

## Latter-day Saints and the Problem of Pain

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I have been profoundly humbled by the invitation to participate in this evening's celebrations. I am grateful to the Maxwell Institute's new director, Spencer Fluhman, for including me and for so many others who not only do the hard work to pull an anniversary event like this together, but who do the daily heavy lifting necessary to make the Maxwell Institute a place worth celebrating. So many noble hearts and brilliant minds have given the very best of themselves over these years to provide us with a place where light and truth can be relentlessly pursued in a spirit of shared affection. If nothing else comes through in my remarks this evening, I hope my respect for this institution, my gratitude for all that it has been (in all of its historical forms), and my confidence in all that it promises to be will be unmistakable. It is in good hands. Professor Fluhman and I met each other 19 years ago this fall as undergraduate classmates in a German language course that convened not far from here. That seems not so long ago. Kurt Vonnegut once famously wrote that "true terror is to wake up one morning and discover that your high school class is running the country."<sup>1</sup> I am inclined to agree. But true sanguinity is to wake up and realize that the Maxwell Institute is being directed by a person that I have loved and admired for almost two decades now. I appreciate Spencer's leadership.

While the substance of what the Maxwell Institute does is sacred by its very nature, there can be no question that for many of us its mission was heightened and hallowed when it took the name of Elder Neal A. Maxwell. That is a name that I grew up hearing invoked in tones of admiration and love from before I fully understood why. It was uttered with affection throughout the global church, to be sure, but what I remember most vividly is how it was spoken within the walls of my own home, where Elder Maxwell was continually referenced as an exemplar of true charity and courageous discipleship. For a family of teachers, he served as the premier model of what it really means to teach. His memory continues to be revered in our hearts and homes. This evening is rendered all the sweeter and the more humbling for me by virtue of the fact that members of the Maxwell family are in attendance.

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<sup>1</sup>Kurt Vonnegut, *If This Isn't Nice, What Is? Advice for the Young* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2013), 111.

Of all the many valued lessons that Elder and Sister Maxwell taught my parents, that they then conferred upon me and my siblings, the one that has most poignantly remained with me relates directly to my theme for this evening. When my father was a young man tasked with some weighty responsibilities, he had the inestimable blessing of being mentored by Elder Maxwell, a mentorship that proceeded freely from the generosity of Elder Maxwell's soul. On one occasion, prior to a significant address my dad had been asked to deliver, he asked Elder Maxwell to read the talk beforehand. After reviewing the draft, Elder Maxwell offered some words of encouragement and then a kindly warning (I recreate here the gist of the exchange if not the actual words): "Jeff," he said, "there is one place in the talk where you have been insufficiently careful of the pain in peoples' lives. There are scars that go unnoticed, but you must see them. You must tread with caution on the hallowed ground of another's suffering." My dad, arrested by the solemnity and feeling with which that counsel was offered, looked into Elder Maxwell's face and saw great stores of compassion won by a disciple's compound of personal experience and divine grace. Since that story was repeated to me numerous times as a child, usually accompanied by my dad's own emotion, I can testify to the impact it had on one man's heart, and on that of his son.

The principles of ministry that Elder Maxwell offered in that moment of personal counsel were echoed in the doctrines that he taught from the pulpit. But it was not only in our need to handle each other's suffering with care that Elder Maxwell addressed the problem of pain. He had, after all, a marked capacity for recognizing multiple facets of complex truths. Citing the example of Jacob in the Book of Mormon, he reminded us repeatedly that sometimes true love requires us to confront sin, a prophetic process that promises long-term healing even if it intensifies short-term pain. And he eloquently recognized pain as an essential element of the discipling process. I still recall the words he offered in the General Conference of April 1991. At that time he memorably asked, "How can you and I really expect to glide naively through life, as if to say, 'Lord, give me experience, but not grief, not sorrow, not pain, not opposition, not betrayal, and certainly not to be forsaken. Keep from me, Lord, all those experiences which made Thee what Thou art! Then let me come and dwell with Thee and fully share Thy joy!'"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Neal A. Maxwell, "Lest Ye Be Wearied and Faint in Your Minds," *Ensign*, May 1991, lds.org, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1991/05/lest-ye-be-wearied-and-faint-in-your-minds.p1?lang=eng>

Elder Maxwell had an uncanny ability to point out—with good humor and a high degree of patience—the absurdity of our quest for cheap grace.

In these teachings of Elder Maxwell we catch a striking portrait of the paradox of pain in a Christian life. In some teachings from the Lord's anointed messengers we clearly see one half of that paradox. For example, President Gordon B. Hinckley taught: "As members of the Church of Jesus Christ, ours is a ministry of healing, with a duty to bind the wounds and ease the pain of those who suffer."<sup>3</sup> I am committed to that sentiment with my whole soul. In a recent stake presidency meeting, as we agonized over the extension of certain calls to serve, we posed the question to ourselves of what faculty we saw as most important for ministering in our Father's kingdom. The answer emerged from our deliberations that we hoped for shepherds who know the healer's art. Our ability or willingness to address pain can carry the heaviest of implications, even life-or-death consequences. Like many of us, I find that my life—both personally and ecclesiastically—has been touched by the tragedy of suicide. This has driven me into admittedly amateurish research on the sources of suicidal ideation and the findings that I encounter again and again indicate that those driven to these most desperate of thoughts are compelled by a relatively simple imperative: They just want the pain to stop. To act for the minimization of pain—both for ourselves and for those we love—is our most basic anthropological urge; to allow pain to continue unaddressed and unacknowledged can have the most devastating of repercussions.

Pain, then, is often our enemy, to be battled in the name of the Savior who rose with healing in his wings. That, however, is not the whole story. Like all paradoxes, this one comes with a countervailing term. I am convicted by the sentiment conveyed many years ago by Elder Orson F. Whitney. He declared that "No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude, and humility. . . . It is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire."<sup>4</sup> Pain, Elder Whitney came close to suggesting, is

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Healing Power of Christ," *Ensign*, November 1988, lds.org, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1988/11?lang=eng>.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 98.

the point of mortality. More recently, President Spencer W. Kimball, a man agonizingly well acquainted with pain, had this to say about the lessons of mortality: “Being human, we would expel from our lives physical pain and mental anguish and assure ourselves of continual ease and comfort, but if we were to close the doors upon sorrow and distress, we might be excluding our greatest friends and benefactors. Suffering can make saints of people as they learn patience, long-suffering, and self-mastery.”<sup>5</sup> Pain, then, has its divine purposes. But, as President Hinckley’s teaching suggested, to believe in that principle does not resolve the paradox of pain in our lives, it merely heightens it. Put simply: We are called upon to minimize in others’ lives the very force that we’re told may be God’s most powerful tool for our sanctification. Perhaps no aspect of our lives pulls the disciples heart in such diametrically opposed directions. (This is different, I might add here, than the other areas where we might perceive a tension between human effort and divine will, since the battles, say, to hold onto physical life, or material wealth, or to insure against catastrophe always leave an area beyond our control, an area in which we of necessity allow providence to function; pain, conversely, in our anodyne society, can always be killed.)

In New Hampshire, where I spend a good chunk of my life, there is an overwhelming opioid epidemic. In every case I have encountered, pain lies at the root of a terribly self-defeating addiction. However, just as the impulse to flee the darkness of suffering can ironically push us into self-destructive paths of pain management—both personally and politically—so a misconceived confidence in the redemptive power of pain can distort and destroy. One can get addicted, it seems, to a certain kind of misery. Surely one of the most haunting religiously charged books in all of American letters is Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, whose central character, Hazel Motes, grows exhausted with his battle against the frightening demands of faith on one side and the hypocrisies of traditional religion on the other, and instead settles in for a life of escaping this battle by blinding himself with lye, wrapping barbed around his chest, and spending his remaining days walking around on shards of glass that he has stuffed into his shoes. It is as if he believes a descent into self-inflicted pain—if it is painful enough—absolves him of the fearful obligation to search for truth. It does not.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, 98.

<sup>6</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952).

And so, where does that leave us, when we recognize that *both* the effort to accept the instructive power of pain and the humane impulse to minimize it in our own lives and in the lives of those we love has the capacity to lead us into self-destructive excess? What do we do when in the face of the very pain that has the demonstrable capacity to fracture our communities, to upend our faith, to snuff out the light of promising lives we hear prophets—ancient and modern—as well as the intuitions of our own souls call upon us to lift that darkness and heal those wounds while simultaneously insisting that pain is an indispensable part of the plan of happiness, a refiner’s fire, perhaps even an unavoidable complement to love?

As I have long noted, Latter-day Saints have been asked by our theology to live at the convergence of competing truths. It’s where the disciple spends her most difficult and productive hours, where grace and work, public community and private home, faith and learning, body and spirit, diligence and rest, justice and mercy, seem to tug at us from constantly tense angles, making a mockery of our efforts at easy resolution. It is often the incompatibility of truths that must nonetheless coexist that drives us to our knees and makes proud human heads bow before a God in whom all truths find their beginning and their end. Here, as we look through a glass darkly, we must live with the shearing tensions. With our prophets, we are obliged to declare that pain is a necessary companion to growth and love and joy even as we feel a divine charge to prevent it and ameliorate it all around us, including not necessarily indulging it in our own lives. There is a cognitive dissonance in this to be sure, one that can likely only be lived with by either not thinking about it very hard or by submerging it in the reconciling blood of Jesus Christ. I think God expects the latter. And I think He has provided us with the resources to live with, and even find purpose in, the problem of pain, although we may never fully solve its riddles. I believe the historical context of the Restoration may enable us to see some of these resources more clearly.

As my dull-headed meanderings around the problem of pain have undoubtedly demonstrated already, I am not a philosopher. I am a historian, which means my head is often stuck somewhere between the Mayflower and Appomattox. History is not always the resource for addressing recurring problems that some of us like to think it is. As the old knock against my profession goes, perhaps it’s not so much that history keeps repeated *itself*, but rather that historians keep repeating each other. Be that as it may, a historian is what you’re stuck with

tonight. I am sorry to subject you to my own backwardly oriented vision this evening, but as I contemplate the unruly problem of pain and my own fervent faith in the Restored Gospel, I find myself thinking about the ways people in the past dealt with the question of suffering, particularly those whose views were circulating through American culture near the time of the Restoration. It might be worthwhile here to look at a just a handful—a quartet—of these historical phenomena and consider how the Restoration spoke and speaks to the questions they raised. It should be said at the outset that in highlighting certain theological resources provided by the Restoration, I am not suggesting that other faiths were without these—far from it, as these impulses and resources were widely distributed—but that the Restored gospel identified or highlighted or underscored or confirmed them in ways that help us in our quest to live with the competing realities of divine love and human pain.

It is striking to me that in the decades leading up to the era of the Restoration, the question of God’s relationship to pain was increasingly on the minds and lips of theological disputants.<sup>7</sup> Among the notable eighteenth-century English sermons devoted specifically to the problem of pain was a discourse from the famous British hymnist Isaac Watts, the same man who gave us “Joy to the World” as well as a hymn with the catchy title “When Pain and Anguish Seize Me Lord.” In his sermon on pain, Watts approached his subject with an eye for complexity, noting that sometimes pain is so heavy that that it serves as an obstacle to our spiritual wellbeing but also that God paradoxically uses this potentially soul numbing force to awakening us from a slumber of self-satisfaction. Pain can reclaim as well as alienate, Watt’s seems to say. Watt’s complex approach appears rather modern, even as his actual rhetoric seems very much of a piece with his early modern world. He wrote, “Pain is like a rod in the hand of God, wherewith he smites sinners...to awaken them into spiritual life. This rod is sometimes so smarting and severe, that it will make a senseless and ungodly wretch look upwards to the hand that smites.”<sup>8</sup> In Watt’s version, a person had to know that the Pain came from God in order to have their attention drawn to the majesty and justice of the Lord. This was a rather common refrain of the time.

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<sup>7</sup> On the controversies over conceptualizations of pain in this period, see Catherine Brekus, *Sarah Osborn’s World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 85-88.

<sup>8</sup> Isaac Watts, *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts, DD*, 9 vols. (Leeds, 1813), 7:188.

**This leads me to point #1, which is that a God with a broader array of communicative possibilities has a different relationship to pain than the God of the rigidly closed canon.**

A recurring question in colonial American religious culture in the era after Watts was whether God still communicated with humanity through moments of devastating public pain. (That question has never really gone away. You may recall the firestorm of controversy that ensued when Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell began reading divine messages into the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>). This riddle of whether God conveys clear messages in catastrophic pain has hung over believers for a long time. For the Puritans, its answer was *officially* a Calvinistic no, but *in practice* a resounding yes, and such beliefs proved remarkably resilient.<sup>9</sup> Even the cutting-edge theological liberals of the eighteenth century, who championed what they considered more enlightened interpretations of such events, still believed that God’s anger could be detected in human catastrophe. As Jonathan Mayhew—the colonies’ most outspoken, most liberal proclaimer of the benevolent goodness of God—declared after the deadly Boston fire of 1760, “This evil, the great evil, has not surely come upon us, but by his appointment, and according to his sovereign pleasure. . . . We may assure ourselves, it is not without just and sufficient provocation that he had appeared thus against us.”<sup>10</sup> For Mayhew, public pain still betokened a communal sin and thus demanded a public reformation. This was God’s public speaking voice. He used pain to get our attention, and ministers were charged to interpret His meaning.

By the time we get to the early years of the nineteenth century, however, some segments of the country were supposed to have moved past that kind of crass providentialism that read God’s chastising hand into every moment of human pain. Historical research has indicated that in the recurring cholera outbreaks of the early nineteenth century ministers seemed less and less willing to put words in God’s mouth in reference to the misery around them, other than to note that He expects us to minister to the needs of a fallen world.<sup>11</sup> In the winter of 1812, for instance,

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<sup>9</sup> Michael P. Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Mayhew, *God's hand and providence to be religiously acknowledged in public calamities. A sermon occasioned by the great fire in Boston, New-England, Thursday March 20. 1760* (Boston: Richard Draper, 1760), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Sassi, *A Republic of Righteousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 158-59.

a poem began making its rounds through the proliferating newspapers of the early American republic. Appearing in journals stretching from Richmond, Virginia, to Hudson, New York, the verse had the catchy title, “LINES On the Folly of ascribing to divine vengeance, accidents which result from human indiscretion.” The poem read as follows:

In pious mood Sir Bigot cries,  
“Behold a judgement from the skies!  
See Richmond in despair!...  
And think’st thou, miserable elf!  
That GOD, vindictive as thyself,  
Begins a hell on earth?...  
Moum, if thou canst; but ah! forbear  
To charge on Heaven the fatal snare  
For Heaven delights to save!

Ostensibly, the verses were designed to shift causal explanation from God’s vengeance to “human indiscretion.” The title suggests that the purpose of the poetry was the enthronement of natural causes as the source of human suffering. Yet the technique it employed to produce that effect was not an explanation of physical science, or an examination of causation at all, but an emotional appeal to the goodness of God. God, it simply said, would not use this sort of pain as his mechanism of teaching.<sup>12</sup> (We actually see the rhetorical strategy quite frequently in early modern arguments about epistemology, in which certain forms of knowledge were defended not on the grounds of epistemic superiority, but on the grounds that they comported more closely with the presumed character of God.)<sup>13</sup> The writer of this poem was thus not the first to take up such a strategy in the fight against those who would declare God’s mind and will in pain nor was she or he alone among their contemporaries. The poem was written in response to a dreadful fire that engulfed the Richmond Theater on a late December night in 1811 and captured the attention of newspaper readers around the country.

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<sup>12</sup> “Lines on the Folly of Ascribing to Divine Vengeance, Accidents Which Result from Human Indiscretion,” *Virginia Argus*, 27 Jan. 1812 and *The Casket*, 1 Feb. 1812, p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> See Winship, *Seers of God*.

On an evening just after Christmas, hundreds of Richmond's finest citizens crowded into the theatre for a rendition of Denis Diderot's, *Le Pere de famille*. One of only two plays penned by Diderot, *Le Pere* had been translated by a Richmond local and was being performed under the title *The Father, or, Family Feuds*. As the curtain lifted before some 600 playgoers, a didactic and sentimental drama unfolded in which the promptings of human feeling were repeatedly pitted against the oppressive demands of a hierarchical society. Within a plot informed by alternating moments of youthful rebellion and familial love, the early national audience saw and heard much that resonated with the republican ideals of parenting. While not without his faults, the title character, known simply as "the Father," appeared as the personification of enlightened paternalism. He expected a modicum of deference, and demanded due obedience, but did so through love, reason and suasion—consciously rejecting the heavy-handed patriarchy promoted by his brother-in-law, who represented the ethos of the *ancien regime*. Though his lovelorn son mistakenly accused him and all fathers of being "tyrants," of having "given us life only to exercise their authority over it," the father ultimately won both the love and happiness of his children by resolutely refusing to become "either a harsh and tyrannous father, or a vindictive and ungrateful man." He would not use pain to parent.<sup>14</sup>

To a culture inclined to forge connections between ideals of earthly parenting and the nature of their Heavenly Father, Diderot's play about the benevolent "Father" must have carried important theological implications. Diderot had been part of the cultural "revolution against patriarchy" which preoccupied the western world during the last half of the eighteenth century, and in which—as Jay Fliegelman has shown—there was a tight correlation between changing parental ideals and evolving conceptions of God.<sup>15</sup> For the Richmond audience viewing *The Father*, however, conceptions of divine paternalism would face an immediate and awful test. At the conclusion of the featured play, the company began an after-piece performance of a pantomime entitled "The Bleeding Nun," drawn from Matthew Gregory Lewis's supernatural and somewhat salacious novel, *The Monk*. They were only one scene into the pantomime when

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<sup>14</sup>Denis Diderot, *The Father of the Family* (1758), trans. John Douglas Hellweg (M.A. thesis., Stanford University); Martin Staples Shockley, *The Richmond Stage, 1784-1812* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 360-82.

<sup>15</sup>Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 44, 155-69, 172-73, 189, 192-94.

the performance came to a sudden halt with shouts of “Fire!” Touched off when the house chandelier came into contact with the highly combustible scenery, flames rapidly spread throughout the closely packed building. Eyewitness accounts detail an ensuing scene of frenzied terror, in which some of the most respected members of Richmond society—including the newly elected governor and the president of the Bank of Virginia—were fatally enveloped in blaze and smoke that was “black, dense, almost saturated with oily vapours.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps most troubling were the accounts of children, like little Nancy Green, who perished while trying to find her father. The fire remains the deadliest in Richmond history.

Before the embers had completely cooled the theological questions raised by this tragedy began rippling out from eastern Virginia. Could the utter destruction of a playhouse be an angry message from God when mere moments before the ignition Diderot’s God-like title character had convincingly asserted that an enlightened father simply “will not resort to force because it suits my interest. ... I will not empty my house because it happens that there are things which displease me”? For centuries the theater had been the object of angry providential memoranda. In Virginia in 1811-1812, however, there were powerful and popular forces pushing against such a view.<sup>17</sup>

In the theological cacophony that followed the Richmond fire, one can find just about every conceivable response. Certainly there were those who read a divine message into the fire, hearing within the tragedy the angry “voice of the Almighty.” And there were those who refused to hear any such thing. Appearing in a pair of different journals, an “Ode” occasioned by the fire dismissed the interpreters of providence, doing so in the context of positing a “pard’ning” God who was particularly kind, a father from whom “Ev’n sinners hope for joy.” The “Ode” demonstrated that to put a kind Father in control of a cruel fire necessitated an appeal to impenetrability and an attendant providentialist “silence”:

Bigots be silent! *dare not judge!* ye know

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<sup>16</sup> “Narrative,” *Enquirer*, 31 December 1811. See also, William H. Gaines, Jr., “The Fatal Lamp, or Panic at the Play,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 2 (Summer 1952), pp.4-8.

<sup>17</sup> Diderot, *The Father*, 3.7, p. 115.

The paths of sacred science how confin'd  
By erring mortals trod;  
Nor can ye *think* how happiness and woe,  
Are dealt to man by that Almighty mind,  
That **ALL-MYSTERIOUS GOD!**

This poem reflects what seems to be an irresistible theological recourse for those looking to preserve divine benevolence in the face of tragedy: an appeal to the inscrutability of God's actions. If Americans were more familiar with the revealed truths of the Bible, one writer complained, they would realize that the "Father of Mercies" always "works by the inscrutable designs of his providence, and his ways, and attributes are unsearchable!" Emphasizing God's identity as "the Father of love ... the universal Parent of mankind," another advised mourning family members to "silent acquiescence, to the divine and omnipotent hand, reverentially and fearfully bowing to that Providence 'whose ways are ever unsearchable.'" A third challenged the readers of Richmond's *Enquirer* "to behold the mysterious and inscrutable dispensations of his unerring providence; and it is our duty to receive them with a sincere adoration of his infinite goodness and kindness...."<sup>18</sup>

As "LINES On the Folly of ascribing to Divine Vengeance" proved, to push the issue of divine benevolence too hard was to risk pushing God right out of life's painful details—something most believers simply could not accept. How, then, did one retain a God who was kind and involved in such moments of agony? In this theological move taking place in the era of the Restoration, in which Americans became increasingly uncomfortable suggesting that God was saying something specific when moments of great pain occurred, they abandoned for the sake of divine goodness what had historically been one of the most attractive sources of divine information. In the past such moments of pain had served in the office of prophet, warning about certain actions, directing certain thoughts, conveying certain messages. In saying that we cannot

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<sup>18</sup> See *Particular account of the dreadful fire at Richmond*, (Baltimore 1812); "Ode," *Enquirer*, 25 January 1812. The *Enquirer* cites *The Philadelphia Inquirer* as the poem's original source.

44 "Crumbs of Comfort for the Mourners of Richmond," *Virginia Argus*, 13 Feb. 1812; "Fellow Citizens," *Virginia Argus*, 3 February 1812; "For the Enquirer," *Enquirer*, 14 January 1812. See David Holland, "Continuing Revelation: An Idea and Its Contexts in Early America," PhD Diss. (Stanford University, 2005),

declare that God speaks through such pain they rendered him all the more silent, rejecting a traditional source of divine direction. Faced with a choice in which God could either be cruel or mute, they increasingly chose the silence.

It was in the context of this process that the Restoration occurred, bringing with it the declaration that God's voice could be heard again—not just in catastrophe, but in direct illumination—and this promised to liberate the Saints from this new zero-sum contest between God's goodness and His communicativeness. Human pain need no longer fill the prophetic office as actual human beings now played that role, and a strong commitment to personal revelations helped the Saints find solace in their moments of calamity rather than looking to the calamity itself for its own interpretation. Pain is a biased interpreter of pain; and the prophetic religion of the Restoration drastically reduced the theological needs for such recourse. God would not primarily speak to us through pain, the Restoration declared; instead, He was able to talk us through pain. In my reading on suicidal ideation, the most effective response to those whose sense of pain puts their lives at risk is simply to keep the conversation going, to avoid the lethal tendencies of self-isolating silence. When we talk about God opening the heavens again we often do not fully appreciate that one of the consequences of renewed revelation was that we no longer needed to believe that He would speak largely in the severities of catastrophe. Pain became something other than God's boldest communicative recourse. Just as it is among humans, so in the relationship between heaven and earth, the openness of communication allows Him to be fully present in our pain. And that presence has the power to save.

**Point #2 is that a view of atonement which puts the empathic project at its heart and center shapes our understanding of God's relationship to pain.**

Traditional Christian doctrines—particularly in their Reformed, or we might say Calvinist expressions—were increasingly under threat in this period for many reasons, but most prominently for the ways in which they depicted the character of God.<sup>19</sup> The Reformation's dominant view of Atonement—sometimes referred to as the penal substitutionary view—held

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Jenkins, *The Character of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

that Christ actually took the place of sinners on the cross and endured an exact amount of pain and suffering to sate God's anger and offended sense of justice toward those whom he had predestined for salvation. As we moved into the nineteenth century, more and more American Christians—including the so-called New Divinity preachers who sought to keep Jonathan Edwards' form of Calvinism alive and relevant—moved to a moral government view of Atonement, in which God had to make a demonstration of justice in order to uphold the dignity of His law and rule. He was less personally punishing Christ to vent His anger than He was impersonally punishing Christ to satisfy the demands of abstract justice. Among the Unitarians, who were coming into their institutional own in this period, Christ's atoning influence lay not in vicarious suffering at all, but in the powerful message of love and conviction that a testator's martyrdom added to the testimony. Christian conceptions of the Atonement in the United States were evolving from a relatively monolithic one in which the Father exhausted his anger through the infliction of pain on His embodied self to the opening of other options such as the one in which the willingness to endure pain became Jesus's voluntary message of love. In these American evolutions and fracturings on Atonement, the morality of the Father's infliction of pain on the Son lay at the heart of the debates. The view one had of Atonement had clear connections with and implications for the way one looked at God and His relationship to human pain.

It is easy to caricature one's theological opponents based on their most extreme statements, which is very unfair, but to draw the Restoration's contrast with a view of God that depicted Him as deriving a certain satisfaction in the suffering of some of his children, I will indulge in quick glimpse at one of the eighteenth century's most sensational sermons. The mid-century minister Jonathan Edwards is often seen as a transitional figure from old Reformed orthodoxies to a New Divinity—representing both persisting Calvinist commitments and a new humanitarian ethos. But as every high school history student knows, he was also the preacher of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", in which he depicted a God whose relationship to human pain would have been increasingly foreign in the antebellum era and which his own New Divinity acolytes had to defend or abandon. Edwards wrote of God's relationship to sinners at the time of judgement: "God will be so far from pitying you when you cry to him, that tis said he will only Laugh and mock... If you cry to God to pity you, he will be so far from pitying you in your doleful Case, or shewing you the least Regard or Favour, that instead of that he'll only tread you under Foot: And tho' he will know that you can't bear the Weight of Omnipotence

treading upon you, yet he won't regard that, but he will crush you under his Feet without Mercy; he'll crush out your Blood, and make it fly, and it shall be sprinkled on his Garments, so as to stain all his Raiment. He will not only hate you, but he will have you in the utmost Contempt; no Place shall be thought fit for you, but under his Feet, to be trodden down as the Mire of the Streets."<sup>20</sup> God's anger required the infliction of pain. Edwards's God persisted, but He would increasingly need to be justified by his successors in the next generation. The God who took a certain delight in the pains of the wicked, and one who could thus be pacified by the pains of His son, was losing traction. The empathetic God was on the rise.

In a poem that circulated through at least 6 newspapers in the 1810s and 1820s—and many more in the years to follow—a rather profound point was buried in saccharine verse: “When gathering clouds around I view, And days are dark, and friends are few, On him I lean who not in vain, Experienced every human pain; He feels my griefs, allays my fears, And counts, and treasures up my tears.”<sup>21</sup> Here we have in poetic form a doctrine of godly fellow-feeling with humanity, a God who experienced every human pain and shares our griefs. This was the sort of God to whom modernizing Americans increasingly turned. Written for our time, the Book of Mormon thus answers the cry of the modern Christian seeker, doing so not with sentimentalized poetry but with unmistakable prophetic prose. The poem does not beg for a God to remove pain, but rather looks for a God who can share it. The Book of Mormon and subsequent scriptures answer that call not in verse but in an actual prosaic doctrine of Atonement, one that elevates the garden in relation to the cross and thus puts empathy at the start and the center of the Atoning act. In doing so, it provides another witness of the God who shares our suffering.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema and Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 49-65.

<sup>21</sup> The earliest American printing I have found is in “Hymn,” *Christian Observer* (February 1806): 92. The poem was authored by the English writer Sir Robert Grant (1779-1838), though at least one early American source attributed it to the Swiss hymnist Johann Caspar Lavater. See, “Lines Written by JC Lavater,” *Religious Remembrancer*, 20 April 1816, p. 135.

<sup>22</sup> Terryl Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity*, provides the most helpful single-source summary of these issues. See his chapters on “Vulnerable God” and “Salvation.” I do not hold with those who see the Atonement as solely an empathic act, but I do see the quest for empathy at its core.

The Restoration provided a meaningful alternative to the less empathic theories of Atonement and their implications for God's relationship to the pain of his children. Right off the bat of the Restoration, in the pages of a Book of Mormon that had appeared mere weeks before the Church was organized, we get a glimpse of a God who himself has to honor the principles of justice on which the universe depends. In Alma's exquisite rendering of the Atonement, and Lehi's illuminating teaching on godhood, the Atoning act is thus not the infliction of pain for the sake of slaking God's bloodthirst, and not merely to maintain the honor of a law He had created, and not even to simply send a message about His self-sacrificial love. It was an act of *participation* with us in a universe in which we all—the divine and the mortal alike—are subject to eternal laws but in which the Godhead were willing to absorb most of the resultant pain that we might only have a portion suited to our circumstance.<sup>23</sup>

When Alma teaches that Christ took upon himself the pains and the sickness of His people “that he may know,” that beloved passage suggests that our redemptive relationship with him begins with an act of understanding.<sup>24</sup> It has become something of a cliché in the therapeutic community that when pain is shared its power is lessened. The doctrine of the Restoration is that human pain is always shared, divinely shared. The Restoration thus offers a God who is not the originator of an existence in which pain is an unavoidable presence, but rather He emerges as a perfect, experienced companion in a shared pain, and as a willing shield to the pain that could destroy us.

**Point #3 is that the God who participates in the problem of pain, does so not in one transcendent act of atonement, but as a product of an eternal, ontological role as Father.<sup>25</sup>**

As many of you undoubtedly know, one of the religious trends that was gaining steam in the decades preceding Joseph Smith's prophetic ministry was universalism, the idea that in the end all of God's children would be saved in His redeeming love. While universalism was often driven by an emotional impulse, there was also a logic at its heart. Not only is it incompatible with mercy, Universalists argued, but it is irreconcilable with justice to avenge a finite sin with

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<sup>23</sup> See especially 2 Nephi 2 and Alma 7.

<sup>24</sup> Alma 7:12

<sup>25</sup> On this point, see again Givens's chapter “Vulnerable God.”

an infinite punishment. In many ways this argument was a calculation of pain. Even if I commit murder, they held, the pain of that act lasts momentarily for the person killed and perhaps a lifetime for those who loved and depended on the victim, but not even that most immoral of acts seems comparable to writhing in the fires of hell for eternity. That is, they argued, there is nothing that a human can do in time to justify a punishment that never ends. The pains do not equate, and how can that comport with divine equity? (Of course, the Calvinists had an answer for that, which is that it was not the act of murder that justified eternal damnation, but the unredeemed corruption of the heart from which the murderous thoughts proceeded that justified an eternity shut out from the holy courts of the Lord; but for anyone who believed that human works affected one's salvation—which Calvinists did not, but increasing numbers of Americans did—the Universalists had a bone to pick with the idea that any of those works would warrant never-ending punishment.) And so this debate went, often with an energetic soul named John Murray at the center of the fray, a fellow who had recently immigrated to the new United States from England and felt a call to disabuse Americans of their faith in eternal damnation and the mischaracterization of God that he believed it entailed. This John Murray is rather famous, often seen as the founding Father of American universalism.

There was another John Murray at the time, however, a Presbyterian immigrant to America from Ireland.<sup>26</sup> In encountering this other John Murray in a wonderful new book by the historian Kathryn Gin Lum, I was taken back to a rather mysterious encounter my wife and I had in the line at Costco when we were expecting our daughter. (My wife has this irresistible empathetic aura that invites people to share their many thoughts and feelings with us for no apparent reason.) A woman in front of us, with very little provocation, turned, noticed my wife was pregnant and warned us to watch out for any other children that share our children's names. "The will torment your kids," she said, "just for the sake of defending their own identity." And then she left with—this being Costco—her 3-gallon jar of mustard and 98-pack of paper towels. It was like something out of an Ingmar Bergman movie. Fortunately we have not lived to see her prophesy fulfilled, and I had not thought much about her since, but she came back to my mind when I recently read about this other John Murray, who seemed to make it his life's mission to counteract and ultimately destroy the Universalist message of his namesake. Could those who

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<sup>26</sup> See Kathryn Gin Lum, *Damned Nation: Hell in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

were swayed by this Universalist heresy not see, he wondered, that without the threat of eternal damnation the human race would have insufficient reason to maintain the basic virtues on which human society depended. Such a pain-free future, he declared, would tear apart the foundations of humanity's shared existence. Nonsense, the English John Murray responded: When people realized that God was too just and good to eternally torment any of His children their natural virtue would be stimulated rather than diminished. To keep these two straight as they battled back and forth in the new American republic, their contemporaries began to refer to Universalist John Murray as "Salvation" Murray and his Calvinist counterpart as "Damnation" Murray. The problem with Salvation Murray, said Damnation Murray, is that he did not appreciate the necessary power of pain. His pain-averse God, he said, was no less than a "conspirator with the worst enemies of society, encouraging the murderers and thieves that He should be determined to crush." Such a God, Damnation Murray wrote, "possessed a feminine sort of goodness, which constrains him, for his own happiness, to keep all sinners from pain. And we must return and caress the offender, whether he cease his rebellion or not."<sup>27</sup> The prospect of a God who, by His very character, could or would not minimize his children's subjection to pain became an issue of recurrent concern in the Universalist/anti-Universalist debate that ran through the religious landscape of the Restoration's culture.

Damnation Murray's characterization of the Universalist God was in keeping with the binary rhetorical impulses of his time. There was a male kind of virtue that was strong and exacting, and a female kind of parenting that was soft and indulgent. His God was one half of a dualism, and Salvation Murray's was the other, with little room for reconciliation between the two. This tendency to pit theological struggle as a battle of polarities was hardly unique to the early nineteenth century, but it certainly was a pronounced propensity in the religious controversies of the era. Some have accused the Book of Mormon of reflecting this kind of anti-Universalist polemic, but the evidence of the Book of Mormon on the question of Universalism is actually rather ambiguous, and the revelations that were received in the nineteenth century paint a similarly complex picture, albeit in a somewhat different key. Unafraid of complexity and even contrariety, the Restoration scriptures reject Damnation Murray's stark dichotomies. A God who both aches to redeem and upholds truth and justice cannot be reduced to either side of

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Lum, *Damned Nation*, 35.

His character when reading the restored scriptures as a whole. Their content, when taken in their totality, suggests both a God who has provided for the recovery and salvation of the vast majority of his children—indeed, virtually all of the earth’s inhabitants—while still reminding us of the reality of eternal suffering, reminding us of it primarily—as Fiona and Terryl Givens have taught—by exemplifying it.<sup>28</sup> God may wipe all tears from our eyes, according to Revelation 21:4, but they remain in His, according to Moses 7. Our God, the scriptures teach, hurts with us—not in some token, metaphorical sense, not as a gesture or a brief taste. But He hurts with us from before our pain began, to well after ours has been resolved. After He dries our eyes, He continues to weep. He demonstrates in the process that pain is the price we pay for love, and thus pain continues even in courts above. But in God’s hands, pain is something that He uses to bring us together rather than—as we so often do in the pain—to push apart. He expects us to find in the pain, of which He carries a much larger share, and from whose full destructive capacity He eternally shields us, a reason to rally together, with Him and with each other.

Again and again when I look at the religious culture of the Restoration era and compare it to the doctrines of the Restored gospel the conclusion that jumps out to me from the contrasts is that one of the primary messages of the Restoration is that pain is not so much something that God does to us, but something that He experiences *with* us, something He can talk us through, something He can relate to, something that He can redirect and reframe and at times—in his wisdom—rebuke, participating in such a way that the effects of pain might be rendered redemptive to the extent that we allow Him to walk with us. This is for me the most important answer to the paradox of pain. The question is not really “Can pain be good for us?” or, “Should we seek to heal from it?” Those answers are unavoidably “Yes”, even though that points to a contradiction, and to a paradox that—like all other gospel paradoxes—promises to continue throughout our mortal journey. The question, rather, is perhaps a much more daunting one. It is, “Will we suffer alone?” And the Restoration answers that with a resounding “No.”

**Finally, point #4 is a reflection of the other three and a recognition that—for whatever else the Restoration did—it created a remarkable community. I spend my life studying, admiring and often appropriating the principles and truths that I find in other faith**

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<sup>28</sup> Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012).

**traditions. There is so much good out there, some of which reflects similar views to the ones I have attributed here to the Restoration. But I have to say that nobody does *community* quite like the Latter-day Saints, and it is there—in a community that at its best replicates the communicative, participatory and empathic approach of our Father to pain—that we find one of most essential resources for living redemptively with this problem of pain.**

In this problem of pain, and in its implications for our relationship with our Father in Heaven, it is worth pausing to reflect on its lessons for our interactions with others. If God's approach to our pain is to understand it, to recognize it, and to talk with us and walk with us as we shoulder it, perhaps we should do something of the same for those hurting around us. Alma 7 suggests that He sought to understand our pain before He sought to heal it. So we should seek to comprehend the suffering of others before we offer them answers. Compassion comes before preaching, understanding before healing.

And, beyond the communication and the compassion, we need to remain present in that pain, doggedly, persistently present. This part of the Restoration's lessons reminds me of an experience I had in my ecclesiastical life. About two years ago I was meeting with a man in dire circumstances, a man who was working desperately to keep a family and a life intact. He had grown up in a home with a mother suffering from a bi-polar condition, making his childhood very difficult, and now his wife had been diagnosed with a mental illness. In the course of trying to provide some comfort and support, I asked him what his church family had done, or hadn't done, or could do to help families like his. He said something in response that has been seared into my memory. He told me that they encountered an endless string of well-meaning and energetic church leaders who would take it upon themselves to try to fix their family. They would pour resources of time and effort and material assistance for a week or two or a month or two until they began to realize that the problems were not going to be fixed. There was no way to fix the intractability of mental illness through a service project or a blessing. As the unending persistence of their problems became apparent to their ward leaders, they gradually lost sight of and contact with these Saints. After recounting this experience my friend looked up at me and said, "You know, we weren't really looking for someone to fix our problems. We just needed someone to walk our road with us."

That is precisely what the Restoration promises but of which we too often lose sight: A God and a community to walk the road with us. Perhaps of all the resources the Restoration offers to us for dealing with the problem of pain, among the most important is the community that comes with the kingdom, a place where our suffering can be shared and in the sharing be rendered redemptive. One of the reasons the pioneer story resonates so strongly with us that it is a narrative of shared pain and Exhibit A of what the community of Saints can see themselves through when we really take seriously the charge to mourn with those that mourn. I cannot convey to you the depth of my gratitude for such a community, perhaps especially for one that comes out of the early nineteenth century, when a new ethos of individual rights and the new imperatives of a market economy began to make such communities ever more unlikely.

And I am grateful for the fact that this same community has encouraged me in the study of history, and that entities like the Maxwell Institute support the pursuit of historical knowledge. One of the reasons I have come to see my academic work as a historian as sacred is that it enables, and even forces, me to understand the historic pains that those around me carry. As William Faulkner wrote of the pain of history, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." We live with the consequences of history, and many of those consequences come in the form of open sores. We dismiss them at our peril and we must handle them the way God taught us in the Restoration: with robust communication, with a prioritized concern for empathy, and with a dogged determination to be present with each other.

Sometimes academic historians get criticized for telling history as if it were one long train of abuses and miseries. Certainly it wasn't that. There is much, much to celebrate and value from the past. But like a sorrowing soul that carries the wounds of their youth, wounds that sometimes make even the most basic of relationships nearly impossible now, so our world is full of communities that carry such pain. If we are to work heal this world—which is what I understand to be the disciples' task—we need to be serious about understanding and addressing its wounds. God himself, the God of the Restoration, set our example for such a thing.

Of that I have a witness. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.