

“O Lord, My God”

Sheldon Lawrence

Joseph Smith’s dying words have always intrigued me. I like them, in part, for what they don’t say. The expression lacks a verb and thus neither asks nor confesses nor praises nor questions. It is not a plea for extended life or safety. It is not the dying command of a captain to attack or take cover. We find no last instructions to the Saints or final declaration of love and loyalty. But rather as the hot lead balls tore through the prophet’s body, as he staggered at the window’s edge and fell into the tragic fulfillment of his last prophecy, Joseph used his last breath to call out the simple but holy words “O Lord, my God.”

“Daddy? . . . Daddy? . . . Daddy? . . .” It was Isaac, my three-year-old son. I was in charge of putting him to bed, and he was beginning to get nervous. It was a new house filled with strange shadows in nooks and closets that he had not yet explored. The golden light of late fall had faded quickly into dusk, and it was that time in the evening when the house reaches its darkest point before someone finally thinks to turn on the lights. He was nervous, for he knew he would soon be in his room alone with the shadows. He was old enough now that his imagination was filling the empty closets with monsters of various shapes and sizes.

“Daddy? . . . Daddy? . . .” Lately he had taken to repeating this word as if it were a mantra. He had discovered the power of language—the power of words—to provide comfort against the darkness.

“What, Isaac?” I answered, making yet one more effort to get him to articulate his desire. “Are you hungry?” As soon as I made my presence known, as soon as he knew I was listening, he did not make a request but simply changed his tone to one of satisfaction. But when my attention drifted, he returned to the pleading, “Daddy?” until my mind was with

him again. His only request, it seemed, was that my open ear receive his voice in his moment of fear—not a plea for help but for nearness.

Once I was fully with him, he approached bedtime with a kind of brave resignation. Like a soldier suiting up for battle, he held my knees for balance as he put on his “jammies” one leg at a time. We proceeded with the nightly routine of going potty and filling the sippy cup. He would go willingly as long as certain precautions were taken, certain protocols followed. The nightlight would have to be turned on, the closet door shut. His bed became like an Egyptian tomb filled with earthly treasures—toys, stuffed animals, books—that would accompany him on his journey.

And he filled the empty room with the sound of his own words. His small chattering voice echoed in the hollow room, for pictures had not yet been hung. He was more afraid than usual. I think he sensed fear in me—sensed that something had been bothering me. I had learned of a recent death in the ward, and I kept thinking about it at unexpected times. A young family had just buried their six-year-old boy after a six-month battle with cancer. I didn’t know his name. I had heard that he loved horses and four wheelers and his little brother. I had seen his father in sacrament meeting staring into the distance with red, swollen eyes. I had heard his mother bear her testimony and almost not make it through.

The news bothered me—it interrupted me. For I had been living the life of an immortal, a life of eternal progression: a new job, a new house, young children. My faith was the faith required for new ambitious beginnings, not the equally important faith required for endings.

So I was quieter than usual as I tucked Isaac into his covers and knelt by his bed to tell a story. The dim nightlight cast irregular shadows across the empty room, and blinds that would not close entirely let the light of dusk seep in through the cracks and pour onto the walls. I let him tell most of the story, giving him prompts and letting him fill in the blanks.

Once upon a time, there was a little boy named Isaac who was walking through the forest when suddenly he saw a . . . *great big waterfall*. What was the waterfall made out of? *Chocolate milk*. Did Isaac swim in the waterfall? *No he just kept going in the forest and then all the sudden he saw a big, giant cave.*

His eyes are wide with excitement at the good fortune of finding a cave. A cave has so many possibilities. It could contain monsters or fortunes or both. There is a touch of fear in his eyes as he thinks about the possibilities. I think of when he was a newborn, when *I* was afraid of the possibilities. For when I first looked into his squinting, puzzled eyes, I did not think of the miracle of new life or the love of God, as some had told me I would. I thought of death. I knew that by creating a life I had also created a death.

I felt guilty that I could not shake this morbid thought, so I concealed it, buried it like a secret sin as I received balloons and handshakes from well-wishers who were trying to figure out, of all things, whose eyes the child had. I acted the part of a proud father, but inwardly I was terrified. It was as if by creating a child I had recklessly partaken of a different kind of forbidden fruit. Unlike Adam, who brought death and sin into a world of innocence, I had brought innocence into a world of death and sin. What had I done by bringing into the world a life whose joys and misfortunes were now inextricably entwined with my own?

It is a failing, my inability to feel love without also feeling an equal and opposite pang of sadness and fear. It indicates my lack of faith and hope. This sadness occurs in almost the very instant of love, as frighteningly swift as thunder follows lightning. It was probably for this same reason that I didn't at first call my firstborn by his name. I instead called him, to the chagrin of his mother, “the boy” or “man cub.” I still had mixed feelings about naming him after the boy who, for reasons debated by countless philosophers and theologians, almost did not grow into a man. In naming him Isaac had we unwittingly called upon some cosmic irony to test us as Abraham? Had we made it too easy for God to teach us a lesson in faith?

A big, giant cave? Then what happened? *I went inside it and there was a great big bear inside. But he was a nice bear and gave me candy. And he was just a nice bear, and we built a fire and put sticks into it.*

As I stroke his messy hair, he looks at me with the faith that I can save him from anything that might happen in this story—a story we are inventing together—a story with an unknown ending. I realize just how much he is in me and I am in him and how we will never be the same. A deep love surges like lightning followed quickly by the thunder of doubt and fear. The story is too uncertain with too many unknowns.

An image flashes in my mind of a young family surrounding the bed of a pale, sickly child. They are saying goodbye, and, because he asked them, they are doing their best to tell him what heaven might be like. They are full of love and anger and hope and fear as they stand at the precipice of a window's edge and look down into uncertainty. And for a moment, while Isaac continues to talk of imaginary adventures, I become unhinged—adrift in a sea of sadness and fear until as if by instinct the right words—holy words—enter my mind like an outstretched hand to keep me from drowning in the tempest. *O Lord, my God.*

This essay by Sheldon Lawrence (lawrences@byui.edu) won first place in the *BYU Studies* 2006 personal essay contest.