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Never Static, Never Simple: One Woman's Conversations Within the Marginalia of *If Truth Were a Child*

Author(s): Amanda Colleen Brown

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**NEVER STATIC, NEVER SIMPLE:
ONE WOMAN’S CONVERSATIONS
WITHIN THE MARGINALIA OF
*IF TRUTH WERE A CHILD***

Amanda Colleen Brown

Review of George B. *Handley*, *If Truth Were A Child: Essays*, (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2019), 253 pp. \$19.99 (paperback).

Abstract: *George B. Handley challenges his readers to reevaluate conventional definitions of truth and the approaches they employ to define their own truths. He argues that the individual quest for truth should include as many available resources as possible, whether those resources are secular or religious. His framework of intellectual and religious experience allows him to discuss truth in the context of literary theory and of the events that shaped his own faith. My review focuses on four themes: balancing experience and learning, balancing the individual and the community, balancing answers and faith, and balancing individual readings of holy texts. Ultimately, Handley’s discussion of those themes gives readers the tools to navigate the current public discourse more effectively, empowering them to look beyond their own perspectives to discover the good in everyone and find balance in their lives.*

When I approach a *Living Faith* volume,¹ I expect to have a conversation with the author, to meet his views with my own. When writing a review, I want to answer his personal thoughts with my own. While this creates a less formal review, I think it speaks more to the heart of a series dedicated to living faith.

1. *Living Faith* is the name of a series of books published by Maxwell Institute, announced in January 2014. Handley’s volume is the latest in this series.

While reading this book, one word kept appearing in my margins on almost every page: תָּאָל, translated “to balance.”² I first came across the word in a Modern Hebrew lecture but learned about its larger etymology in an Akkadian seminar later in the term. The word for *intelligent* or *wise* in Akkadian is *uznu*, which is also the word for *ear*,³ signifying the ancient belief that the ears balanced the head just as wisdom balances one’s actions. This image appropriately describes how I came to Handley’s material. I am a Latter-day Saint, a scholar, a Millennial, a dancer, and approximately 1,002 other things. My life and the things I identify with are a continuous balancing act. I am not unique in this; in fact, the universality of balancing the parts that make up the whole is foundational to the book. In discussing Handley’s work, I have chosen to focus on four main themes in which the individual is expected to balance in various capacities. While something of the individual essay structure is lost in this, I believe the book should be taken as a whole.

Throughout this volume, when Handley refers to truth, he is either referring to knowledge and information gleaned from study or to “religion’s revealed truths” (xiii). He argues for the enlargement of both, either through more study or revelation and experience. He broadly characterizes truth not as a “fact or a thing” but as “experiences and relationships that teach us love.” He explains that “Truth is no trophy in our glass case or award framed on our wall. Its value isn’t in possessing it . . . truth’s value is manifest by the love we muster to build relationships in its pursuit” (83). From this perspective, truth is less about obtaining information and understanding or choosing a side of the polemics that endlessly confront us and more about how individuals act on what they believe.

The value of viewing truth through this perspective is best explained by the author’s editorialization on the judgment of Solomon (1 Kings 3:16–28). Two prostitutes come before Solomon asking for a ruling regarding their dispute. They live together with their babies, but one of the babies dies in the night. Both mothers claim the living baby is her own. Solomon shockingly rules that the baby be cut in half, ensuring that both mothers have a share of the living baby, while simultaneously ensuring both lose their babies. The false mother rejoices over this ruling, preferring the true mother have nothing instead of having something she cannot. The real

2. Shmuel Bolozky, *501 Hebrew verbs: fully conjugated in all the tenses in a new easy-to-learn format alphabetically arranged by root* (Barron’s Educational Series, 1996), 7-8.

3. Martha T. Roth, et al., *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2010), 20:362.

mother is desperate that her child live, even if it is not with her, so the child can be a whole human with potential to grow into an adult. She would not have him forever crystalized in one stage. Solomon recognizes the true mother from this response, and the baby is given to her.

After recounting this story, Handley asks, “with how much more care and humility would we speak and act if the truth were not the result of some game of words or a battle of wills, but a flesh-and-bone living child, a living soul?” (105). What if we treated truth as a living entity capable of transforming from toddler to mature adult? Asking readers to reform their conceptualization of truth from the facts they first learned into an entity that should undergo constant transformation offers a process by which truth is enlarged to match experience. This creates a space in which personal bias and agenda are continuously under scrutiny and therefore unable to mask as truth. Viewing truth as a child — ever-changing, yet still unconditionally cared for — allows readers to open themselves to a transformative process rather than a static event that ends in a premature death.

Balancing Experience and Learning

Handley indicates his thesis in the following language:

I believe that the humanities are not just an adornment but are essential to our spiritual lives, and by that I also mean that intellectual and spiritual growth need to occur in at least some relation to one another. However, neither religion nor the humanities can have the greatest impact and best influence in our lives without three crucial ingredients: criticism, compassion, and charity. These things often work together but sometimes get separated, and when they do, the quality of our intellectual and spiritual lives suffers. (36)

Throughout his book, Handley openly discusses the experiences in his life that have promoted faith while simultaneously citing authors he academically values. This method produces essays both deeply personal and grounded in academic discourse. The first two chapters explore his approach to Christianity and specifically the Latter-day Saint faith and his reasons for attributing value to them in his personal life. As a religious Millennial, I greatly identified with his exploration into the merits of religious tenets.

Explaining his reasoning for adhering to his Latter-day Saint faith, Handley states, “I didn’t choose the religion for cultural or political

reasons ... I didn't choose it because Latter-day Saints are my tribe or because my identity is that of a Latter-day Saint. I chose it because I believe it" (xiii). By framing the motivation behind his faith, he creates a framework from the outset where the reader can expect him to allude to the experiences that shaped his faith in one sentence and discuss literary theory in the next.

Personally, I found this mix of experience and training not only refreshing but healthy. In categorizing our learning as either spiritual or academic and therefore compartmentalizing the two as inherently separate, we run the risk of allowing one to outpace the other. In creating a space where experience grows from intellectual accomplishment, and intellectual accomplishment grows from lived experiences, the individual opens up to a holistic learning process in which faith and secular pursuits constantly create and reform beliefs.

Balancing the Individual and the Community

Handley's discussion on the individual's role within a global community throughout the book begins by posing questions every faithful person must ask: "How can I espouse beliefs that are universal while still remaining tolerant, patient, and appreciative of the truths espoused by others? How can I espouse beliefs and testify of their veracity while also acknowledging that the truth of God is always greater than our understanding of him?" (29). These are questions that sink to the heart of the matter of truth because they acknowledge that belief in universal ideas must interact with the broader community. As such, the believer must carefully consider his or her faith's espoused truths, seeking to better understand them within the context of the diversity of human history.

Handley opens this discussion with an outline of what Christianity means to him as a believer and builds upon his reasoning for espousing its revealed truths throughout his essays. He states that belief in Christ should not be characterized as intolerance or fanaticism but as a moral obligation in every relationship. He puts it this way: "I believe I am morally obligated to try to heal, to bring joy, and to do good. This is what amounts to bringing others to Christ, to whatever extent they are willing or interested" (24). This approach is appealing because it creates a common ground for every interaction. Instead of a conversation centered on specific ideologies, the focus shifts to allowing others to accept the amount of truth they are prepared for in order to share one's faith. This can manifest through acts of service, a powerful testimony, or a friendly conversation between neighbors. Of course, dedication to the set of beliefs one espouses plays

an integral part in adhering to said beliefs, but when being right becomes more important than loving, serving and striving to heal, and bringing joy to others, one must refocus motives toward Christ.

Handley also explains why he adheres to the Latter-day Saint faith, citing the unique perspectives on personal revelation, missionary work, and temple work as particularly important to him. Of the first he states, “From personal experience, I have learned that the Lord grants me higher understanding to the degree I am willing to improve my life and rethink my assumptions. Revelation, in other words, is never independent of my willingness to change” (11). He then explains that for him, personal revelation invites change and checks his convictions to make sure they are “as close to God’s truths as they can be” (18). Personal revelation is then a way of drawing closer to truth in the very fact that it may make the individual question his or her previous outlook on the topic/circumstance to which it pertains, precisely because God’s thoughts are not the thoughts of humans (see Isaiah 55:8, 9).

Handley’s reflections on missionary and temple work also resonated with me. As a student of the humanities, I am wary of practices that have the appearance of colonialism. Do we rely too heavily on our own “ethnic stor[ies]” (21) to elevate our beliefs above our faith? In his discussion on missionary work, Handley wrote of his own experience with this question, concluding:

I wish people today could appreciate what it means for young people to walk in the streets among all kinds of people, to eat and talk and live as they do in humility and simplicity and to learn life on their terms, to speak to them in their homes, and to work to earn their trust not because the missionaries have something to gain from them but because they only hope for the people’s deeper happiness. (26)

By framing the desire to share the beliefs one holds sacred on the terms of the other person, Handley presents a path by which feelings of superiority are cowed by experience and love. Temple work only adds to this. As a religion, we are not satisfied in only asking those around us if what we believe to be true can add to what they already believe. No, we ask it of our dead as well. In this, “the zeal of a missionary is balanced by the patience of a temple worker” (30). Our beliefs do not have to be accepted at the edge of the sword, as it were. We believe in giving people time to search out truth for themselves, so much so that the time for seeking truth extends beyond the grave.

Dovetailing this discussion, Handley reminds us that “Although your stories are different from mine, yours are just as idiosyncratic” (35). He advocates charity for each other while each of us comes to truth under our own specific circumstances and in our own times. He also urges the use of as many resources in our search for truth as we have at our disposal, be they academic, cultural, artistic, or religious. He says, “When the faithful disciple engages deeply ... and emerges with a changed, reoriented, and enlarged vision of human experience, the humanities prove integral to the ongoing restoration of all things ... consecrated learning becomes a poetics of the Restoration” (62). Pursuing the line of inquiry the humanities have established is essential to the gospel because it is what provides the stimulus for personal revelation.

Balancing Community and Leadership

The emphasis on growing truth as a community naturally leads to a discussion regarding the institution and the concept of institutional perfection. Handley argues for a balance of responsibility between the institution and those who interact with it. He says:

There are certainly examples in church history of when church leaders have been wrong about one issue or another. If I were to see them as the spiritual equivalent of superheroes who have categorically superior character, superior intelligence, and superior and unassailable wisdom on all topics, then this stance would imply that the blessings and opportunities of discipleship are intended for only an elect few, which would diminish my belief in my own chances for improvement and growth. If I believe I see their weaknesses, my responsibility is to do what I can to keep working where I have the most direct influence to make the church as effective as it can be for others. This is for me more important than my judgement of the leaders or my efforts to identify discrepancies between gospel ideals and institutional culture or practice.” (151)

He later notes that while it is easy to blame the institution, the complexity of human beings and individual reactions to it require more introspection than simply laying the blame at the feet of leaders. We are all responsible for pain and must become better, patiently waiting on the development of the revelation we have. The institution is not perfect, which would be problematic if we were loyal to the institution. Instead the institution is merely the structure that unites our loyalties. We are all

equal in the ability to receive individual revelation and are all, therefore, complicit in fostering and carrying out the community structure we hope to be part of.

Balancing Answers and Faith

In approaching truth and knowledge, Handley asks: What is knowledge worth to us? What do we wager? How far are we willing to pursue truth to find meaning in it? These questions reminded me of the sentiment expressed in the September 2017 article “How a free canvas tote became a bigger status symbol than a \$10,000 Hermès bag.” The author suggested that a *New Yorker* tote bag, free with a subscription, telegraphed to the subscriber’s community that she appreciates cultural literacy and is willing to pay a premium for knowledge.⁴ While the search for truth extends beyond a free tote, using it as a status symbol physically indicates the wearer’s search for truth as an aesthetic element and aptly illustrates truth as a form of currency. More fundamentally, is truth worth skimming Wikipedia articles as consumers, or is it worth our time, patience, research, and attention?

The balance we are discussing here is so difficult because finding immediate answers to our questions and believing there’s enough of an answer to give the process time are different methods often conflated into one. How comfortable are we in *not* understanding the whole of something all at once but then easily grasping an answer to the next question? Yet Handley argues that having patience and trust in coming to a full understanding of truth is imperative. He says, “I am wary of easy or superficially logical explanations that try to make facile sense of things that do not deserve superficiality but instead require time and patience and faithful waiting” (163). Finally, the most uncomfortable balance of all may be between having answers and having none at all. Balancing these aspects of devotion and doubt are essential to all people who seek faith.

Balancing Reading Holy Texts

Handley’s writing revolves around the premise that obtaining a meaningful understanding of truth is not a trivial matter. Applying this to scriptural literacy, he advocates a reimagining of truth found in “likening” the scriptures and a renewed commitment to the pursuit of

4. Leslie Albrecht, “How a free canvas tote became a bigger status symbol than a \$10,000 Hermès bag,” *MarketWatch*, September 9, 2017, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/how-a-free-canvas-tote-became-a-bigger-status-symbol-than-a-10000-hermes-bag-2017-09-01>.

truth. Arguing for an approach of duality, where the reader perpetually glances back, balancing history lost with revealed present truth, he encourages literary discernment in sacred reading.

Drawing heavily from Jacobs and Ricoeur, Handley also reimagines the process of reading scripture and the risks inherent to it. Instead of relying on the too-often oppositional reader response and historical critical methods, he advocates a reading in which participants imagine themselves into the text, and he provides examples of what such readings can accomplish throughout the book, connecting them to our own interpretative history.

Most notably, this method is outlined in Handley's reading of 2 Nephi 27 and its "narrativized metaphor" (203) of Isaiah 29's reference to a sealed book. In this passage, Nephi takes a text he feels a connection with and reads himself and his people into it, expanding it to fit his prophetic vision and experience. Just as Nephi saw both the original meaning and an expanded meaning in his editorialization, he thinks that we, too, are supposed to see the sealed book as a prophecy about Martin Harris's failed meeting with Charles Anthon *and* as an allegory about the pitfalls one experiences after he or she has rejected revelation (203–205). Expanded readings like these are why the Holy Ghost is a necessary tool for reading scripture in that he provides discernment.

While I agreed with Handley's ultimate conclusions, his process exhibited my primary disagreement with the book. Having previously argued that Nephi's reinterpretation is intrinsically connected to the original meaning of Isaiah 29, I feel Handley missed much of how Nephi read himself into the quoted text by forgoing an analysis that accounted for the original context of the Isaiah passage, which he skipped over entirely.⁵ Unlike Isaiah's voices crying from the dust, who have no medium to communicate beyond the grave, Nephi's voices are encapsulated in a book then given life through the efforts of a medium translator. Reading context into passages allows the reader to fully appreciate the extent to which the new metaphor encapsulates the original meaning.

I value Handley's proposed system because it provides a reading framework for those who are intimidated by the black hole that is historical critical theory. I love accounts of the wrestle one has with the narrative and how it can connect the individual to the divine. However, I worry that without a very basic framework of historical and cultural

5. Amanda Colleen Brown, "Out of the Dust: An Examination of Necromancy as a Literary Construct in the Book of Mormon," *Studia Antiqua* 14, no. 2 (January 2016), 27-37, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1237&context=studiaantiqua>.

knowledge, the reader will not reach “the moment of transfer from the seemingly ahistorical space of a sacred meaning into our own history” (200), simply because he or she lacks the foundation to go from one point to the next. I agree there is a time and place for an almost mystic reading of oneself into the text and have personally greatly benefitted from it. Such readings are what draw me into holy texts, making them my own, making them Divine. Such readings do not inform my understanding of what the text says in and of itself. My academic training does that. For me, it’s a balance.

Conclusion

The author ends the book on a larger note, discarding the narrative of self-made blessings for a system in which grace is life itself. He says, “Appreciation of life’s glory comes at a cost: one must forsake a will to control and the expectation of a desired outcome” (240). By broadening the definition of grace, life’s meaning becomes less centered on a path paved with blessings received from commandments kept aright and more about the substance of a life lived as “a plotless poem” (241). Releasing ourselves from the narrative that commandments lived entitle us to grace frees us to more fully explore grace as something ineffable, something that cannot be wielded as a weapon to control our individual destinies.

As a final personal reflection, a quote that often has sprung to mind when I contemplate truth is, “there is no right or wrong, but thinking makes it so.”⁶ While this line is deeply ironic, coming from a prince whose entire character motivation revolves around his conviction that he sees his father’s ghost, I find it an apt characterization of the perils and pitfalls one faces when undertaking a serious quest for truth. Handley’s reminder that thinking is far less important than doing good and acting upon grace counteracts the idea that truth can be decided in a split-second decision set against conflicting data points. I wish to live in a world where building community through common ground is not just lauded as an ideal but is a reality. Reflecting upon ways in which we all can look beyond our own perspectives and find the good in everyone, Handley has outlined a path through the current public discourse. Treating truth as an entity in a constant state of development, Handley asks us to build upon what we believe together, to create common ground.

6. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2.

Amanda Colleen Brown is a graduate student in Bible and the Ancient Near East at The Hebrew University at Jerusalem, where she focuses on Akkadian, modern Hebrew, and Israelite popular religion as it relates to women's narratives. She previously graduated from Brigham Young University with a bachelor's degree in Ancient Near Eastern Studies. She is also passionate about a variety of dance styles, literature, and travel.