did you feel in that situation?
10. If the Church is true, what does this issue make you wonder about God?
11. If you accept the Church's viewpoint on this issue, what might it mean about you?
12. I have unconsciously spent my life searching for a God/Church/Religious leader with these traits:
14. I unconsciously expect God/Church/leaders to make me feel:
15. And then I wish God/Church/religious leaders would give me:
Even though unconsciously I don't think they will
16. When my needs are not met or I am under stress I often feel:
...and I assume God/Church/Religious leaders are responsible for my feelings
17. Then I often respond this way: When what I really should do to heal and grow is the opposite of this, which would be:

18. What two or three things attracted you to the Church when you first began exploring it?
19. How might the things in the church that trouble you feel a betrayal of that early promise?
20. As you look at what attracted you to the Church and what you loved about it when you first decided to embrace it, what is the problem created by having too much of that thing, or of it getting out of balance?
21. Are there ways you get angry with the Church for behavior or attitudes you actually need more of in your life but don't allow yourself?

Watch this presentation on our Youtube channel at:

Pt 1- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3PZRB3cjIA>

Pt 2- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDAz1rH9m6I>

Pt 3- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpC8dg_YQb0

Pt 4- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZcvjapHDAQ>

Pt 5- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIIInLaGv_IY

Transcriber's note: Transcript is lightly edited for clarity and readability.