

LDS Perspectives Podcast

Episode 46: The Delicate Art of Critical Judgment with George Handley

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Laura Hales: Hello, and welcome to the LDS Perspectives Podcast. This is Laura Harris Hales, and I'm here today with George Handley to talk about "Criticism, Compassion, and Charity," a speech given in November 2015 as part of BYU's My Journey As a Scholar of Faith Series, which was later published in *BYU Studies*. George, can you tell us a little bit about your professional background?

George Handley: My degree is in comparative literature. I started as an undergraduate at Stanford University and majored in comparative literature mainly because I had intended to major in English then discovered, as a result of my Spanish speaking mission in Venezuela, that I loved learning Spanish and learning about Spanish American literature as well, and didn't want to have to choose between Spanish and English, and was delighted to discover there was a way to do both. I did comparative literature as an undergraduate at Stanford then began my MA and PhD at Berkeley. I taught for three years at Northern Arizona University in a humanities program there before coming to BYU in 1998. I've been here ever since.

Laura Hales: You mentioned that the challenge of sharing your journey was that it was idiosyncratic. You took comfort in knowing that others are just as idiosyncratic, and there are many ways of reaching Christ. Why did you take comfort in those two notions as you prepared your remarks?

George Handley: Well, I knew I had been asked to give a talk that was obviously going to be personal. Despite the fact that it was very personal, and I have written a memoir, it's very uncomfortable talking about myself or telling my own story. I knew that I was going to make myself vulnerable in doing that, and that can be unsettling. Maybe it's my study in the humanities, but it's probably also my service in the church that have both taught me that there's no one mold out of which people are cut. Every story is different. When you dig beneath the surface of somebody's life, you learn about struggles that they've had, challenges that they have faced, the brave and

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maybe not so brave things that they have done. They become very human to us when we see them in their full particularity.

I've just always assumed, maybe not always, I think it took me a while growing into adulthood to realize that I was not as unique as I had thought. Part of that was also, I mean, I related briefly this story of my brother's suicide. I think that event itself was so traumatic at a relatively young age of 18. For me it was very terrifying to talk to other people about it. I assumed, almost from the get go, that no one would understand this, or that very few would. Over the course of my life, I've discovered not only that a lot of people have dealt with mental illness in their own lives, or in their families, but suicide is not as uncommon as we might think.

On top of that, life's challenges are many. Maybe I could stand to learn from what someone has been through if they've dealt with cancer, or if they've dealt with a car accident in their family history, or whatever it might be. Everybody's life feels like a particular cross to bear. But, I think, when you really listen to other studies, then it's actually less burdensome to carry your own.

Laura Hales: I love that. You characterize your talk as part autobiography, part testimony, and part argument. I'm curious what your thesis or argument was.

George Handley: I really wanted to make an argument for the humanities as valuable to our spiritual development. That was part of it. Then I broke it down as the title of the talk indicates into three subcategories of thinking about criticism, compassion, and charity. I don't want to argue that if everyone would just read more poetry and go to more concerts and read more philosophy and great literature, then they would be spiritually healthy and sane. It doesn't work that simply. There is some need to find balance between exploring the world, exploring ideas and values through the humanities, and the cultivation of one's faith and one's relationship to God.

I wanted to say, "There's a really marvelous opportunity for anybody. It really shouldn't be only for people who do scholarship in the humanities, but for anybody to derive tremendous benefit from exposure to the humanities, especially if they have already given themselves to God and already made a commitment to try to align their will with His."

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I think the humanities then provides some really powerful ways of stretching the soul, of building a better imagination inside of us, and developing a greater capacity to love and serve that we otherwise couldn't get actually. It's very hard. There are some wonderful things that you can get through the humanities that can't be done because you can only live one life. You can only experience so many things. But you can learn about lots of other lives and lots of other experiences through the humanities.

That was the thrust of it. I can't imagine my life, and I can't imagine my faith without what I've learned through reading novels, and reading philosophy, and watching great plays on the stage, and listening to inspired music.

Laura Hales: Let's go to the speech you delivered and your argument. Let's touch on each of the elements separately. You mentioned that you broke it up into three parts. Can you tell us what the difference between contention and criticism is?

George Handley: The way I understand, and the way I'm trying to use the word criticism is very different than from contention. Contention seems to want to exploit difference and drive wedges over differences. Contention is either the result of wanting to overstate a difference and make it like a kind of trophy or the effort to squelch all discussion of difference. Both of those are very contentious positions that are very, I think, destructive to community. But community cannot be realized without coming to terms with difference. Differences matter, and they matter a great deal, but they shouldn't become divisive, and they shouldn't become positions by which we polarize ourselves vis-a-vis another group, or another individual, and see ourselves on the other side.

Criticism, to my mind, is the basic practice of maybe we could call critical judgment, whereby you step back enough from a situation to do some analysis, and to some thinking about what's happening, why is it happening, why is it influencing the way you feel. It's a bit of a detachment process whereby you get your head out of the situation.

Contention is highly emotional, whereas I think criticism is actually a more deliberative and calm state of being. It's really, really important. We can be duped by a lot of things. We can get caught up in group think. Sometimes we're caught up in group think about things that are true; just

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like we can be caught up in group think about things that are false. In either case, it's not really spiritually valuable for us to adhere to something that we haven't actually considered on our own and haven't really thought very much or very carefully about.

Criticism is really, really valuable. I did want to make that point because I do think we're as Mormons so desirous of unity and community, and we're really good at it. But we sometimes, maybe very often, are uncomfortable with difference. We're uncomfortable with conversations in which those differences become apparent.

Our impulse is to want to sort of repress it and identify conversation about difference as contentious itself when in fact it may be, just like in a marriage or in any relationship, it may be a vital part of the strength of that relationship to be able to come to terms with, "Okay, you see the world differently than I do, but we still love each other. We still are in this together. It's okay. We can live with this difference. Maybe this difference will go away over time or maybe it won't. But in either case, I'm with you. I'm not going anywhere." That's when real community starts to happen, and real bonds of attachment can happen. Not because one person feels intimidated into feeling like they have to think like everyone else.

I find that a lot of people who struggle in church settings, that's precisely what they're wrestling with. They may have genuine questions about the doctrine, or about history, but they're also really struggling with feeling like they're connected to people with whom they have pretty important differences. Either those people, or they themselves, are the cause of alienation and separation, when maybe with better bonds of friendship that wouldn't even happen. The differences might still be there, but they would feel like they belong.

I think that's pretty crucial. I'm getting on to the other components here. I think criticism as a starting point is really essential. I just don't think it's healthy to assume that just because you can get young kids in the church to repeat what their parents tell them that you accomplished the goal. The goal is that something really genuine takes root in their own hearts. That has to start with that kind of thoughtful judgment that they engage in on their own terms.

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Laura Hales: Would it be oversimplification to say contention is concentrating on whose argument is correct, and criticism is looking at the argument and seeing what parts have merit.

George Handley: I think that's a great way to think about it. Yeah, later in the talk I think I say something to the effect of, "To me it's always been more important to be good than to be right." I think that's what you're getting at there. Or as President Monson has put it, "Don't let an idea become more important than a person or a relationship because you've got so much at stake over an idea." What you're really trying to do when you are contending is you're trying to establish being right and someone else being wrong. It may very well be that in a particular case someone is very much right, and someone is very much wrong.

I'm not trying to paint a picture here of truth being so relative that it doesn't matter. Really serious things are often at stake in these kinds of situations. But Christ and the prophets of the scriptures have made no allowance for contention. There's still this mandate that you have to love, and you have to love your enemy. If you're not loving your enemy, according to Paul, you can have the truth, but it's not doing you any good. You really do have to get to that point where you have real charity for another.

Laura Hales: You mentioned earlier that criticism is essential to building a sense of community. Something I've noticed in recent years, especially since I've become more active in social media is that members have started to set up camps. I heard one friend call it "tribalism." I think of the Book of Mormon, and there began to be all manner of "ites." You also mentioned that compassion is an important companion to criticism. How does that fit into this sense of building community, so that we don't get into this dangerous trend of making camps?

George Handley: I agree with that description of tribalism. I think there's a real danger in our nation and in our church of thinking the goal of life is to find like-minded people and surround yourself with as many of them as you can, and then bolster yourself against all the unlike-minded people and keep as much distance as you can. That's terribly unproductive for community, for democracy, and Christian community in particular.

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As valuable as criticism is, there is a tendency if you are not ... I was describing it as kind of a cool, detached position. There's inherent danger there that criticism can become its own goal. Actually, over the course of my development as a scholar, and my training in higher education, I became aware that that's what was really the problem. All of the attention seemed to be on the critical skills of judgement. I noticed that the conversations in my classes and in the scholarly discourse is always very uncomfortable when we turn around the questions of compassion and deeper than that charity. I do think that's a real problem that our culture is facing right now.

Compassion in its root means to suffer with another. I think that is essentially connected to the baptismal covenant of mourning with those who mourn. I think it is fundamental to what it means to be a Christian. I'm ashamed, frankly, that some Christians publicly in our country have denigrated this idea, as if it's a weakness to be compassionate towards other people, as if it's a danger.

Granted, I've admitted that criticism is a crucial tool, but it's also a danger. Compassion is a critical tool, but it can also be a danger all unto its own. I talked a little bit about that in the address.

Part of this is personality, right? Some people gravitate naturally towards compassion, and other people gravitate naturally towards a position of cool detachment, and maybe even cynicism. Boy, if you want to avoid being duped, you want someone who's really critical on your team. They're going to be the last person who's going to be fooled, right?

But if Christ is the persuader here, then being super critical and detached is not an ideal position. The opposite scenario is also true. If you're trying to avoid being duped by a way of thinking that is dangerous, then being super compassionate without a lot of criticism makes you vulnerable.

On the other hand, if you've got, say, a refugee crisis going on in the world, and compassion is nowhere to be found because people can't see their own story reflected in the story of another person, then we've got a really serious problem on our hands.

Christians ought to be champions of compassion because Christ obviously embodied it. He taught it. He taught us to see his face in the face of others. He taught us to love others as we love ourselves. He taught us to be wary

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of judging by external appearances. Thinking about what's in the heart of another person, that takes imagination, it takes some trust.

Because, it's fearful, I think, for some people to feel compassion because they feel like they're losing control. They're losing their identity if they don't know what to do when they feel love and compassion for someone whose life story and position in life right now is so different from their own that they feel like, "Well, if I show genuine love for them, or I feel genuine love for them, that might be a weakness in my faith." I think it's quite the opposite. I think you're actually showing a great deal of faith in Christ if you can let yourself feel someone else's sorrow without feeling threatened by it. He certainly isn't.

I mean, I just sort of think of it that way. God is not threatened by anyone's plea. He might not give them the answer they want. He might say, "Boy, this person has a lot of change and growth to go through before they're going to ask me the right kind of question." But there's compassion there behind His willingness to hear the pleas of our heart. I think we have to model that.

Laura Hales: Peter Enns, one of my favorite, non-Mormon, Christian scholars wrote a book last year called *The Sin of Certainty*, which I consider essential reading for anyone on a journey of faith.

George Handley: I haven't read it yet.

Laura Hales: He mentioned that church should be the safest place to express our doubts, but often it's the most toxic. I found that it can also be a toxic environment for expressing not doubts, but new ideas. I've found that when I bring up something that may not be part of the manual, but is from extra reading that I want to share with my community, there'll be a "batten down the hatches" response, either by the teacher or someone in the classroom.

As we're trying to build a sense of community, make criticism healthy, not a negative thing, how does humility fit into the equation and help us think more clearly and less emotionally?

George Handley: I think of humility as a function of our capacity to see God's goodness, and the blessedness of our lives. It's connected, as we know, to gratitude. If you don't have a really deep or proper understanding of the goodness of God and His generosity ... I mean, to use King Benjamin's wording, he

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says, “The long-suffering even of God towards you ...” and just the constant flowing of blessings from Him, if you read King Benjamin’s address carefully, he’s not talking about temporal blessings necessarily, although that could be part of it. He’s talking about the blessing of existence, just being alive, just being in a body, and being gifted with this earth and with the experiences of this life.

I think that position of really radical humility is one of the deepest wellsprings of real joy because it’s independent of whether or not your circumstances conform at all times to your desires and needs, but is instead recognition that God has been inexplicably generous with you.

To my mind, actually, it’s the people who have the best reasons not to feel that way, but when they get to that deep level of spirituality, and they feel that gratitude, that’s a real lesson for the rest of us, more important than almost anything in my mind, in part because much of our unhappiness and dissatisfactions with life come from, I think, a misperception of reality. The reality is that we are generously loved by heavenly parents and gifted with the opportunity to be in this life and to have the experiences that we have.

I think when we die we’re going to miss a lot of these things intensely. Thinking about that helps me to feel grateful enough that I don’t misspend my intellectual energies on questions that might actually be pretty juvenile or pretty petty because they stem from a really shallow understanding, a superficial impression, an emotional reaction, to a situation that is actually far from reflective of the way things really are.

Laura Hales: That last point you made segues really well into, I think, a particularly helpful argument that you presented for the humanities being a tool to strengthen and build faith. You mentioned that you don’t make big distinctions between secular and sacred experiences. Why can’t we have a sacred experience listening to a particular piece of music just as we label having sacred experiences hearing testimony of Christ?

George Handley: I think, actually, I’d go so far as to say that if you can’t ever feel God’s spirit or feel the sacred outside of a restricted, institutional church setting, then you’re probably missing the boat altogether.

First of all, I’m a big outdoor person. I love the natural world. To me, by definition the natural world is secular. It’s mundane. It’s profane even. It’s

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certainly dirty and messy. We've all experienced, I think, some kind of experience with awe and wonder in the natural world. If it's possible there, and it's desirable, in fact, there seems to be many scriptural mandates to suggest that you really ought to learn to see God's hand in all things. Moroni describes charity as the power to lay hold of every good thing. I think it's D&C 98 where it says, "The Lord tells us to forsake all evil and cleave unto all good." There's this mandate. It's not just to avoid bad things, but it's a mandate to be actively seeking, and identifying, and embracing anything that brings us closer to the sacred, closer to the divinity of Christ.

Granted, if I'm on top of a mountain, or if I'm listening to music ... I've felt this listening to blues music, just as much as I have listening to a Mahler symphony. I feel deeply touched and moved in a way that feels spiritual to me. That tells me that my spiritual palette is more diversified than it used to be. You can think of it ... I'm using the metaphor of a palette here, but it's like trying to train somebody to taste good food, and diverse cuisines. If you love Thai food, and somebody can't bear it, you sort of feel sorry for them. It's not that you would want to go so far as to moralize and say that you've got some sort of stunted spirituality or anything, but what a shame to miss out on the array of expressions of God's love for us, when they're everywhere.

Again, maybe they feel threatened by that because that starts to suggest, well, maybe the experiences in church are not so unique. They don't have that unique claim on the truth that we thought they did. I just don't see it as that kind of a mutually exclusive choice.

I feel that if I'm connected to Christ and my covenants, and I'm taking the sacrament on a weekly basis, then that gives me permission, and even, again, a mandate to lay hold of every good thing everywhere. As I go out into the world and experience the sacred in other contexts, boy, that makes me feel like Christ is so much more present, and more powerful, and more a part of our lives than we realized.

That, by the way, is one of the central messages of the New Testament. My favorite story in the entire Bible is the men walking on the road to Emmaus, when they're with the Savior, and they don't realize it. Then they have this meal with Him, and they don't realize it. Then they finally

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do. The message seems to be that Christ is in your midst whether or not you see Him.

This story is sort of a cautionary tale. Don't miss it. Open up your eyes and see that He's present. If He can't be present in the mountains, or in a concert hall, or reading great poetry, then He's probably not present in your living room or in your home either. I believe He is. I believe He can be. He probably is, and you're not seeing it. It's just a matter of cultivating deeper eyes to see.

Laura Hales: For me, that's reassuring. Not only can we find God outside of the church building, but people outside of the church building can find God. He's no respecter of persons.

George Handley: Well, yeah. I mean, if you just do the math, we're a very, very tiny minority. Granted, that's one reason why some people will say, "Well then, I can't accept the premises of a church that are that bold, given how small it is." That doesn't bother me.

The fact of our smallness is reason for great humility, even though we have very, very bold claims about the truthfulness of the gospel. We also included in those claims, some of the most generous points of theology that indicate God's workings in the cultures and peoples across the planet, and throughout history in a way that I think encourages us and requires us to be generous and accepting of other cultures, and willing, certainly at the very least, willing to learn about them and to appreciate their beauty, and not feel threatened by them.

It's not always clear to me when I first encounter difference where Christ is in that difference. That's one of the things that's kind of almost freakishly alienating about it. I mean, I remember vividly being ... I think it was the very first week of my mission, and we were giving my very first discussion on the First Vision in this poor old woman's home with cracked walls. We were using the old film strips that we used to use. In the middle of the film strip, a lizard walked across her wall, just right across the image of Joseph Smith praying in the sacred grove. For some reason, it just kind of shattered me. I just thought, "What am I doing here? This culture, and this place, and this woman, they didn't ask for me to come here. Who gave me the right to come here? What in the world have I done?" I just went into a total panic.

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It took me a while to calm down, and see that, “Okay, I’m getting stretched here.” Maybe that particular woman, who I don’t think had any interest in hearing our message any further than that one meeting ... When I started to see not just people accepting the gospel from that culture, but also just seeing the good people in that culture who never accepted it. I was very much at peace with that.

The temple is one of the main reasons for me. I like to think of it this way. Mormonism has this weird, interesting paradox. You’ve got the urgency of missionary work on the one hand, and if you go to the MTC, a couple of my daughters have served missions recently. One’s on her mission right now. I was as much an enthusiast of missionary work as anybody on my mission. I still am. I get that I have an urgent need to share the message of the gospel with other people at all times, and I’m happy to do it. But I don’t think that feeling of urgency is mutually exclusive with a feeling of really deep patience and forbearance and love of the world as it is.

The temple is a very different mode, right? I mean, I guess we talk about the urgency of temple work, but it’s never really quite clear exactly why it matters that I do someone’s work today, or next week, or a couple of years from now because we’re talking about eternity. Suddenly the time scale is completely different, suddenly the realization is the temple is the promise that every human who has ever existed on this planet will have the chance to come to Christ. That will happen at the proper time and place. You want to be a part of that work, but you don’t have to freak out that it’s got to happen today. It won’t for most people. There’s just simply only so much temple work we can do. Again, if you look at the math, we’re just barely, barely touching the surface of this. It just gives me great patience.

I like to think of Mormonism as sort of learning to balance the urgency of a missionary with the patience of a temple worker. Temple is that place where the promise of the atonement is made real for the long term. My own experience with my brother’s death and going through the temple for him that I recounted in my address is what taught me that. I mean, I’m glad I went through when I did. I do think there was probably more urgency for me to go through the temple for my brother than there was for him just because, again, time scales are different.

But I learned that as tragic as the way his life ended was, I could have trust that Christ’s atonement helped him, that Christ suffered for his pains and

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his afflictions, not just for his sins, as He does for me and for mine. And that when things are not working out, and not clear at all how they ever are going to, I have patience that over time things will work out.

I'm in a family of ... I'm the only active member in my immediate family, and most of my extended family actually. I've got a couple cousins who are active. I feel great patience with that. I don't lose sleep over that. It's not because I'm secretly not liking them or not loving them. I really do love and admire them. I really feel God working in their lives, and I feel they inspire me and bring God to me many times. I hope I do the same for them.

Laura Hales: In your talk, you brought up a metaphor, and metaphors can be powerful mechanisms to remember a principle. The metaphor that you brought up was that a journey of faith can be compared to a marriage. Explain that metaphor to me.

George Handley: I think that marriage begins with really strong, hopefully, it begins with really strong affection, that there's a feeling of being in love that brings you to a person, and the deep, deep joy that you feel just being in that person's presence, and the sorrow that you feel when you're away too long from one another. That's what starts a marriage, but in the middle of the road of that journey together, it's not going to always feel that way. You have to reevaluate what it is that you committed to.

Rilke, actually, in one of his greatest poems, *The Duino Elegies*, he talks about lovers. I've actually taught this to students here. They feel a little robbed by this passage, but he basically says that if you think about it, there's something really selfish about that kind of urgent need to just be in that presence of that other person because it's really gratifying. It's all about a certain kind of pleasure, and it's not actually cultivating the deepest kind of commitment from you that comes when you, or your partner, or usually both, have so disappointed one another in your weaknesses, that you're going to have to find a higher reason to stay in, not just tolerate one another, but actually work and serve one another.

What I've loved about my marriage is, as hard as it has been at different times in our 27 years of being married, that I've come out of a tougher period with renewed appreciation and deepened affection that is so much more valuable than what I had when I started. Even though the intensity of

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the emotion might be different, the connection and the appreciation for that other person is so much more meaningful, precisely because of what you've struggled through.

I think, in our relationship with God and in our relationship to the church, we make certain commitments. For many of us, those commitments may have been because at a certain stage in our lives there was just a pure sweetness to that experience. It seemed unthinkable that the church could ever be anything but a source of an enormous pleasure, and then all of a sudden, you're going to church year in, year out, and you're thinking, "This isn't very much fun. I don't like this discussion we're having in Sunday School today, and I don't like this calling. It's tedious." Sometimes people really bug us, and so on and so forth.

You can develop a kind of antagonistic relationship to your church life that, in a similar way, causes you to have to rethink, "Okay, what was it I was in this for from the beginning? Is there a reason to stay in it, despite the fact that it's not providing me, at least right now, that kind of soulful feeding, and nurturing, that I really need?" That's a really desperate situation to get to, where you need spiritual food, and you're going to the source, and it's not actually feeding you.

In my married life, I've experienced that, and fought through it and worked through it to deeper points of connection with my wife that I wouldn't trade for the world. I think I've seen that happen in cycles in my church life as well, where I have felt ready to quit, at least asking myself, "Why in the world am I still doing this when it's not providing me ... am I just doing this for other people? Am I just doing this to keep up appearances?" But I've stayed in the fight, and I've stayed in the struggle.

What happens in those moments is deeper growth and deeper change in you, and a loyalty, and a steadiness starts to take place of a propensity to attach yourself to whatever gives you the greatest amount of pleasure immediately, and fervently, and then let go of it as soon as it stops doing that for you.

There's no stability for a marriage, and there's no stability in a spiritual life for that kind of mentality. You have to get off of that. That's a rollercoaster anyway, right? I mean, then you're just kind of jumping from one stimulus to the next. I have seen people lead their lives that way.

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They're onto the next thing that's giving them the juice, and they can't figure out a way to steady themselves in something, that for a while is not giving them that same pleasure but over the long term will if they'll keep working at it.

Laura Hales: I'm going to divert a little bit our discussion from faith and ask you what you think is an important factor in undermining faith and creating doubt?

George Handley: Yeah, I think that's a great question. I mean, what I said earlier is that I still have questions. I still have doubts. I think one learns to live with them, and maybe sometimes they're almost like companions, like, "Oh yeah, I've had that question for a number of years. That's still there." It's kind of funny. It's like this old friend or something. I think that doubt becomes a real problem and more of a crisis when you are motivated more by fear than by love and trust.

That's very hard for some people. If you've been abused as a child by a father figure, it might be really difficult to trust a Heavenly Father or to trust church leadership enough to feel like it's fruitful for you to be a part of it. I can understand that struggle, but when fear becomes the primary motivator, or the primary emotional position that one occupies most of the time, fear and distrust, then I think questions and criticism become drivers of a pulling away and detaching in a way that's unhealthy and unfortunate.

I think most people in the church, they may not have all their questions answered. I don't know anyone who does, frankly. But I think most people who stay in the church have probably stayed not necessarily because answers have come to them in droves, but because they feel like they belong. They feel connected and loved and known. If you feel generically loved, people smile at you and welcome you to church every week, but no one knows your story, and it's pretty easy to doubt even that as well-intended. You might think of it as hypocritical even. You might totally be offended by it because it feels so superficial.

That's a function of maybe the need for us to feel like when we walk into church, and when we bow our heads to pray to God, we need to feel like we are known, and that God sees us as we are. That's an exercise of faith to believe that's possible with God. It may be an even a more difficult exercise of faith to believe it's possible with people. It's easy to distrust another human's capacity to truly understand you.

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Again, I just think about marriage. I think of the times when I've doubted my wife's love for me, when I distrusted it not being genuine enough because she didn't understand where I was coming from well enough. How unfair that was to her, in part because I wasn't even giving her a chance to know more about what it was that was hurting me and causing me to feel that way. Maybe, of course, it's true. Maybe she didn't love me deeply enough, and I probably didn't love her deeply enough. That's also human. I needed to, both of us needed to, work at getting better at that.

I just think that's a major driver of our relationship to the church, is our relationship to people in the church. That's why I don't think you can overstate how important it is to do what Elder Holland has recently asked us to do, and President Uchtdorf has so beautifully before him, and many others, is accept people right at exactly where they are right now. Don't make demands on them to change.

People need to feel like whatever their life circumstances are, they are acceptable for the sake of love. Your love isn't hanging on some sort of thing, "Well, I will love you if you don't smell bad." Or, "If you don't bother me." Or, "If you don't have a political opinion that's going to offend me." Or, "If you don't live a lifestyle that I can't accept." All of those things are just so damaging to a person's prospects for wanting to feel like that community of Christ over there is my community. Those are my people.

Granted, Elder Holland made the point, "It's not just an all-inclusive club that we're after." There are such things in the world. What we're after, is a sense of belonging that then puts us in a position to be changed by Christ. The invitation is always, "Come. Be ready to be challenged by Christ." I hope the message is, "You don't have to worry about me or my brothers and sisters in the church pointing fingers at you for being different. You're okay just the way you are." If you have to come to church for 10 years and never change a thing, I'm still going to be glad to see you every week, and embrace you, and do so sincerely.

Laura Hales:

It takes a great deal of bravery to sit in a room where you feel like you're different than other people and to still feel that sense of community. We go back to those labels that have popped up in our Mormon culture in the last five years — tribalism. You spoke quite a bit about our responsibilities as members as part of a larger community to show

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understanding and to be gatherers. It was somewhat ironic that your talk, which pretty much addressed things that people were struggling with should come so closely in time to that release of the policy change regarding homosexual couples and their children. Did this policy change affect how you delivered your speech or how you felt about your message at all?

George Handley: Yeah, I mean, I had been working on it for, I don't know, a good two months. I was downright obsessed with it. I couldn't think about anything else when I was in the shower, when I was doing the dishes. I mean, I was just constantly mulling over what I wanted to say. Then I was obsessed with getting onto my computer and fine-tuning a sentence here and there. I was already fully, fully involved with that and was pretty close to being done. In fact, I think it was less than five ... it was five days if I remember correctly. It was less than a week, and I spent that weekend revising the talk, certainly with that in mind.

The truth of the matter is, though, I didn't even know how I felt about things. I was in shock. I was wrestling myself, and I was already doing what I'd learned to do, and that was resorting to my own sense of trust that nothing I believed to be true was suddenly not true. Nothing that I had experienced was suddenly not something I had experienced. There was a truthfulness to my experience, and a truthfulness to what I had come to know that I didn't feel panicky over that.

The first thing I thought of was, on the other hand, all I could see were wounded bodies everywhere. I don't want to overdramatize it, but I mean, I just felt like, this is probably what it's like when a bomb goes off. What's your first instinct? Is it to run or is to help people who are wounded? Maybe because I had had that responsibility of giving this talk, I just felt like I needed to help people who are wounded and maybe in time one of those people will be me.

I felt healed by the experience, actually. I felt so grateful for the people who came. I mean, the audience was full of people that I loved, and I could feel their love for me. I could feel us wrestling with some difficult things together. It was an exceptional, extraordinary experience, one of the best in my life.

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Being at BYU, and being in this community of faith, has always provided me those kinds of extraordinary experiences that I just feel so immensely grateful for. I don't know that I ... I didn't have the energy to be online and reading what was going on and debating with other people. I did not even have that many conversations with others about it.

For one, I was afraid that it was going to drain my energy, and my focus really needed to be on, again, what I already knew, and the people that I loved and cared for, and what would be helpful for them to hear. I figured that if it was helpful for people who I knew, then maybe it would be helpful for others. I didn't anticipate it would be as broadly viewed and read as it has been. I've had a lot of people talk to me about it who I don't know and thank me for it. That's been immensely gratifying.

I was just trying to speak from my own experience. I wasn't really happy about the irony of it at the time. I just thought, "Oh, this is dreadful. I can't imagine a worse moment to have to give this talk."

Laura Hales: Well, I would say maybe then not irony, not coincidental, maybe timely. You did help us during that time of processing when we were just thinking, "What just happened here? What does this mean?" People have come to me and told me how much your speech helped them. I appreciate you sitting down with me today and again reviewing the concepts that you've taught. We will put a link to both the video and the written talk in the show notes. Please check that out. Thank you, George.

George Handley: Thank you very much.

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