Final statement –f2020

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There is, at this time a year, a certain buzz about campus, an odd mix of pent up frustration of grades, coursework, and the looming finals with a certain Christmas joy. I look forward to this point in the semester, hopeful that the mountain of grading, writing, and course preparation will fade soon enough in the distant past, something akin to Lucy’s entrance into the Wardrobe and the enchantment of the world ahead of her. And yet, while like you I look forward to lazy Christmas snowstorms and long conversations over warm cups of hot chocolate with family and friends (over zoom, perhaps), we can’t let this moment slip by without asking a few questions of ourselves and this endeavor in this class over the past 14 weeks.

To start, let me say that I am so deeply overjoyed that our semester lasted in person far longer than I ever expected it might. You, and a very committed university team, took care of one another and helped make this semester a success. We should remember that this moment is one that we can and must draw strength from now and in the future. Though there have been tremendous losses and tragedies, we are getting through this together. My hope is that that lesson, the strength of unity and strength of compassion (coupled with medical heroes who have expended energy and care and sacrifice)—never be forgotten as we move forward. During times of incredible divisiveness, I’ve been impressed with people who cared, with people who looked out for other first, and for those who offered safety to complete strangers.

No doubt, this class may have been very different from what you expected or it may have been exactly what you expected. At the end of the day, my concern over grades is certainly less than yours, given our vantage points and relative proximity to the work that has generated those grades. Your sweat, your tears, and your ability to push through one more arduous reading, or one more paper, makes your vantage point personal and suggests a kind of investment that should not be ignored or downplayed. Each of you should be lauded for commitment to the process and the result. It is just this investment that poses firm, sincere questions to you and to me: “Just what have we been doing over the past 14 weeks?” and “What have I learned?”

My hope is that in some small way this course helps you to see the world from a new, different vantage point than you did previous to joining World Religions here at Brigham Young University. BYU, with its special mission and aims to “assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life” by providing an education that is (1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to lifelong learning and service” ought to be a testing ground for how our education can influence later lives. Indeed, as a student here myself many years ago, I was prompted to think outside of my narrow perspective and see where good existed in the world, even while I stood in the Wilkinson Center, and, with many friends, fellow students, and faculty, watched the twin Towers collapse on 9/11.

It is all too easy to become preoccupied with negativity and the degraded nature of society today – doing so leads us toward an insular perspective rather than an embracing, fellowshipping, industrious, and productive one. My hope is, that as we have studied Judaism, Hinduism, Taoism, Shinto, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and others, you have found reason to see a little more how God sees. He calls all of his children back to him and desires that all of us find our way through this life. As the scriptures teach: “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” (Moses 1:39)

The British theologian, Alistair McGrath once commented on the importance of perspective: He wrote about another scholar’s (John Mackey) way of thinking about how perspective changes approach. McGrath draws upon his use of a balcony as an apt metaphor for helping us see why we need to step-back for a minute, especially in moments of suffering and turmoil, to see the world anew.

By the Balcony . . . I mean that little platform in wood or stone that protrudes from the upper window of a Spanish home. There the family may gather for an evening to gaze spectator-wise upon the street beneath, or at the sunset or the stars beyond . . .

By the Road, I mean the place where life is tensely lived, where thought has its birth in conflict and concern, where choices are made and decisions are carried out. It is the place of action, of pilgrimage, of crusade, where concern is never absent from a wayfarer’s heart. One the Road a goal is sought, dangers are faced, life is poured out.

Why this metaphor? McGrath draws on:

Which of these two perspectives – the Balcony and the Road, the attitude of the observer and the participant – is the more important? . . . “Truth is found upon the Road. It might even be said that only when a man descends from the Balcony to the Road, whether of his own free will, or because he has been pitched from it by providential circumstances, does he begin to know what reality is. The true place of the Christian faith is the Road. Those on the Road are facing real issues, and have to make real decisions which will affect their future and their welfare. Those on the Road cannot know what lies over the brow of the next hill, or what awaits them around the next bend. They are like people walking in the dark, and on their own.

By contrast, those on the Balcony are spared the indecision and bewilderment so often experienced by those below them, who are wondering where the Road ahead of them leads, and how likely they are to get to their intended destination. . . . At its worst, the Balcony approach involves merely noticing other people suffering. . . . But it need not be like this. Those high above the Road on the Balcony could be of help to those on the road – above all, if they were fellow travelers, engaged on the same journey. For at its best, the Balcony perspective can be profoundly helpful.

Let me help you see where you are (from my vantage point) – This course is designed to promote an ecumenical sense of God’s work in the world. Ecumenical not in the sense of abandoning the pillars and foundations that members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints hold most dear – but rather combining those with a greater sense of how expansive God’s love truly is for all humanity. I hope you see through the various scriptures and sacred texts that we’ve read together elements of truth that testify to those truths that you hold near and dear and are at the heart of your relationship with a loving Heavenly Father. I hope you will hear in the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel something that draws you forward:

Human faith is never final, never an arrival, but rather an endless pilgrimage, a being on the way. We have no answers to all problems. Even some of our sacred answers are both emphatic and qualified, final and tentative; final within our own position in history, tentative—because we can only speak in a tentative language of man.

Heresy is often a roundabout expression of faith, and sojourning in the wilderness is a preparation for entering the promised land.”

While we claim eternal truth, let us not be so tied to exclusive truth, but rather look for God’s hand in all things and in all places, among all people. I hope that all of us will eventually ask, and answer for ourselves in our specific way: “Just what is God doing with all of his children, and how can I help?” You see, we need to employ a bit more Ammon in our lives when he said:

Now my brethren, we see that God is mindful of every people, whatsoever land they may be in: yea, he numbereth his people, and his bowels of mercy are over all the earth. (Alma 26:37)

For 14 weeks, in this class, we’ve joined together on the balcony, getting periodic glimpses of how God’s work is playing out globally – we’ve read and thought about culture, politics, theology, and practice as ways of recognizing distant shapes on the horizon. And, with this, you may have a broader perspective than you had earlier. And whatever glimpses we have gained in this class and at BYU more broadly, we now must go back to the street. I don’t know which streets you end up on or pass through tomorrow or in the future, but I do know this: because you have some glimpse of the horizon fixed in your memory, you now must be one who can help those on the street (because we are all, truly) on the street in our daily walk and talk. My hope is that you will take a minute and sit back and ask yourself the question “What have I learned and what will I take away?” More importantly, and I’ll end with this: “What will I now do to among my fellow travelers as I suffer alongside them, as I choose to mourn with them, pray for them, and they with me?”

Thank you for a truly wonderful semester, you’ve pushed me and encouraged me to do more and be better. More importantly, you have helped me see many new vistas from the balcony and the street. May you be blessed in all you do.