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## A Long Consequential Journey

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## A Long Consequential Journey

Susan Elizabeth Howe

First Nephi is the part of the Book of Mormon Latter-day Saints read most often; each time we are admonished to read this scripture, we start over at the beginning. Human nature being what it is, many of us have read 1 Nephi four or five times for every time we've completed Mormon, Ether, and Moroni. We can recite "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents" from memory, and we know the stories of Lehi and his family leaving Jerusalem, Nephi and his brothers returning to get the brass plates from Laban, Nephi's broken bow, and the bad brothers' rebellions. These stories have conflict, heroes, and villains in the best narrative fashion; they engage the imagination of children as well as adults.

And there is an epic dimension to the story of Lehi and his family, a joyful story in that they undertake a perilous journey into the unknown—first into the wilderness and then across a vast uncharted ocean—and arrive at "a land of promise," a land "choice above all other lands." But it is a tragic story in that it chronicles the disintegration of a family into warring peoples who fight against each other for over a thousand years in the pattern of so many of the children of Adam and Eve.

I have been studying these chapters from a very different perspective than in the past from my quiet home in Eph-

rain, Utah, or my office at BYU. I am living with my husband in London in a one-bedroom flat that rents for three hundred pounds a week, about \$1900 a month in U.S. currency. The cost of living here is astronomical. But London is also enlightening in terms of my awareness of the multitudes of people on this earth and some of their problems. The BBC television news rarely has more than one story about the United States, and that story often discusses how U.S. policy adversely affects other nations. In England we are always aware of other nations because we live alongside residents of those nations. The extensive range of the former British Empire has made Britain a multi-racial, multi-ethnic community. Walking through Kensington Gardens, we see almost as many Islamic people as Europeans, the women black ghosts in the long dark robes and head covers that hide their faces. Pick-up soccer teams of African émigrés compete on the fields. On Sundays whole communities of Indians visit with each other in Hyde Park, the women bringing comfortable chairs and carpets from their homes to make a sort of outdoor living room for their particular circle of friends, while the men stroll around the Serpentine and talk.

We are attending the Whitechapel Ward, one of the newest and smallest congregations of the London Stake, composed of people who live far to the east of central London in a working-class area formerly frequented by Jack the Ripper. This is the ward Gene and Charlotte England attended a few years ago when they were on BYU's semester abroad program, and ward members still remember the Englands with great love. Gene and Charlotte helped the Whitechapel Ward set up a Primary; none of the ward members had ever

attended Primary and so did not know what, exactly, it was or how it should work. Gene bought a large picture of Christ that could be displayed each Sunday during sacrament meeting in the elementary school assembly room that serves the ward as a chapel.

Our little ward includes only five families the church considers “traditional,” with a father, mother, and children. There are many single mothers, some of whom are so poor they can’t afford bus fare to come to Sunday services. A few members are illiterate, and they are very sensitive about others finding this out. One or two have studied with the missionaries and are learning to read and write. Most rent one room in a flat; sometimes others share that room. Only one family in our ward owns a home. Most of them have been baptized within the last ten years, and many have emigrated here from Ghana and Nigeria. It pleases me that all the men in our bishopric are black; probably about eighty-five percent of the ward members are people of color.

All these factors have influenced my reading of 1 Nephi. I have been interested in understanding how this epic story of Lehi and Sariah and their family can help the members of our ward find courage to deal with difficulties of their lives and what it might have to say to help nations negotiate and work together rather than sink to interactions based on hatred and mistrust. I have been equally interested in how this story can help me know how to live better, what national and international policies to support, and how to believe that our world has a future. After all, this story, Nephi’s account of his family, is both personal and political, individual and epic.

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## The Journey

And it came to pass that the Lord commanded my father, even in a dream, that he should take his family and depart into the wilderness.

The story begins with Lehi, who has been troubled by prophecies that Jerusalem must be destroyed and who prays to the Lord for the welfare of his people. He receives a series of visions that teach him of the coming of the Messiah to redeem the world and why Jerusalem will be destroyed. Because he joins other prophets in preaching repentance to his fellow citizens, the Jews become angry and want to take his life. So the Lord tells Lehi to leave Jerusalem to avoid the impending destruction. Their departure seems to have been abrupt; in one sentence the Lord gives his instructions, and in the next, the family abandons their home and property and departs.

This journey into the wilderness is one of the mythic elements in this story, a passage into unknown and unsafe territory. Such journeys are associated with patterns of growth and development that apply to all people in all cultures. Lehi's journey can stand as a metaphor for our own—a trek through time and space, as Mormons understand it, away from the safe home of Heavenly Parents and into the lone and dreary world where we are at risk spiritually and will die physically. In the life cycle, a youth's leaving home holds comparable trauma and terror, suggested by the fact that college freshmen are, according to psychologists, the loneliest people in the world. Marriage is another of these journeys, a destination impossible to predict even with the best plan-

ning. A new job, an illness, the birth of a child—anything that sends us into a space, literal or figurative, we have never been in and do not know how to traverse successfully—all these are the significant journeys of our lives. To travel such a path sometimes feels like releasing your hold and sliding down a snowy mountain slope without seeing the terrain you will be whizzing toward, or walking across a thousand-foot crevasse on a narrow swaying bridge. Uncertainty. Surprises. Danger. You have only your own wits to fall back on—only the will to go on despite the loss of community, of the rules and laws by which we protect and order our lives.

It seems many in the Whitechapel ward have faced very difficult journeys, literal journeys, from homes in Africa where they were people of status and regard to a dangerous neighborhood in London where they are unknown and suffer dislocation and exclusion from social systems they do not understand. One of the sisters in our ward—I'll call her Clarity; her name is that surprising—dresses particularly well. Her clothes combine contemporary fabrics and colors with traditional African styles of long draped gowns and matching head scarves. She is careful of her appearance, and I can tell that fashion and dress are important to her. She gave the Relief Society lesson a few weeks ago and demonstrated a great deal of confidence, speaking clearly and forcefully so everyone could hear. She spoke of her home in Ghana, of how in polygamous families a wife who brings in money is more valued than a wife who stays home and bears more children, of the competition between each wife and her children and the other families. She said her father was very strict with her, but she seems to have much love and re-

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spect for him. The lesson was about how mothers can contribute to harmony in the home, and she said, “Mothers are always called upon to share with their children. For example, if a mother receives a food allowance,” by which I assume she means from a government agency, “which is sufficient to feed herself but not her children as well, she will still share with her children.” This woman looks like a leader, a woman of status. She seems to have brought her clothes and her confidence with her from Ghana. Now she lives in one room shared with her daughter, and she lives on very little money. I don’t know the rest of her story—how she came into the church or why she came to London.

Brother Gnotolo (another pseudonym) came from a successful and well-educated family in Nigeria. He has siblings in Austria and the United States in professional positions or pursuing advanced degrees. While he lived in Nigeria, he joined the church and eventually became a member of the stake presidency. Somehow he lost his wife and his jewelry business failed. He tried farming, but two years in a row, just before it was time to harvest, someone came through and stole his crop, leaving him no profit for the entire year. Because of the political corruption of his home area, he has tried to establish himself in London, giving up the status he enjoyed in Nigeria to do so. He shares a room in a flat; Monday through Friday he works five hours each day in a social service agency and then another eight hours at McDonald’s. He told my husband and me he was drawn to the church because of the simplicity of its doctrines and services and because everyone in the ward is equal, because the church doesn’t try to establish a hierarchy of members.

The journey of this sister and brother seem very difficult to me, far more challenging than anything I have had to bear. Sister Clarity and Brother Gnotolo cannot expect life to be fair to them. I wonder how much hope they have of learning a trade that will enable them to better provide for themselves or of getting a job that is commensurate with the education and experience they already have.

It seems to me the journey of Lehi and his family might be useful to them as a spiritual guide. To leave home with a destination in mind and a plan of how to get there is one thing; to leave home with no idea of where to travel or of how to obtain food and shelter along the way would require a great deal of faith, even if the leader did assure you he had been commanded of the Lord. According to the record, of everyone in Jerusalem, only Lehi and his family had a choice. This was because he had been “obedient unto the word of the Lord” and had done “as the Lord commanded him.” Soon his family found themselves living in tents. Apparently before Sariah or her sons could come up with an argument for staying, they were whisked away into the wilderness, leaving behind their resources, their precious and beloved possessions, their security, and their home. Nephi’s record tells us that some in the family handled this jarring change better than others.

Sariah, Nephi’s account suggests, was a loyal and supportive wife. Having her own faith and spirituality, she must have received a witness of her husband’s calling and trusted his visions. The scarcity of women in the Book of Mormon suggests that women in this culture were excluded from public life, but even so, Sariah must have known the danger Lehi

was in after he called their neighbors to repentance. Love and loyalty would motivate her to accompany her husband in order to preserve his life. Sariah never objects to leaving Jerusalem until she becomes afraid that her sons have been killed on their return to retrieve the brass plates. Only then does her faith break down; only then does she question Lehi's promises and become afraid that the whole enterprise is folly. During that long uncertain time while her children are gone, I imagine Sariah praying mightily to the Lord for their safety, and when her sons return, she receives her own witness from God that their journey in the desert—and whatever that journey might bring—was God's will for them. "Now I know of a surety," she says, "that the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness." Though the narrative is rather silent about women generally, the record suggests that Sariah knows from then on that the journey is necessary, and she does all she can to help it succeed.

Nephi, also swept into the wilderness with his family, does not merely agree to his father's journey; he makes the journey his own. He says that although he is very young, he has "great desires to know of the mysteries of God" and therefore prays mightily until visited by the spirit, receiving a witness that what his father has told them is true: they need to leave Jerusalem before it is destroyed. Nephi tells his brothers of his confirmation of his father's visions. Sam believes him. Laman and Lemuel do not, so Nephi prays for them. God tells Nephi, "inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands." Therefore,

Nephi travels with purpose and the comfort of a promise. He will see his work and suffering justified, whatever he has to endure. He is taking his wife and children to a promised land where they will be blessed. Nephi was compelled to accompany his father like the rest of the family, but instead of complaining and thereby undermining the enterprise, and by turning to the Lord, he finds a way to make this journey his own.

Laman and Lemuel begin protesting before they reach the first camp, a valley with a river running through it. In that camp Lehi tries to honor and instruct his sons by naming the river Laman (“that thou mightest be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness”) and the valley Lemuel (“that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm, and steadfast, and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord”). Lehi’s strategy does not work. The elder brothers think their father is loony for dragging them away from the wealth and comfort they are accustomed to. Like many young people, the brothers seem to be in a period of rebellion against their parents and they see no evidence that Jerusalem is in any danger—no news reports of troops amassing in Babylon, no eyewitness accounts of weapons being stockpiled. Only faith and a confirmation from the Lord might convince them, but they are not in a religious phase of their lives. They think it is “foolish imagination” to claim Jerusalem will be destroyed.

They want to go home. This is their one desire, and they do everything they can to get themselves and their family back to Jerusalem, mostly by opposing the projects that lead them farther and farther away. They are not about to risk

trying to get the brass plates from Laban. They tell their father “it is a hard thing” he has required of them. It is not only dangerous, they know that if successful, it will only encourage their father in his delusion. When Nephi’s courageous “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded” shames his brothers, they make a half-hearted attempt by politely asking Laban for these important historical records. It is Nephi who suggests they offer to buy the plates with the family’s abandoned wealth. When that strategy fails and Laban has his servants try to kill the young men, Laman and Lemuel become so angry with Nephi that they beat him and Sam until an angel intervenes. I find it interesting that the angel stops the sibling boxing but does not go so far as to help them get the plates. Nephi has to complete that task by killing Laban with Laban’s own sword.

Laman and Lemuel’s next rebellion occurs when they have again seen Jerusalem. It is ironic that they take part in asking Ishmael’s family of daughters to depart with them, something in their own interest but ultimately enabling the continuation of Lehi’s plans. Nephi likely does much of the talking in Jerusalem, but as soon as they are on their way back to Lehi’s camp, Laman and Lemuel find their critical voices again. I imagine them taking Ishmael’s sons and daughters aside and saying, “Look, we don’t think our father is entirely sane. It’s crazy to think that Jerusalem is about to be destroyed. He and our fanatical brother Nephi will ruin our lives if we don’t stand up to them and go back.” In this instance, and on so many later occasions, they gossip, they whine, they complain. Over the years, only the intervention of Nephi, Lehi, their mother, and even the Lord keeps them

going with the group. Their protests become more and more violent; more than once they try to kill Nephi.

Laman and Lemuel don't make a good journey because they never claim it as their own. They do not turn to the Lord for guidance in confronting the difficult challenges they have to face. They establish no goals for themselves; their whole focus is to disrupt the journey and to condemn those who have wronged them. They have a brief period of actually trying to understand the reason for their journey, but when hardship comes along—and it certainly would be terrifying not to be able to obtain food because their bows were broken—they collapse again into rebellion. Nephi uses the word *murmur* to describe their speech. They murmur, murmur, and murmur, the word itself suggestive of its deviousness, of how it weakens and discourages the others, of how it undermines the leadership of their father.

On the other hand, the way Sariah and Nephi respond to this jarring change in their lives is a good example of how to traverse life's unexpected journeys. They turn to the Lord to learn his will. They accept what is necessary and inevitable rather than fight against it. (To find out how necessary leaving Jerusalem was, read what happened to those who remained, as recorded in 2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36.) Nephi and Sariah gain the promise of the Lord, and with that promise they create goals for themselves that bring what they are promised to pass. I am reminded of the similarity between their situation and that of Joseph, son of Jacob, after his brothers sold him into Egypt. Like Joseph, Nephi and Sariah keep up hope, focus on what they can do for their own well being, do not despair when confronted by obstacles and

setbacks, and believe in the value of their lives. They gain their strength by communing with and following the Lord.

### Division

Our younger brother thinketh to rule over us; and we have had much trial because of him; wherefore, now let us slay him, that we may not be afflicted more because of his words. For behold, we will not that he shall be our ruler: for it belongeth to us, which are the elder brethren, to rule over this people.

In considering Laman and Lemuel, it is useful to remember that Nephi is the narrator, that his brothers became his enemies, and that over the years he developed a certain perspective toward them that might not necessarily reflect their own understanding of their experience. The story they tell themselves is that they have been duped and deceived by their father and brother; deprived of their home, their possessions, and their birthright; and relegated to a sort of bondage under Nephi's power. Actually, the narrative includes considerable evidence that explains why they feel as they do.

As I have re-read the accounts of Laman and Lemuel's strong, on-going opposition to the journey, I have wondered why Lehi did not just let them go back to Jerusalem. The principle of agency would suggest that after they had been called to repentance and warned of the destruction to come, they should have had the right to choose whether or not to believe the counsel of their father-prophet. Why did he not just let them return home and bear the consequences of their actions? Was it because they might have endangered the whole enterprise by telling, under sufficient stress, where the

family had gone, bringing an army patrol out to destroy them? They surely would have been prime suspects in the death of Laban. Would they have been convicted of that crime and executed by the elders? Is that why Lehi insisted that they come along? Or was their labor necessary to provide enough manpower for the family to travel years through the wilderness, build a ship, and journey across an ocean? Or did the Lord simply require them to accompany their family so he could bless Lehi's posterity in spite of them?

Whatever the reasons, Laman and Lemuel are pushed and prodded and dragged along the whole journey, often seeming to have their agency overruled by Lehi and Nephi and an occasional heavenly visitor. In the Valley of Lemuel, the site of the first camp and the first confrontation Laman and Lemuel have with their father, Lehi speaks to them "with power, being filled with the spirit, until their frames did shake before him." Lehi confounds them, Nephi says, "that they durst not utter against him; wherefore they did as he commanded them." This seems an incident of spiritual coercion; Laman and Lemuel are forced to continue on the journey when they do not want to. Even angels of the Lord are sent to keep them in line, as in the brass plates story. The only time Laman and Lemuel are moved by pity and remorse is on the trip back to their father's camp with the family of Ishmael. After a violent argument with Nephi, they bind him and he receives the strength to break his bands; but they are about to repeat this exercise when several in Ishmael's family—his wife, a daughter, and a son—plead for Nephi, and Laman's and Lemuel's hearts are softened. Nephi says they ask his forgiveness, which must have been difficult for the headstrong young

men. Except for this one experience, the older brothers are kept in check, not by their own remorse or by catching the spirit of the journey, but by the power of God, which seems to threaten their physical well being or even their lives. After Ishmael dies and they propose killing Lehi and Nephi, “the voice of the Lord” chastens them until they repent, again requiring them to continue this journey.

Nephi becomes the focus of Laman and Lemuel’s anger because he eventually takes charge of the family. He first allies himself with their father by praying about Lehi’s visions and receiving additional revelations. Lacking spiritual conviction, the older brothers may have seen Nephi’s support of their father as a political move to gain power. Then Nephi proves himself to be the de facto leader of the group because he is the one who solves their problems (he gets the brass plates from Laban; he can interpret Lehi’s vision for his brothers; he makes a new bow and arrows and manages to save the family from starvation). As time passes and Lehi ages, Nephi assumes responsibility for both the physical and spiritual progress of the family, a fulfillment of the promise Nephi received from the Lord, that if he kept the Lord’s commandments, he would become “a ruler and a teacher over [his] brethren.” By the time they reach the land they name Bountiful, Nephi has assumed that position.

From Nephi’s perspective, he only asks his family to do what the Lord wants them to do. But Laman and Lemuel, never attuned to the Lord, decide that Nephi is ordering them around for his own purposes. For example, Nephi’s directive that they should build a ship seems to be the last straw. As they watch their younger brother begin the ship-

building process, first finding ore, making a bellows, and forging the tools necessary to construct a large ocean-going vessel, they say, “Our brother is a fool, for he thinketh that he can build a ship; yea, and he also thinketh that he can cross these great waters.” It is important to note that Nephi expects them to work and that they refuse. Obviously Nephi cannot build a ship alone. He requires the help of all the able-bodied men in his family. So once again, Nephi preaches to them, reminding them of how the children of Israel, their own ancestors, were brought out of bondage and how their own situation is like that of the exodus. He tells them how bad they are (“Ye are swift to do iniquity, but slow to remember the Lord your God”), which is particularly hard to accept from a younger sibling. When they become so angry they try to throw Nephi into the sea, the Lord manifests his power, and Nephi warns that anyone who touches him will “wither even as a dried reed.” A few days later when they touch Nephi, the Lord shocks them so powerfully that they fall down and begin to worship their younger brother. Nephi stops them: “I, Nephi, saith unto them, That they should murmur no more against their father; neither should they withhold their labor from me, for God had commanded me that I should build a ship.” And thus the brothers are required to do what Nephi orders them to do. As he is the one who has received the ship-building instructions, they are completely under his direction. Nephi really does exercise power over his brothers, and so when they claim that “he hath thought to make himself a King and a ruler over us, that he may do with us according to his will and pleasure,” they are responding to their experience of how Nephi has

actually dominated their lives. It is not unreasonable for them to assume, as they look toward the future, that he might plan to enslave them to build his promised land.

The point I am trying to make is that I think Laman and Lemuel genuinely believe what they say about Nephi and his attempts to rule over them. I believe that when they oppose Nephi and eventually attempt to kill him, they think they are preserving their rights and their lives. And yet when we read this account, because we identify with Nephi and Lehi, we dismiss Laman and Lemuel's perspective as dishonest, inauthentic, sinful, or just irrelevant. In fact, we label them as the bad brothers and do not think much of them at all. It may be that Nephi himself did not consider and did not care how his older brothers actually felt, perhaps justifiably because he had to accomplish what the Lord required of him, but also perhaps because of his human limitations.

It is, of course, true that Laman and Lemuel's forced participation in this journey kept them from suffering horrible deaths or captivity and slavery when the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and burned the city and the temple. It is also true that because Laman and Lemuel had to travel with their family, their descendants were blessed to become a great people and to live in one of the world's richest and most beautiful lands and, at various points in their history, to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. It may also be true that for some necessary ventures to succeed, opposition and dissension have to be crushed. But another of the lessons of this section of the Book of Mormon is that the suppression of people's opposition and disregard of their rights can create enmity that may last for centuries. This seems to me to be an

absolutely vital lesson to bring to bear in today's world.

To change directions for a moment, let me relate another of our London experiences. We were in Boots, the local pharmacy, looking for medicine, reading labels to see if "linctus," which came in a bottle, might compare with what we Americans call cough syrup. All at once a little boy of about five walked over and hit me and then spit on my husband, Cless. Now children everywhere go through phases when they are hellions, which we thought might account for the child's behavior, but when Cless told the child's mother what had happened she just pulled her son to her side and continued talking with the pharmacist. She did not correct him, punish him, or have him apologize. This was disturbing and annoying, and I could not get it out of my mind. For the next few days I thought of things I might have done. In my most violent fantasy, I picked up the little brat and shook him before delivering him to his irresponsible mother and asking her, "Is this how you let your child behave?" And then I began to wonder if perhaps he had not been taught by his parents (his mother was in Islamic dress) that this is how Americans deserve to be treated, if the child was acting out his mother's and father's hatred. We had, perhaps, come face to face with the fact that Americans are not universally loved.

So what does this incident have to do with my current discussion of 1 Nephi? The separation of Lehi's family into Nephites and Lamanites should teach us something about how groups of people—families, political factions, religions, nations—become enemies. If that Islamic family we encountered in Boots is, indeed, anti-American, there are probably reasons for their feelings, just as Laman and Lemuel, despite

all their complaints and eventual violence, had reasons for their mistrust of Nephi. The only way it might be possible to change those antagonisms would be, first, to learn what caused them and then not to reinforce them by hostility and anger. I wonder if what pertains on this individual level—our response to an unkind action—might pertain to nations. At least as a caution, we might consider that the stronger and more right we perceive ourselves to be, the more likely we are to focus on our own concerns and disregard those of others. We have been very clear when other nations and political factions have injured us, but we have been almost oblivious to how we have harmed the people of other nations. In the current world, it is difficult for the United States to act beyond what its leaders perceive to be in the country's immediate interest; however, from a longer perspective, it is surely in our best interest to try to understand the reasons why other people hate us and to correct what we have done wrong. Unfortunately, compassion and forgiveness are almost never factors in determining international policy. Yet to listen to and accept the perceptions of other nations about damage to their well being and safety might demonstrate our respect and encourage their trust. I do not think we can arbitrate a successful peace for ourselves or any other nation without such trust, a belief that we are aware of and working for the interests of other nations as well as our own.

#### Vision

... while my father tarried in the wilderness, he spake unto us, saying: Behold, I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision.

I am not so naïve as to imagine that our best efforts in respect to other nations and individuals will solve all our problems, from personal to international, and bring about world peace. In fact, First Nephi demonstrates that when people have different desires and different goals, they are likely to come into conflict if one side perceives its interests to be threatened. Nephi's vision of "the great and abominable church" suggests that some entities *are* great and abominable. (I would expand the notion of "church," as represented in Nephi's revelation, to include many other groups—entertainment companies, financial corporations, political factions, even nations.) We have to make judgments about who and what to support and who and what to oppose, and it is inevitable that in standing for what we feel to be right, we will make some enemies. It is important that we identify correctly whom to consider an enemy, and I don't think it is people of other faiths. Nephi specifies that the churches "which are built up to get gain, and all they which are built up to get power over the flesh, and they which are built up to become popular in the eyes of the world, and they which seek the lusts of the flesh and the things of the world, and to do all manner of iniquity" represent the interests of the devil. To expand the concept of those intent on getting "power over the flesh," we should mistrust any organization that aims to exterminate another group of people. It will not help us much to compromise with or attempt to please such groups because their actions are directly contrary to our understanding of how we should live to fulfill our destiny as children of God.

Unfortunately, self-interest and a limited understanding

may cause us to confuse the Lord's will with our own, and acting from self-interest may bring us into conflict with other good people. I think it is a dangerous practice to label one's enemies as evil. It is another aspect of human nature that when someone opposes us, we are apt to see them as entirely bad when in reality they have many good qualities and, from the perspective of the Lord, are very similar to ourselves, a combination of some noble and worthy beliefs and actions and other selfish and sinful ones. It is fortunate for us that we can look to Christ as to a great tree of life whose sheltering shade covers us all, despite our limitations and our sins.

The image that I see arcing over the entire book of 1 Nephi is Lehi's vision of the tree of life. After he has wandered a long time in a dreary waste, he comes to "a large and spacious field" and in that field beholds "a tree, whose fruit was desirable, to make one happy." Tasting the fruit, he says, "I beheld that it was most sweet, above all that I ever had before tasted. Yea, and I beheld that the fruit thereof was white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen." And, he says "it filled my soul with exceeding great joy." There are many other images and symbols in this revelation, but I find this to be the central image because it leads both Lehi and Nephi, as they attempt to understand it, to learn of Jesus Christ. After Lehi describes his vision to his family, he testifies to them that, six hundred years after their departure from Jerusalem, "a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews; yea, even a Messiah; or, in other words, a Saviour of the world." He then explains to his family that "all mankind was in a lost and in a fallen state; and ever would be, save they should rely on this Redeemer." When Nephi prays to under-

stand the meaning of his father's vision, the Spirit tells him that "after thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted, thou shalt also behold a man descending out of Heaven, and him shall ye witness; and after that ye have witnessed him, ye shall bear record that it is the Son of God." Which is what happens—Nephi sees the most beautiful tree he has ever seen, so precious and exceedingly brilliant, and then a vision of the birth of the Savior. When an angel asks if he knows the meaning of the tree, Nephi answers, "Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things . . . and the most joyous to the soul."

I am having a hard time coming up with language that will adequately describe the experience of feeling in my soul the love of Christ. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that the revelation uses a symbol or metaphor: to understand it requires us to make a comparison with what we know, and therefore as many interpretations are possible as there are ways in which the Spirit of the Lord touches our hearts and makes us feel joy. But I am reminded of this story told by Reeve Nield, a Latter-day Saint woman who started an organization called "Eyes for Zimbabwe" (online at *Canon Norway—Eyes for Zimbabwe*), which arranges to provide free cataract operations for people who live in the African bush and have gone blind because they have no access to medical care. There are no doctors in the bush who might perform this relatively simple operation. Because Reeve Nield has created this organization and raised funds to support it, and because some surgeons and other generous peo-

ple have volunteered weeks of their vacations to carry out these operations, over two thousand people who were blind can again see. What that might mean to them is represented by one elderly woman who, after her bandages were removed and her sight restored, leaped up in joy and took one of the workers by the hand to pull her outside. She said, "I want to thank you and I have nothing to give, so I will dance for you." Imagine the sheer joy and the beauty as that little old woman hummed to herself and began to move to the rhythm in her heart as she clapped her hands. This story tastes sweet to me; I feel the power of the spirit of the Lord both in the service that gave her back her sight and in her thanksgiving dance.

I do not think it is by chance that a revelation of the Savior leads both Lehi and Nephi to learn things about their extended family. Lehi compares the House of Israel to an olive tree and prophesies of branches that will be broken off and then, at a future time, grafted into the trunk of the tree again. This is the story of his own descendants. After Nephi sees Christ's birth and ministry, he tells of the future inhabitants of the American continents, particularly of the development, decline, and restoration of his descendants to the gospel of Jesus Christ. My own testimony of Christ is that to feel his spirit and to be guided by him is not constraining or limiting; to the contrary, when I most feel Christ's spirit, I am enlarged with a vision of what my gifts are and how I can use those gifts in the world to create goodness despite my weakness and limitations. Despite my sins.

The tree representing the love and sacrifice of the Savior extends to Lehi and all his family, including the bad broth-

ers, Laman and Lemuel. Although these two never seem to be able to understand the love of God—in Lehi’s vision they never partake of the fruit—still, they are blessed with many of the same blessings Nephi is blessed with. Despite their contrariness, they are among those who are guided through the wilderness to a beautiful and promising land. They are blessed with a great posterity. Many of their descendants learn the gospel and come to believe in Jesus Christ. Because they are more righteous than the Nephites, in over two thousand years their descendants are not destroyed and God identifies them as a remnant of the House of Israel. The vision of Christ is greater than the division between the Lamanites and Nephites; through Christ’s gospel and sacrifice, they are healed, literally brought together into one people when Christ visits them on the American continent after his resurrection. Two thousand years later, in London, England, it is of great comfort to me to consider that Christ’s love reaches its branches over not only the Nephites and Lamanites but also over Brother Gnotolo, Sister Clarity, my family and me, and all the nations of our complex, decaying world. Worthy or not, Christ’s love shelters us, and the white, precious fruit is there to be tasted by us all.