

## ***“Seekers Wanted”***

Steven C. Harper

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For further information write:

BYU Women’s Conference 253 Harman Continuing Education Building Provo, Utah 84602

801-422-7692 E-mail: [womens\\_conference@byu.edu](mailto:womens_conference@byu.edu) Home page:

<http://womensconference.byu.edu>

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The Lord can pack a lot into a little verse. Three times in the thirty-six words of D&C 88:118, the Lord commands Latter-day Saints to seek:

“And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”

The Lord not only tells us what to seek (learning and words of wisdom), but why (because we don’t yet have sufficient faith) and how (diligently and cooperatively, by study *and also* by faith). And he tells us where to seek (out of the best books).

Latter-day Saints are seekers, or ought to be. Joseph Smith’s first vision is our archetype. Speaking of the first vision in 1946, Elder John A. Widtsoe said, “we must all find truth . . . as the Prophet Joseph Smith found it in his first vision.”<sup>1</sup> He added, “it seems to me to be an epitome of the approach to all truth.”<sup>2</sup>

Elder Widtsoe said those words when and why and where he did because a new biography of Joseph Smith had just been published and it threatened to undermine Joseph’s testimony of his first vision and the saints’ faith in their first prophet. The book revealed that Joseph apparently didn’t

document his first vision until many years after it occurred, that he used a seer stone to search for buried treasure, and that he practiced plural marriage.

A group of Latter-day Saints met to discuss the book. Could it be true, they wondered? “I was somewhat startled,” one of them said, “to find that it is probably true.”<sup>3</sup> At least one of these saints felt inspired to become a better seeker because of the book. At the same time he felt frustrated by what he perceived to be a dynamic of Mormon culture. “We think we know without doing any studying,” he said, “We just repeat words. Don’t do any thinking, don’t do any questioning, don’t do any studying, don’t question anything. We don’t think we have any right to.”<sup>4</sup>

Do you feel that tension between the gospel invitation to ask whenever you lack wisdom, to seek further light and knowledge on the one hand, and cultural pressure to conform, to fear doubts, or to suppress questions on the other hand? Do you feel dissonance between the command to seek diligently because we don’t yet have enough faith and the cultural expectation to stand and declare that you know beyond any shadow of a doubt? I do. And I’m not alone.

Maybe you’re here because you do too, because you’re a seeker, or want to be? Did you chose this session because you’re feeling some tension—or love someone who is—between what you know, or think you do, or hope you do, and something you (or they) have heard, or read, or learned? Are you wondering how you can make that tension go away?

If so, you may have come to the wrong place. I lack the power to make the tension go away and am not sure that I want it to. All I can do is encourage perspective and invite persistence in applying every word of D&C 88:118. Based on my own experience, I promise that seeking makes the tension fruitful and fascinating and facilitates an environment in which faith flourishes and doubt diminishes if not disappears.

What do I mean by seeking, anyway? I mean cultivating and practicing the skills to see and to sort. Like pre-schoolers identifying colors or sorting blocks, seekers learn to see and to sort what they know from what they don't know. They learn to see from various perspectives and sort the most valid ones from the least. They also learn to see the difference between facts that are true and verifiable no matter one's perspective and assumptions that depend on one's perspective. Seekers sort facts into one pile and assumptions into another.

Then seekers decide what meaning and value to give the facts and what perspectives are most valid for interpreting them. They do all this carefully, trusting both analytical thought and spiritual feeling, not one or the other. Seekers don't think that feeling is better than thinking or vice versa. Seekers reject the false dilemma between spiritual *or* intellectual. Seekers are not cool rationalists *or* spiritually sensitive types. They are spiritually sensitive rationalists who believe that the glory of God is intelligence, that truth is light.

Seeking is done by study *and also* by faith--together, simultaneously, harmoniously. The seeker's head and heart are God-given allies, not enemies. The Lord said, "I will tell you in your mind *and* in your heart, by the Holy Ghost" (D&C 8:2). Seekers recognize that the Holy Ghost is their source of ultimate knowledge and that they have no claim on the Holy Ghost unless they think (as the Lord told Oliver Cowdery in D&C 9), unless they do the brain work of reading, remembering, and pondering. Nor can seekers expect the Spirit to confirm their findings when they neglect the spiritual work of exercising faith in Christ with a sincere heart and real intent (Moroni 10:3-5).

Let's test our basic seeking skills. Let's examine three pairs of statements and sort the facts into one pile and the assumptions into another:

### FACTS

- In 1839, Joseph testified that in 1820 he saw two divine beings who answered his prayer

- Joseph Smith said that he was employed to search for buried treasure and that he used a seer stone to do so
- Joseph Smith was sealed to many women

### ASSUMPTIONS

- Joseph must not have seen a vision in 1820 or he would have written about it when it happened
- God would not call a young man who searched for buried treasure by looking in a stone to be a prophet
- Joseph Smith must have exercised unrighteous dominion over women

With awareness that there is an important distinction, we can clearly discern the difference between facts that are true no matter our perspective, and assumptions that change depending on our perspective. Seekers hone that skill.

Let's try a more advanced exercise. This one will assess our ability see clearly how little we can see clearly. I'm going to give you a set of historical facts. They are disputed but they are well attested in historical records. Though the facts are highly unusual, I believe that the historical records that contain them are trustworthy. Part of the exercise, though, is exercising your power to deciding for yourselves how you will interpret them and what you will decide that they mean. I invite you to listen to them carefully and reverently.

Here they are:

- Early church records say that a man and a woman were engaged to be married
- Then a high ranking authority sent a message to the woman that she was to bear his child
- She became pregnant

- Then the authority told the woman's fiancé to marry the woman anyway and care for the child as his own

The fact that early church records tell this story can be perplexing, maybe downright discomfoting. Some may feel the need to justify these facts or invent a rationale to make sense of them or just reject them as untrue? Some may even feel betrayed to learn that such facts could exist in church records and yet they're only hearing the story now.

Perspective changes the way we experience this set of facts and others like it. Every set of facts like this one is a very small set, like a few pieces of a thousand piece puzzle. Only a lousy seeker assumes they can see and sort well with just a few pieces of a big puzzle. Good seekers find more pieces first, and with each one gain a better perspective.

In this case, for example, just one more piece of the puzzle would help. Everyone here has heard that story before. Professor Huntsman wrote a terrific book about it. You've probably heard it in church at least once a year. You have probably told it yourself, maybe quite recently, and not only believed it but found it beautiful, found yourself admiring that woman and her noble husband, and worshipping that man, that most authoritative Man, who loved you and I so much that He gave His Only Begotten Son, just as the story testifies.

It is the Christmas story, as told in the Bible and confirmed in the Book of Mormon.<sup>5</sup> Depending on one's perspective the story could be scandalous. Is it the ultimate example of unrighteous dominion or it is the supreme story of God's condescension, of his voluntary descent below all to save all? The basic facts are the same either way. It's the meaning and value you decide to give them that makes all the difference.

For a seeker—one wanting to see things as they really are and will be—God's perspective, and the patience and faith to work towards it, are everything. Perspective gives us the paradoxical

power to see how little of the puzzle we can see, and if we add to that the patience and perseverance to seek the remaining pieces diligently, by study and also by faith, we will be true seekers.

Seeking is a long, patient, persistent process that includes internalizing the best books, including the scriptures, where we not only learn the most important facts but the most valid meanings and values to give them. Seeking is hard work. It is not for the weak-willed or faint of heart, nor for the intellectually or spiritually lazy. But it will sustain faith in a world intent on destroying it.

Whatever tensions you may feel or fears you may have, seekers are wanted in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The first converts were all seekers. Today's converts are seekers. We are all commanded to be seekers. So it may seem odd that life as a Latter-day Saint seeker can be lonely. It can seem as though you are unwelcome if you wonder or have doubts, if you are still on a quest for light and knowledge when so many seem to have already arrived. You might feel like you are under attack or all alone as you sit through Sunday school or a testimony meeting, when a comment that confirms the faith or feelings of others only jars or upsets yours. Perhaps you don't ever feel alone or vulnerable in those settings, but some around you do.

Joseph Smith experienced similar feelings. He told friends that when as a youth he attended revival meetings he wanted badly to join in the shouts of joy but, he said, I "could feel nothing."<sup>6</sup> And he could not pretend that he felt otherwise. So he kept seeking. Then when he finally found his answer he told an adult authority only to be rejected as a result. That is no way to treat a seeker who was just trying sincerely to find out who he could trust.

We could bless each other immensely if we refused to treat each other the way the minister treated teenage Joseph. We could take our cue from President Henry B. Eyring's address "about how we can best help in those moments of quiet crisis," the moment when a child of God says to

themselves, “maybe what I thought was true, what I have depended upon, isn’t so.” Latter-day Saints have these moments.<sup>7</sup> For some they are fleeting. For others they are persistent and nagging. For some they become devastating.

The brilliant Harvard student John Widtsoe had one of these moments long before he became Elder John A. Widtsoe, whom I quoted earlier in what turns out to be an autobiographical explanation of how he followed Joseph Smith’s example to find bedrock truth. John studied psychology and philosophy with leading scholars and majored in chemistry under the tutelage of renowned professors he admired and who admired him. But as he drank in their views he confronted the materialism they all shared, the idea that there was no such thing as spiritual, only material; except for the chemistry department chair. He gave John confidence in faith.<sup>8</sup>

“I was having my religious battles,” John recalled. “Was Mormonism what it pretended to be? Did Joseph Smith tell the truth?” With these questions in mind, John “read, listened, compared, thought, [and] prayed. It was a real search for truth. Out of it *in time* came the certain knowledge that the restored gospel is true and that Joseph Smith was indeed a Prophet, and restorer of the simple true gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes we tell these happy-ending stories without appreciating the crisis in which they begin. Maybe we divert our attention from that crisis because we fear that our own faith can’t afford it, as if investing in those with questions, doubts, or concerns will confirm our own. Or maybe, suffering a shortage of faith or charity, we make someone’s crisis worse by sending all the wrong signals when they cry out for our help. “It’s because of sin,” we might say, or “just pray about it,” or “where is your faith?” all of which can sound to the worried soul as if there is something seriously wrong with them, as if they’re not like the rest of us.

President Eyring offered a better alternative, one he called “the patient approach.” It begins with listening. That can be hard because these conversations can create fear in us and therefore the instinctive response to flee or to fight when what we should do is listen. “If you listen carefully to their feelings,” President Eyring said, “you will find out something about the heart.”<sup>10</sup> He invited us to look on that heart and see the person “not as a doubter, but as a seeker after truth. You can ignore the attitude of challenge,” he said “and see instead a person who craves faith, who has seen manifestations of divine power, even if [they] have not recognized them, and who wants not just to believe in those powers, but to call them forth in [their] own life.”<sup>11</sup>

I know that President Eyring’s teachings are true because I have experienced them from both sides, as a would-be seeker with a bad attitude but a longing to believe in God’s power, and as a teacher of sincere seekers who need to be heard, oriented, and reassured.

Shortly after I turned fifteen a diabolical man killed two innocent people and then nearly killed himself while trying to cover his string of forged documents, many of which were calculated to cast our church history in a controversial light. Earlier that year (May 1985), well before anyone knew how the murders and subsequent investigation that autumn would change everyone’s perspective by adding a few more pieces to the puzzle, the *Church News* published one of the documents, a purported letter from Joseph Smith to Josiah Stowell about using a fresh hazel rod to find buried treasure guarded by a clever spirit.

I read the letter in the *Church News* at the breakfast table and flippantly asked my father why they weren’t teaching me that at church. “I don’t know,” he said. He had read the letter but he explained that he didn’t understand it. He did not pretend to. He then explained to me that he knew that the Book of Mormon was true because of his experience with it and with the Holy Ghost. And he helped me see the implications of knowing that the Book of Mormon was true. Then he promised



that if I would exercise faith, be patient, and seek further knowledge, I would see everything work out.

That is the way to treat a seeker in a moment of doubt. No ostracizing, no alienation, no rejection. No sense of fear. My father taught me that seeking involves learning what you know and how you know it, and acknowledging what you don't yet know and how you can best learn it by study and also by faith. And since I didn't have enough faith my father shared his as he taught me how I could plant the seed of my own faith, nurture it, and someday enjoy its fruit. That morning my father taught me what Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught in the April 2013 General Conference, when he said, "When those moments come and issues surface, the resolution of which is not immediately forthcoming, *hold fast to what you already know and stand strong until additional knowledge comes.*"<sup>12</sup>

My father didn't use the same words, but he said essentially what Elder Holland did when he declared that "what was once a tiny seed of belief for me has grown into the tree of life, so if your faith is a little tested in this or any season, I invite you to lean on mine." I leaned on my father's faith and gradually gained more and more of my own. I became a seeker, a soul with more questions than answers so far, on a quest for light and knowledge, unsatisfied by folk doctrines or philosophies of mortals. I seek because I do not yet have the faith of a mustard seed. I seek learning from those who are wise. I seek from the very best books. I seek by diligent study and also by exercising the faith I already have.

My father's example helps me treat my students as seekers, whom I invite to begin by assessing what they know and how, and whom want to help in their moments of doubt.

One former student wrote me just two weeks ago to tell me about her mission to Zambia and Malawi. "There were so many instances where I applied doctrines and principles [of seeking]," she

said, “The first of which was, ‘What do I know and how do I know it.’ The next was it is okay to not know everything and to admit when ‘I don’t know.’ I also reflected repeatedly on your plea for us to never make . . . assumptions.

“There was a point on my mission that I had to grapple with polygamy. It was so difficult for me to understand how polygamy was okay and why it happened in our history. I kept having thoughts like, ‘If men and women are equal in the sight of God, why would polygamy ever take place?’,’ with the assumption that, ‘Since polygamy happened, and because of what the Lord says to Joseph Smith in 132nd section of the Doctrine and Covenants, men and women are not equal in God’s sight.’

But I recognized that this was an assumption, and that I needed to receive my own witness that women (myself in particular) are equal to men in God’s eyes, regardless of polygamy happening, both in ancient and modern times.”

This sister testified, “One of the most tender moments on my mission was when I received an unmistakable answer to this prayer. It happened when I was least expecting it when I was exercising in our large, empty apartment while listening to a talk Julie B. Beck gave a few years ago, [titled] ‘Mother’s Who Know.’ I know that men and women are equal in God’s eyes because I received an undeniable witness from the Spirit that we are. Isn’t God merciful? Since this time I’ve been able to study and learn more about polygamy and it isn’t a threat to my testimony. I don’t understand everything, but I know enough. This is the Lord’s church. The Priesthood is real. We are God’s children. Through Christ’s redemption and by living the gospel we overcome sin and death.”

Another one of these wonderful young seekers stood courageously among classmates, who were circled around a bonfire on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Having listened to several of his peers testify with certainty, this young seeker stood and said that he could not. He was not trying to

be challenging or controversial. He just wanted to know and believe in truth and to be true to himself, not pretend. I felt God's love for him and glad that he felt safe enough in that setting to speak his heartfelt faith and lack thereof, his desire to believe (Alma 32).

I listened to that young seeker that night and on subsequent occasions. We talked about his hopes and fears, about how he could let his desire to believe work in him, about how he could act on the faith he had, how he could seek learning by study and also by faith. At one point I felt impressed to be very direct. My words were not so eloquent as Elder Holland's but to the same point as when he said, "the size of your faith or the degree of your knowledge is not the issue—it is the integrity you demonstrate toward the faith you do have and the truth you already know." I told this seeker that he was a believer. In the midst of doubts and fears, he obviously chose to believe. I told him that I was a believer too, just like him, and promised that if he would exercise faith, be patient, and seek further knowledge, he would see everything work out.

I recently received a note from this seeker that included these words: "While I still don't know the things I most want to know, I feel as strong as ever in my belief of those things that to me matter most. You were right. I am a believer. Thanks for letting me know that. I wasn't sure at first, but the truth is that I am."

So am I. I believe that God lives and that he created heaven and earth. I believe that he has all wisdom and all power, and that I do not yet comprehend all that he does (Mosiah 4:9). But I believe that he wants me to and so has commanded me to seek. Our Heavenly Father "is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). He wants us to make the Savior's Church a safe, hospitable home for seekers, to make sure they feel wanted, even, maybe especially, if they don't yet have the faith of a mustard seed. May the Lord find us ever seeking His truth, and as we grow in

grace and knowledge, may we listen to other seekers in their moments of doubt and invite them to lean on us as they nurture their desire to believe.

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Widtsoe, "Joseph Smith: The Significance of the First Vision," in *The Annual Joseph Smith Memorial Sermons*, volume 1, sermons 1-10 (Logan, Utah: Institute of Religion, 1966), 28.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Widtsoe, "Joseph Smith: The Significance of the First Vision," in *The Annual Joseph Smith Memorial Sermons*, volume 1, sermons 1-10 (Logan, Utah: Institute of Religion, 1966), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac E. Brockbank, "Address Regarding Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*," 2, MS 545, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. For biographical information on Isaac E. Brockbank, see *An Historical and Genealogical Record of Isaac Brockbank Sr.* (no place: no publisher, circa 1959), 194.

<sup>4</sup> Isaac E. Brockbank, "Address Regarding Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*," 5-7, MS 545, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. John A. Widtsoe, "Joseph Smith: The Significance of the First Vision," in *The Annual Joseph Smith Memorial Sermons*, volume 1, sermons 1-10 (Logan, Utah: Institute of Religion, 1966), 28.

<sup>5</sup> I'm grateful to Richard E. Turley, Jr. for sharing this example and perspective with me.

<sup>6</sup> This is according to Alexander Neibaur's journal entry for 24 May 1844, just a month before Joseph's death. See the full account in chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> Henry B. Eyring, "'And Thus We See': Helping a Student in a Moment of Doubt," Address to CES Religious Educators, 5 February 1993, Temple Square Assembly Hall, accessed 10 March 2015 at [https://si.lds.org/bc/seminary/content/library/talks/evening-with/and-thus-we-see\\_helping-a-student-in-a-moment-of-doubt\\_eng.pdf](https://si.lds.org/bc/seminary/content/library/talks/evening-with/and-thus-we-see_helping-a-student-in-a-moment-of-doubt_eng.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Alan K. Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2003), 57-78. Quote on page 63.

<sup>9</sup> John A. Widtsoe, *In a Sunlit Land* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1952), 37. Emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Henry B. Eyring, "'And Thus We See': Helping a Student in a Moment of Doubt," Address to CES Religious Educators, 5 February 1993, Temple Square Assembly Hall, accessed 10 March 2015 at [https://si.lds.org/bc/seminary/content/library/talks/evening-with/and-thus-we-see\\_helping-a-student-in-a-moment-of-doubt\\_eng.pdf](https://si.lds.org/bc/seminary/content/library/talks/evening-with/and-thus-we-see_helping-a-student-in-a-moment-of-doubt_eng.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Henry B. Eyring, "'And Thus We See': Helping a Student in a Moment of Doubt," Address to CES Religious Educators, 5 February 1993, Temple Square Assembly Hall, accessed 10 March 2015 at [https://si.lds.org/bc/seminary/content/library/talks/evening-with/and-thus-we-see\\_helping-a-student-in-a-moment-of-doubt\\_eng.pdf](https://si.lds.org/bc/seminary/content/library/talks/evening-with/and-thus-we-see_helping-a-student-in-a-moment-of-doubt_eng.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey R. Holland, "Lord, I Believe," <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/04/lord-i-believe?lang=eng>.