

*Difference as nourishment*

# “INTERCONNECTING” AT HOME AND ABROAD

By Thomas F. Rogers

*Let your hearts expand, let them be enlarged toward others. For not only is the mind or intelligence which man possesses . . . coequal with God himself . . . all the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement so that they have one glory upon another.*

—Joseph Smith

**I** LIKE TO THINK THAT THE PROPHET’S URGING may to some extent underlie a credo I formulated in the Seventies, which I outlined in the preface to a book of my plays:

One of life’s most important purposes and functions—its greatest source of fulfillment, at least for me—is to commune, to “connect” with others, at ever-deeper levels of understanding, mutual acceptance, sharing, identification by merging into one another’s lives. And yet, how we tend to stifle our inclination, our need to do so, therewith missing the satisfaction and joy—the very nourishment to our souls—that alone derive from such communion, such connection. We do this largely, I think, from fear—fear of rejection. It is easily the most tragic tendency in human affairs and leads not only to emptiness and depression, but to resentment, hostility, and vengeful scapegoating. It lies at the root of the psychology that engenders and exacerbates all conflict and war, whether public or do-



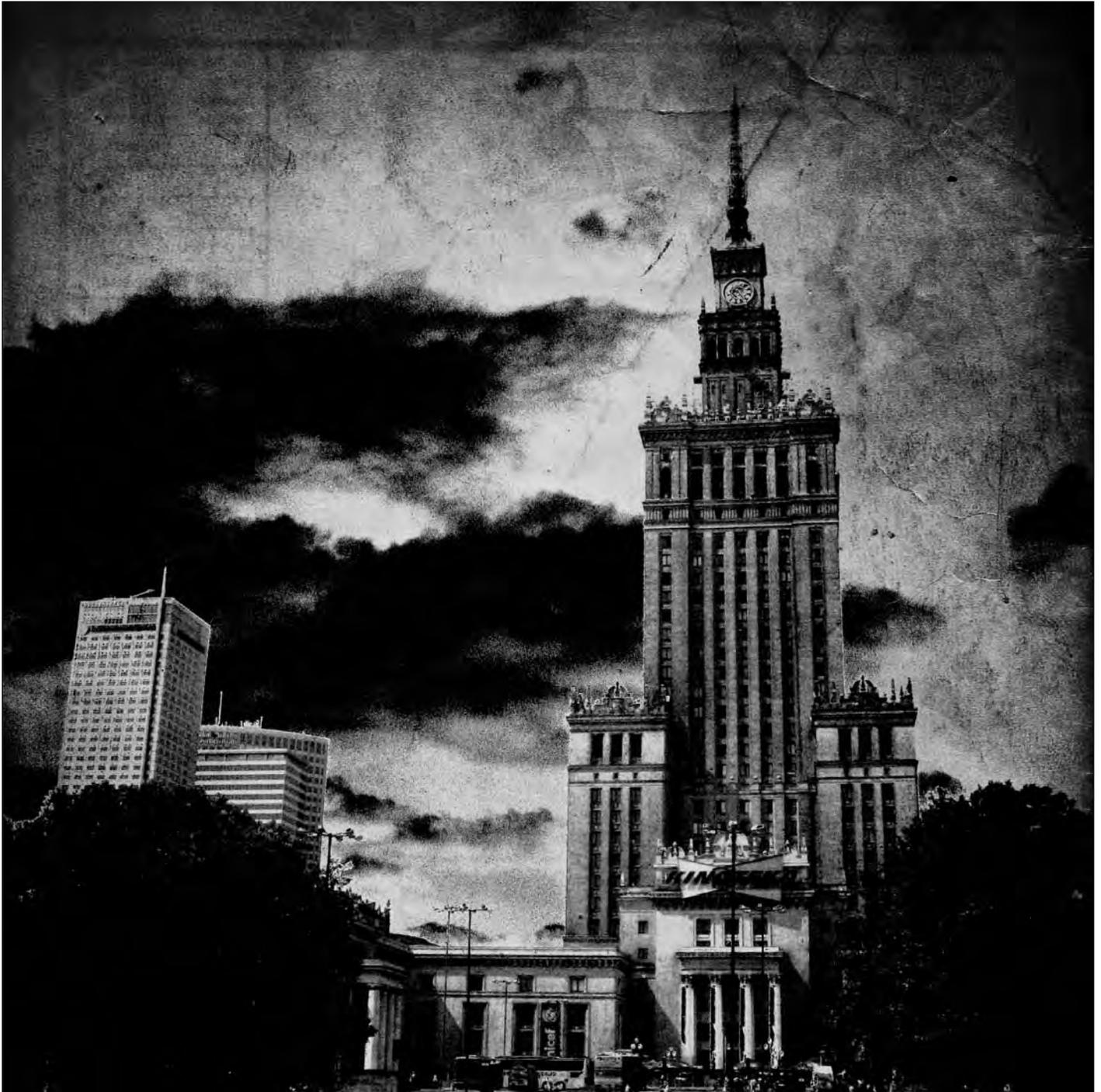
THOMAS F. ROGERS is a professor emeritus of Russian literature from BYU and the University of Utah. A constant traveler, polyglot, playwright, and painter, he relishes connection with his fellow beings. He and his wife Merriam have seven children and thirty-seven grandchildren.

mestic, at every interpersonal level. If the devil inspires anything in us, it is our fear and subsequent disregard of each other, hence of ourselves. There are doubtless practical reasons—limits of attention and energy and time and availability—which preclude our attaching ourselves to or demonstrating our affinity for other than a certain number. But this should never serve as a pretext for our not universally caring for and about everyone of whom we become aware or who sooner or later enters our presence.<sup>1</sup>

As a self-styled polyglot, I have, for some reason, tended to pursue the language of “the enemy.” Don’t ask why. My first mission call to Germany, headquartered in Berlin, occurred a good ten years after the end of World War II, and, obviously, I had no say about where the Brethren happened to call me. In fact, I’d earlier studied French and was secretly hoping that would recommend me for the land of our former allies. But I’d also already studied almost three years of Russian, for which, in 1955, there was not the slightest chance a missionary would have much use.

While in Germany, I got to know Erich Krause, devoted genealogical director for the North German Mission and a former devotee and SS bodyguard of the Fuehrer himself. His alter ego was surely another Krause, Walter, who had escaped a death sentence at the hands of the Nazis only by fleeing prison during the Allies’ fiery bombing of Dresden and whose own father, an ardent East German Communist, had later denounced him for being less political and embracing Mormonism. Walter Krause had lived into his nineties and was the first to be called as patriarch for all of Eastern Europe.

I doubtless encountered many former National Socialists and sympathizers during that two-and-a-half year sojourn.



MARTINA ABELA DZIEGAN

**In Cold War Poland I discovered that the thrust of that nation's fiercely patriotic Catholicism has been the memorialization of its defenders throughout centuries of suffering and defeat at the hands of occupying powers.**

Many had probably fled from the Russians to Schleswig-Holstein, an early mission area of mine; and then, of course, there was Berlin itself. But discussing politics wasn't part of a missionary's job description, and, blessedly, we were mostly oblivious to the earlier background of our fellow members and those to whom we brought the "word."

In the early 1990s, as a mission president in St. Petersburg, Russia, I could not help but be keenly aware that a number of our outstanding priesthood leaders, some of whom had been highly responsible professionals in the Soviet enterprise, would have had to be Party members only two or three years before. One of these—the late Vyacheslav Yefimov—particularly stood out for me. He was the street-smart but deeply spiritual president of our mission's largest district, later the first native Russian to be called as a mission president. A few years earlier, he had been the supervisor of more than 500 employees in the St. Petersburg transportation system. Brother Yefimov saved me from making a number of grievous mistakes and naïve judgment calls as I first took over the reins there.

No, those who live under global alignments opposed to our own are simply, like us, mostly subjects if not victims, of where and—since those alignments so readily alter—when they were born. We should always keep this in mind, though I have not always done so. I painfully remember, for instance, disputing the solemn pro-



nouncement of a venerable tour guide in 1957 at the Lenin Museum on Red Square. I was still an LDS missionary, not yet released nor returned home, and, yes, there all by myself. I'd received the permission of my extremely indulgent mission president to a most presumptuous request: to take advantage of a "Gesellschaftsreise," a group tour, advertised to Germans wishing to visit the former Soviet Union. As it turned out, no German as yet cared to, and I went all by myself for ten days, the distance from San Francisco to New York and back, with the finest hotel accommodations, restaurant meals, guide service, and more—all for \$400. Moscow is now considered the world's most expensive city. Those were indeed—and in more than one sense—"the good old days."

My gray-haired guide was, for what seemed the nth time, pointing to another portrait of Lenin and reciting one of his gems of wisdom: "Serve your fellow men, and you will know great joy" (or words to that effect). So I impertinently rejoined—I was still a missionary, don't forget—that someone else had said the same thing almost 2,000 years before. My guide, who had, with all the dedication of a secular nun,

## **During my numerous sojourns in Russia, I have always tried to visit a Russian Orthodox service—not so much for the liturgy as simply to bask in the choir's glorious a cappella singing.**

taught herself English just the year before in order to serve at the first post-war international conference of communist youth, was scandalized. After all, I was standing on her sacred turf, and she was, clearly, a true believer.

Have I as yet learned the important lesson I've here been preaching? I'm not so sure. Earlier this year, while with a grandson waiting for the Paris metro, I noticed a woman reading a newspaper in Serbo-Croatian and could not refrain from trying on her a few phrases from the time I'd spent in her homeland decades earlier. Somehow I readily remembered the sentence, "On vech veliki momak"—"He's already a big boy"—and, though somewhat out of context, handily spoke it, pointing at my grandson. The lady, a recent émigré, was flattered at my attempt to speak her language until she learned that we were Americans. She then made it clear that she was Serb, not Croatian, and still deeply resented our bombing Beograd during the U.N. action against the forces of Milosheвич and Radzich. My sense (not to mention the rest of the world's) that the Serbs had perpetrated blatant and horrific genocide in Bosnia made no difference. In her eyes, America was the hated enemy, and I found the conversation suddenly terminated.

While I held nothing against the woman personally, I was reminded of just how deeply historic resentments run in many people. During my time in Bosnia in the 70s, while the

communist dictator Tito still reigned, citizens often conjectured that after his demise, in this artificial country no larger than the state of Wyoming, there would arise a cataclysmic civil war involving Serbs, Croats and Bosnian-Herzegovinians, Macedonians and possibly Slovenians, each egged on by centuries-old grievances. How prophetic this proved to be just a few decades later. Those in the United States who still insist on flying the Confederate flag may come closest to such a perpetuation of inherited resentment.

During the Cold War, I was, through the arts, afforded further opportunity to appreciate cultural differences between "the other" and myself. After my German mission, I was for several years an actor on Second Avenue in Salt Lake's own Deutches Teater, a little cultural marvel no longer in operation. There for at least a quarter century Siegfried and Lotte Guertler, themselves professional émigré thespians who had during World War II made films for the Nazi regime, annually produced on their own living room stage an average of five full-length classical German plays. But our audience was almost entirely comprised of elderly German émigrés. We seldom saw there any native-born Americans, not even those who had once served missions in the "Heimatland."

During my numerous sojourns in Russia, I have always tried to visit a Russian Orthodox service—not so much for the liturgy as simply to bask in the choir's glorious a cappella singing. While I consider that church's ethical stipulations and spiritual community quite lacking, its music, icons, and incense mesmerizingly convey a genuine mood of solace and consolation. I also respect the deep reverence its worshippers invariably supply. Also, in Poland, where I've had lengthy residences to study both its language and theater, I've been enthralled by the Krakow Franciscan cathedral's marvelous art nouveau stained glass depictions of Deity and various saints, the creations of my favorite Polish artist, the marvelous portraitist, Stanislaw Wyspianski, himself also one of Poland's noted playwrights.

Just as while in Vienna I learned that Austria's foremost religion is classical music, in Cold War Poland I discovered that the thrust of that nation's fiercely patriotic Catholicism has been the memorialization of its defenders throughout centuries of suffering and defeat at the hands of occupying powers. In other words, given their flat, defenseless location along what cultural geographers have called Europe's "shatter belt" and their military vulnerability due to factionalism and political disunity, the Poles have been forced to commemorate their defenders' *failure* to withstand foreign aggression. Although a seventeenth-century Polish king, Sobiecki, is credited with repulsing the Ottoman Turks outside Vienna, preventing further inroads into Europe, Poland long disappeared from the map after other powers partitioned it. And Poles suffered the proportionately greatest loss of life in World War II, approximately one out of every seven citizens.

This was the prevailing leitmotif I encountered in all forms of Polish artistic expression during my two fairly lengthy residences there in the 1970s. During a memorable tour with theater professionals (and some amateurs such as myself), I was introduced to films and stage productions by Poland's foremost avant-gardists. I had, for instance, a privileged interview with the country's veteran filmmaker, Andrzej Wajda, whose films had paid tribute to both the protesting Gdansk shipyard workers clandestinely massacred in the early 70s and those who launched the Solidarity movement a decade later in the same locale. The world-renowned performances by Jerzy Grotowski's Teatr Laboratorium in Wrozlav (formerly Breslau) focused on the ordeal and sufferings of those interned in the Nazi camps.

In the film, *My Dinner with André*, an actual New York-based director, André Gregory, tells the actor Wallace Shawn about undergoing a live burial in Poland as a participant in a meta-theatrical activity. This was the sort of thing Grotowski was now into, and a number of the more impressionable members of our group had similar experiences during the two weeks we were with his actors. Others of us underwent grueling vocal and physical exercises—intended to free up our innate visceral emotions so that, on stage, our responses would be, like those of his actors, all the more primal and authentic.

The players had already ceased performing plays as such; but for a documentary film by Wajda, they had revived their last one—*Apokalypsis cum Transfiguris*—an imagined account of rivalry and disputation among Christ's original disciples, leading to his rejection and abandonment before the Crucifixion. Our group was allowed to view two successive rehearsal performances in preparation for the filming.

The show's idea had been suggested by personal clashes among Grotowski's actors, who consented to expand upon them for the purpose of his production. The emotional intensity of the play was almost unbearable. If such dissension did in fact occur among Christ's first followers, I felt transported, as though actually there. Christ's desolation and loneliness were, under such circumstances, all the more vivid. A year or two later, the troupe, who had lived together like monks and nuns and whose sole purpose in life had been their art, broke up.

With the Church's extensive outreach to individuals both within and outside the fold (home teaching, missions, humanitarian aid), the Latter-day Saint outlook on both everyday life and human destiny is notably positive, optimistic, and mutually supportive. Thus, I was not at first prepared for this almost opposite perspective or the historical conditioning that underlies the social mentality and worship of Catholic Poland. But, like the decor of Poland's churches, which so darkly focuses on Christ's suffering, these unforgettable expressions of courage and dignity wrested from oppression and defeat helped explain to me an unfortunate nation's perpetually stoic survival against greatest odds. Though I could not fully identify with that legacy, I was indelibly affected.

After returning home, I staged for the BYU Department of Theater a reconstruction of images, gestures, and scenes from Grotowski's and others' avant-garde productions. As our audience entered the Pardoe Auditorium, they were forced to walk over empty, worn shoes scrounged from Deseret Industries, reminiscent of the exhibits of liquidated inmates' confiscated belongings on exhibit at Auschwitz since the end of World War II. Like our largely wordless reenactment, the effect was eerie and, I imagine, unlike anything BYU audiences had previously encountered.

But I am not always so unruffled—as was the case when, at the end of a recent month-long stay in Armenia, I went with the mission president there to the Genocide Museum in Yerevan. I already knew about the Turks' horrific slaughter of Armenians during World War I, but the tour helped clarify the circumstances. This time the guide was younger and very knowledgeable. As we followed her from one exhibit to the next, I noticed that a swarthy young man in blue jeans had attached himself to our party, standing a little behind us but clearly following the guide's English. On an impulse I turned and asked, "Are you also an American?" upon which he abruptly disappeared. I felt bad and asked the guide who he might be. Her answer: "He's probably a Turk. They sometimes come like that to listen in but don't want people knowing who they are." I understood, but I felt bad that I'd provoked such discomfort.

The very next day after boarding the plane from Yerevan back to London, a British seatmate, a middle-aged woman, whispered in my ear that the bald-headed man sitting just in front of me, with his wife, teenage son, and daughter in adjacent seats, was "the former president here who, in protesting the recent elections, fomented riots in which scores of people were killed. He's a very bad man." Although we were already heading for London in a British Midland carrier, I thought it prudent to change the subject. My seatmate, an investigative journalist, found that agreeable enough until my reply to her question, "What are you doing here?"—"I'm with the Mormon Church."—immediately brought down the conversational shutters. There was not a peep more from either of us for the rest of the flight. A 'reality check' and strong reminder that, like Turks in Armenia, Mormons are not always so endearing—particularly at a time when America is far from admired and, in this instance, just after the media had given widespread attention to Warren Jeff's Texas fundamentalists.

That old difficulty again: how to reach out to others with the certainty and conviction of our faith and values without counting on any personal acceptance or even respectful acknowledgement? But let's turn that question around: How willing are we to extend to 'the other' equivalent respect and appreciation while not compromising what we call our 'testimony' or standing at a comfortable remove from what may be our own energizing faith? Do we simply have to view the world's various religious philosophies and systems of belief as interchangeable and relatively the same?

This ecumenical challenge was brought home to me

when in the 70s, my daughter and I toured and, for a length of time, resided in India. While in Kashmir, we found ourselves literally snowed in and unable to fly back to Delhi. My daughter was laid low with the flu, so for three days, I traveled to a nearby Muslim restaurant and carried back our meals. The young waiter there finally asked if I were a Christian and then exclaimed that he could not imagine anyone's being other than a devotee of Allah. I think my response at the time was fairly inspired: "Whatever you and I choose to call Him—Allah or Jehovah—surely we can agree that He created each of us and is the Father of us all. Isn't that what's really important?"

More recently, and closer to home, my encounter with Muslims has proved more ironic, even wistful. After retiring, I took up an intense study of Arabic, the language of our ostensible enemies and geopolitical rivals. As a senior audit, I enrolled in two year-length Arabic courses at the University of Utah. My last teacher was Abdullah, though that had not always been his name.

Born in New England and raised in Salt Lake City, Richard Lux was a full-blooded Caucasian American. Responding as an engineer to an offer from the University of Utah Medical Center, Richard's father had brought their family to our area. Though Richard was not a Mormon himself, his best school friend and playmate was a 'straight-arrow' Japanese-American Latter-day Saint. Together, he tells us, they played pranks and got into the typical scrapes of young men their age. They were inseparable until one day, in high school, this friend told Richard that a certain seminary teacher had advised his charges not to associate with non-members. Richard says that, from that moment on, he detested Mormons. Later, while pursuing Arabic at Columbia University, he converted to the Muslim faith.

I have seldom encountered a more delightful or dynamic teacher. The irony is that—now a devout Muslim—Abdullah's opinion of Mormons has considerably softened because he sees us in terms of his and our shared standards and our respect for the Transcendent: "We have so much in common." Again wistfully, I suspect that his good friend and neighbor might have eventually prevailed on him to seriously investigate and accept the religion he now highly respects, though from an almost unbridgeable distance.

Then there was my Arabic tutor Hussein, an Iraqi refugee in his mid-30s who lives and works right here in my Bountiful community. A Shia from Basra, Hussein was, as a teenager, recruited to fight the Iranians in Saddam's earlier U.S.-backed offensive against Iran. Unlike Abdullah, Hussein was not a very good teacher, but I was a far-from-apt pupil, so one day, in the middle of a lesson and without any explanation, he stood up and announced that he had to leave. He never came back, and that proved to be our final lesson. It was, I suppose, a face-saving way to let me know he'd had it with this dull pupil. Maybe though, such a response reflects the sort of politeness that, in being so direct, we Americans have little sense of—another cultural difference and barrier to overcome.

In any event, on a previous day Hussein and I had been poring over my dual language text of, believe it or not, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, when he began to reminisce:

"There was a great man who had to live for several years in Paris but finally returned to his people."

"Are you possibly talking about the Iranian imam, Khomeini?"

"Yes."

"But you fought against Khomeini as one of Saddam's soldiers."

"He was a very great man."

"Do you happen to know, Hussein, that Khomeini sent to China for cheap plastic toy keys and handed them out to young boys, telling them this was their key to Paradise, then urged them to go ahead of his troops against you, to clear the mine fields with their own bodies?"

"Oh, but they wanted to do that. They wanted to go to heaven."

Sadly and paradoxically, my contact with Muslims during the time I spent in Damascus was slight and superficial. By chance, I ended up in the Old City, considered the world's oldest still-inhabited community, and for centuries now a Christian enclave. In Arabic it is called Bab Tuma—meaning "The Gates of (the Apostle) Thomas," who, according to Christian lore, came there preaching the gospel. My hosts and their excellent son, my tutor Basil, are Roman Catholics, and their compound is not far from a number of renowned biblical sites—the house of Ananias, for instance, who cured Paul's blindness—silted over in the course of two millennia but excavated and now a subterranean Franciscan chapel. Suggesting the common anomalous juxtaposition of sacred places and shrines, Syria's largest and most prominent mosque lies not much farther in the opposite direction—the burial place of Saladin, the great Iraqi warrior who put an end to the Crusades in Jerusalem. But that's not all—within the mosque proper is an especially ornate structure which houses, as legend has it, the remains of none other than John the Baptist, though here he bears an Arabic name. His relics are honored by agreement with the Christians whose own church stood earlier on the same ground — a striking accommodation by those who at other times are far less tolerant of other religions.

I've yet to fully comprehend the sons of Allah.

#### KASHI

**D** OUBTLESS THE MOST exotic place I've ever visited is India. Even a good quarter of a century later, my impressions of it are quite vivid. India still has one of the most totally religious cultures on the planet—its people fully accepting of Hindu tradition. As a Westerner, I felt slightly uncomfortable with the general fatalistic assumption that one's hardships and suffering were earned in a previous life. But I also noticed that even the *achuti*—untouchables—sitting on an ash heap and sorting discarded paper and plastic for a few sustaining grains of rice, seemed



## Indian life is certainly filled with its own distinct contradictions.

so essentially calm and accepting of their condition that few if any in that society appear to suffer from ulcers or require a psychiatrist. I suspect, however, that since I was last there, with India's burgeoning, more westernized and relatively prosperous middle class, much has changed in that regard.

For the first two months, with Indrail passes in hand, my daughter Krista and I literally “rode the rails,” superficially

taking in the entire subcontinent with the exception of Nepal. Everywhere there were beggars—the more freakish the better. At a seashore temple site in the Dravidian South, we were amazed to see a quite young girl carrying a full-grown turbaned man, his withered limbs wrapped, snake-like, around her waist. During a long train stop in Puna, encouraged by her father and brother, each with an amputated

arm, another young girl approached our train car. She went for the Arab men sitting at an opposite window, enjoying a repast of fresh fruit, imploring them with the uplifted stubs of her own arms, from which both her hands had been neatly removed. The Arabs laughingly held out a single grape which, somehow, she managed, tweezer-like, to grasp between the stubs and bring to her lips. Then they turned their backs on her. In Mumbai, while crossing a long bridge, we were swarmed by a pack of well-trained urchins who, for all the world, reminded us of the similarly organized young Gypsies who, now everywhere in Europe, suddenly descend upon the unsuspecting traveler, reminding me that a thousand years earlier, the Gypsies' ancestors, speaking the Sanskrit language they call Romish, came from this same place.

Almost any morning in either Mumbai or Calcutta, where millions live on the sidewalk, doing their ablutions and preparing food with the help of fire hydrants and the open gutter, fresh corpses lay on the sidewalk, always discretely covered by a thin cloth. Crossing the country from Calcutta to Delhi through relatively poor and wild Bihar Province, we were accosted in our compartment by young men who compelled us to give up our reserved seats to them: we'd already heard of the Wild West-type banditry on trains, knives sometimes slashing through the partitions dividing one compartment from the next to reach the bandits' victims.

By contrast, we were, as total strangers, often invited by our current traveling companions to attend a lavish family wedding celebration at a forthcoming destination, which on one occasion we in fact did. Our presence as foreign guests seemed to add a certain prestige to the occasion.

Everyone had his or her "cobra story," and we were grateful that, even after the monsoons broke—the season for their appearance in gardens and commodes—we somehow missed that stirring adventure.

Unlike the prominent body odor still frequently encountered in public places in Russia, I never detected anything but total cleanliness—thanks to Indian natives' much lighter apparel and the worshipful practice of daily bathing. After our first landing in Calcutta, we had taken an evening stroll to a nearby marketplace: the variety and quality of apparel amazed us, but the locals seemed not the least style-conscious or ostentatiously self-aware—whatever might barely cover their nakedness would do. Finally, visiting the famed temples of Kajaraho in the jungles of central India, we had a sense in the many bas-reliefs of the erotic abandon of an earlier mode of worship, called tantra.

Having located two able and willing tutors, I finally settled to study, first in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, center for the criminal cult that strangled its victims with silk cords, and called "Thugee"—from which English derives the word "thug." Finally I went alone to India's ancient holiest city, Varanasi (corrupted by the British to Benares) but formerly known as Kashi, where, with the help of my phenomenally dedicated tutor, Virendra Singh, a Kshatriya (one degree below a Brahman), I rented for \$40 a month a two-story

building overlooking the sacred Ganges.

For coolness, like everyone else at that time of the year, I slept on my building's flat roof. The sights and sounds that awakened me at sunrise presented an unforgettable tableau. Streams of pilgrims passing by on their way to the river and salvation, shouting "Ram! Ram!" Beggars lining the path with hands extended for coins or a few grains of rice. "Dhanyawad," the common word for "Thank you" was here studiously avoided since it was understood that the giving of alms is a saving act for which the bestower and not the receiver should be especially grateful.

My attention was nevertheless quickly diverted by the hawks and vultures that swooped ever closer, checking me out in case I'd expired overnight and was ripe enough for devouring. I had only a few minutes to gather my effects and descend from the roof before swarms of wild monkeys, the newborn babies often still clinging to their mothers, descended to steal anything still in sight—eyeglasses, reading matter, bedclothes. In one instance, I defiantly shook my fist, in turn receiving a still more defiant grimace. Don't aggravate wild monkeys: they have sharp teeth and often carry rabies (if not, as we've since discovered, AIDS).

On a corner outside my window sat another deliberately amputated beggar, near naked, who ecstatically invited one of the many nearby sacred cows to lick the salt off his perspiring skin—his particular mode of ablution. Once the enchanting voice of another such pilgrim beggar whom I could not see came wafting from below. We later learned that, though he did not speak Hindi, this old man had come from Calcutta to end his life at the Ganges. The language he used was what everyone agreed was *Bharat mei bahut, bahut mitya bhasha*—India's most beautiful language. Virendra in fact engaged the man to serenade us on the evening of my departure. The other guests and I passed the hat so that he had enough to keep him in rice for the next several months, a fee well earned.

Indian life is certainly filled with its own distinct contradictions: I eventually learned not to post my letters in official street-side receptacles—they never reached their destination. Apparently the postmen who collect them peel off the postage and throw the letters away, so it is only safe only to bring mail directly to the post office and witness, with his rubber stamp, a more reliable clerk performing the requested cancellation.

Meanwhile, openly published statistics—India, unlike Russia, is a viable democracy with freedom of the press—indicate that annually millions of young wives are, through the connivance of their dissatisfied spouses and mothers-in-law, burned to death in staged kitchen fires so that the husband can then find another wife with a new dowry. Exposés further suggest that far too many widowed women are—at whatever age—cast onto the street, even by their adult children, to spend the rest of their lives as either beggars or prostitutes. Many seem to take their fate stoically enough, however: "It's my karma. It's obviously my punishment for misdeeds in a previous life." Devoted widows are also still

occasionally praised for committing suttee—outlawed during the British occupation—in which a woman willingly throws herself upon her deceased husband’s funeral pyre.

“The body is just an empty shell, while death frees the soul from its imperfections.” Despite this common sentiment, funeral rites are, like weddings, elaborate and costly. Virendra kindly invited me to witness part of an eleven-day ceremony conducted by his friend, chair of Benares Hindu University’s civil engineering department, who, as his mother’s oldest son and a Brahman, presided at her funeral.

With shaved head and wearing a single sacred string—his “garment”—the professor was at one point instructed to bring the string from his left to right shoulder. On another occasion, I was privileged to sit on the man’s veranda floor for a funeral feast—the guests ushered there in shifts, our food served in banana leaves, and monkeys clamoring just beyond us through the grillwork.

As a modern scientist, the professor had, Virendra told me, been particularly concerned about the raw sewage and diseased corpses that have brought the Ganges to an unimaginable coliform level, despite which most pilgrims and lifelong residents claim to have immunity, still freely drinking and bathing in its waters. Some years later I once more encountered the professor, in a full-page photographic spread in an issue of *Life*, fully immersed in the same holy river, his head barely rising above its waves. He too must have considered himself impervious to its harmful physical properties.

As nowhere else, there are in India a multiplicity of gods. One day I observed Virendra’s wife sitting on their cold concrete floor intensely reading and reciting from the holy epic, “The Ramayana.” Virendra explained that she was doing so as a form of mourning—out of respect for her recently deceased father. With its supernatural mythological setting, the Ramayana eulogizes the virtues of its heroine, who is willing to commit suttee and do all else that would honor her paramour. Having several times noticed on their wall the portrait of Ganesh, the elephant god, I one day brashly asked Virendra, himself well educated, if he could really take such a deity at all seriously. “It’s for my wife,” he confessed. Such animistic deities are, apparently, far more popular with the masses, while Virendra and the more scholarly tend to view them as symbolic, favoring a more abstract and sophisticated line of interpretation. It’s the Indian equivalent of, say, our own culture’s contrasting Unitarians and born-again evangelicals.

In my ongoing search for striking ritual and theological parallels between Hinduism, this oldest of all extant world religions, and Mormonism, I felt richly rewarded when I came across the early German Indologist Max Mueller’s rendition of the Vedic *soma* ritual, which, with its washings and anointings, I leave for anyone who has been through an LDS temple to read about and ponder. Then there is the common presence of a water source—often an outside pool or vat—on the site of most Indian temples, which is also what Hindus call their holy edifices. I find these “fonts” nowhere

else but with one particular people in all Christendom. I’ve already mentioned the sacred thread. Speculative as all this must be, it is perhaps helpful to recall that Hinduism is an at least 4,000-year-old Aryan transplant from the plains of Central Asia, with commonalities between the Indians and the Sky-God-worshipping Scandinavians.

Two high moments stand out from my month-long stay in Jabalpur. First, my all-too-brief interaction with Shri Matiji Pandit, a most gifted tutor, from whom I tried to acquire the rudiments of what may be the most difficult of all ancient languages, Sanskrit. With a Ph.D. in Vedic Sanskrit (the language’s oldest form) from Benares Hindu University, Dr. Pandit had been engaged by my hosts, American and English professors at the local Methodist seminary, to teach Sanskrit to young Indians preparing for the Christian ministry. Despite her commitment to Hinduism, she was often confided in by these young future Christian preachers, who sought counsel regarding occasional impasses with their Western mentors.

One day, having read that at one time there had been practically a separate god for each devotee, I asked Dr. Pandit if, in her vast knowledge of Hindu lore, she had ever encountered a deity who had either preached love for one’s enemies or voluntarily given his life for all humankind. After a long pause, she quietly answered, “No.” This conversation—now a quarter century old—was for me, a defining moment, providing a further, unexpected foundation for my conviction that Jesus Christ and his mission are truly distinctive, as they need to be, if he is the world’s one and only Savior.

While in Jabalpur, I enjoyed the hospitality of a most gracious member of the seminary faculty, Dr. David Scott, who, though American, had grown up in India, the son of missionary parents. A year earlier, I had made initial arrangements to travel there, and though we were total strangers, Dr. Scott and his wife had kindly offered to have Krista and me as his houseguests. However, only a week before our departure, they sent us a telegram with the warning that others would not welcome us in Jabalpur because we were Mormons. His dean, while in the United States, had received a highly unfavorable impression of our missionaries. Nevertheless, when our train halted in Jabalpur, I stopped off anyway, half expecting to be stoned, and phoned Professor Scott. His curiosity piqued, he decided to come see us at our hotel. After meeting us, he at last declared that he would, after all, arrange both a tutor and accommodations for us—as it turned out, a recently vacated missionary bungalow with a staff of five servants. Such accommodations were then still fairly affordable. However, it soon became clear that neither the Scotts nor any of their Western Methodist colleagues wanted to hear a word about our suspect religion.

Then, one day, Krista became acquainted with a venerable Indian gentleman who resided in a neighboring bungalow. He was a former Muslim who, in his youth, had stowed away on a ship to the U.S. and, before returning to his native

community and clan, had earned a Ph.D. in theology at Princeton. After converting his extended family, he became Jabalpur's now highly revered first native Methodist minister, long retired. Upon learning from Krista about our own religious background, he enthusiastically leaped up and returned to the room with various photo albums featuring LDS temples. Later, his married daughter, a local high school teacher, made her appearance: the source of his pictures. Until that moment, we had imagined that no one within a 1,000-mile radius (excepting the faculty members at the seminary) had ever even heard of Mormons. As it turned out, the venerable minister's daughter and her husband had previously served for two years as Hindi translators at the LDS Church College in Samoa, where she'd acquired a quite different—in fact, glowing—impression of the Church.

The week prior to Easter, her father invited me to join him on his way to the Methodist chapel for a service. Because of the heat, I had by then gone native and was, like him, wearing a diaper-like *dhoti*. So together we took off, walking arm in arm past cows and peasant carts along a dusty road. Then, entering his church, he escorted me to a prominent pew, reserved in his honor. I don't remember much about the service, but I'll never forget the astonished and slightly distressed looks on the faces of the entire seminary faculty, all of them in their allotted places. Some time later, the old minister's daughter asked to speak to me, earnestly declaring, "I want to join your church." I assured her that she would not only need her husband's permission but also would probably have to wait until missionaries and a branch of the Church came to Jabalpur. I'd be pleased to know—and not terribly surprised—if by now, that is the case.

Also while in Jabalpur, we briefly made room for a British couple who had for years served in Africa and India as missionaries for the Assemblies of God. Civil as they were, their attitude toward us reflected that of our hosts, so we never discussed religion. Then, still later, the local minister for the Assemblies of God—a former Brahman—paid a call, requesting that I preach to his congregation, which I did. It was an exhilarating experience, and, subtly, I tried to insert a little of the restored gospel. Afterward, it became clear why I'd been so confidently asked to hold forth before the man's vivacious, young congregation—energetically singing their hymns from memory to the accompaniment of his tambourine: "Could you arrange to send us a portable electric organ?" he eagerly asked just before we parted ways. In reply, I asked for his mailing address and promised to be in touch with his religious counterparts in Utah, which I did.

## BEIJING

**C**HINA IS REALLY quite a different place—on the surface less compatible with my perhaps more transcendent outlook. According to professor of religion at Syracuse University Huston Smith's distinctions, China is more noteworthy for its practical social skills and organiza-

tional management than—despite its ancient grounding in Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism—particularly lofty spiritual yearnings. My wife, Merriam, and I went there in 2001, the year after my retirement, at the behest of BYU's China Teacher Program, where we spent a full ten-month academic year. I returned the next year to Nanjing University to study second-year Mandarin with a student group from BYU.

The regimentation of Chinese life was, throughout, clearly in evidence and hardly a surprise. The world's impression at the recent Olympic games of masterminded synchronization is no exaggeration. Though we mostly effete old fogies had been required to take doctor-certified tests for AIDS before traveling there, we were apparently still under suspicion, and one day, with very short notice, all the foreign teachers at Peking U. were herded into buses and brought to a medical facility for further testing. I wondered if the same precautions are taken with the young women who adorn every barber shop, ostensibly to give massages. Their exertions, I've read, account for at least three percent of the entire Chinese economy, as available women are in short supply due to the nation's one-child policy and the systematic abortion of female fetuses.

But—unlike anything I've yet to witness in Eastern Europe—one thing especially struck me: the Chinese seemed to eagerly lean into wherever they were going, whatever they were doing (so many up early in the morning on their bicycles). Construction projects take shape overnight with round-the-clock, ant-like shifts. The at-least-300-million "surplus labor" pool (i.e. "unemployed") are that eager to earn another day's bowl of rice and pass on a portion to their family.

Like Moscow, Beijing seems to extend itself interminably. Its high-rise facades are nevertheless graced by a variety of styles with traditionally curved gabled rooftops, a nod to ancient Chinese tradition. One could wish for such a flair for individuality in the monolithic structures of Eastern Europe. In Moscow and other Russian cities, I've noted, a greater attempt has been made more recently toward individuation—maybe inspired by and in imitation of the Chinese. Recent structures in Khabarovsk at the far eastern end of Russia, for instance, which is only thirty kilometers from the Chinese border and whose construction crews are clearly "guest workers" from across the Amur River, very much resemble those in Beijing.

Red lanterns line many a street for blocks on end—denoting the presence of restaurants. Somehow the Chinese manage to eat out a lot. Though I'm still told that our Chinese restaurant fare States-side is not the real thing, I'm hard put to see much difference—except that, as a student once put it to me, "We Chinese eat anything that creeps or crawls." Unlike in Russia, night life is vibrant. Also, unlike Russians, who seem to do little more than export their mineral, oil, and natural gas wealth, the Chinese are, as we all know, extremely resourceful at producing just about *everything*—particularly cheap and fake goods with perfectly du-



The regimentation of Chinese life was clearly in evidence and hardly a surprise. The world's impression at the recent Olympic games of masterminded synchronization is no exaggeration.

plicated foreign packaging. Sometimes their translated labels are, like those of the Japanese during their earlier industrial boom after World War II, quite amusing. I once purchased a classical CD whose English title ought to have been “The Maiden’s Prayer” but, due to a mis-spacing, sounded more like an ad for a female douche: “The Maiden Sprayer.” An invitation to a Christmas season performance by the Peking National Ballet of Tchaikovsky’s perennial *Nutcracker Suite* was billed instead as “The Walnut Clip.”

We were privileged to teach a huge number of graduate students—all Ph.D. candidates—at Peking University, the nation’s Harvard. Its ornamental grounds, with running streams, lily ponds, and bridges, had actually been laid out and paid for by American Protestant missionaries prior to World War II and the advent of Communism—a fabulous show place with a most inviting ambience. Our quite adequate housing was in a dormitory reserved for foreign faculty, which, we learned through the grapevine, had been the site of Madam Mao and the Gang of Four’s house arrest prior to their execution. We were told that none of the indigenous faculty at the time dared look in the building’s direction, and even we sensed a spooky aversion to the place on the part of various locals.

Apart from the unreasonable workload—eight separate two-hour sessions each week with a total of 160 students, and in my case, a weekly composition and two journal entries from each of them to read and comment on—we found our students an eager delight. Most of them of peasant origin, they earnestly hoped to secure for themselves a challenging profession and decent living standard. For many, we were their first English-speaking instructors. As representative Americans, we may have also conveyed to them, along with the language, a certain fashionable prestige. In any event, they seemed to enjoy and highly respect us. They often told us, “You are my parent,” a traditional Chinese response to one’s teacher. Maudlin as that was, they seemed to mean it, despite the fact that a number of them were no longer young adults, many married, and some already in their forties. Except for rare holiday visits to their home villages, most had to live apart from their families, including spouses and children. Some already had important and prestigious positions in Chinese society.

A month into the second semester, while standing one morning before one of my classes, I was suddenly afflicted with a particularly searing abdominal pain. I did not hesitate to announce that I would have to end the class and immediately go to a hospital. A student I’d not seen earlier and who, in fact, had joined the class that very day, promptly arose and declared, “I am a banker. I have a car just outside this building, and I will drive you there.” This was unheard of—student transportation on campus was limited to the ubiquitous bicycle. But I took advantage of the good banker’s offer. As it turned out, I’d been attacked by epididymitis, a serious urinary tract infection, consequent to the TERP operation I thought I’d already recovered from. I have never felt closer to the veil than during the subsequent several days I lay in

Beijing’s only Western hospital, whose staff had just been joined by its first Western-trained urologist the day I was admitted.

Then there was the manager of one of China’s five boxcar factories, who weekly flew to Beijing from Dalian on the Pacific Coast, just for our class. Later, on separate weekends, both he and the banker flew Merriam and me to their respective cities, where they housed and dined us. In Dalian, I requested that we visit our student’s boxcar factory, which, starting with hoops of steel sheeting, turns a new boxcar out every half hour, adorned with the purchaser’s freshly painted logo. They sell for an unheard of \$15,000. When our supervisor learned that we’d accepted these lavish invitations, all she could imagine was that we were taking a bribe, but I assured her that both students would receive the grade they deserved. I have no doubt, however, that the grades of party functionaries and their dependents were changed in their favor if they proved not high enough.

One of our students was already the editor of a legal publication, and one of the lovely young co-eds, already a justice, periodically excused herself to travel on assignment and join a panel of other judges to adjudicate various state trials. For some reason, I thought to ask her if she had ever had to sentence someone to death. Her too-calm answer, after citing a particularly shocking number: “I interpret the law as conscientiously as I can.”

Besides teaching our graduate students, I earned extra pay by taking on a number of undergrads for a conversation course. These far-younger students differed from the grads in their more privileged socio-economic background, better foundation in English (clearly the products of prestigious schools), and greater sophistication. They reminded me of the confident, well-heeled undergraduate Yalies I’d once rubbed shoulders with—wearing scuffed blue jeans and worn sneakers, their elite uniform—by contrast with more formally attired grads like me, who were there only thanks to generous fellowships. My Chinese undergrads had already seen pirated versions of films that had not yet come out at home, and I could tell they were confidently looking forward to joining the nation’s ruling class. By now, they are all, I imagine, very well entrenched.

Proselytizing is illegal in the People’s Republic of China. Wisely, the LDS Church has forbidden its functionaries to so engage. While we were in Beijing, only ex-pats could assemble for LDS church services. Since then, hundreds of native Chinese members who converted while abroad and later returned to their homeland have been permitted to assemble together, but not with their foreign counterparts. One general authority, Elder Chah, himself Chinese bearing a Hong Kong passport, has long been allowed to serve as a liaison with native Chinese Latter-day Saints. Despite the legal restrictions, various foreign evangelical Protestants—including some of our own colleagues and fellow residents at Peking University (who, incidentally, viewed us much as had the British journalist in Yerevan and the professors at the seminary at Jabalpur)—have openly preached to their

students, and baptisms have ensued. This seems to be tolerated because such groups allow their local leaders to be appointed by the PRC government, something the LDS Church would never allow.

Despite the fact that we studiously avoided any discussion of religion, an amazing thing occurred between us and almost all of our students—a one-on-one bonding, in this case with individuals whose racial, linguistic, cultural, and political traditions markedly differed from our own and despite relatively brief weekly contact. These connections were as personal and endearing as I can ever remember with my former students, missionaries or even, in some cases, our own children. How does one account for that?

During two successive semesters—with a totally new group of students showing up after the first—I required that, among other things, they write about their family history. I already knew that during Mao's Cultural Revolution most genealogical records had been destroyed, so I asked them to phone home to a grandfather or maiden aunt if they could not return to their village during the intervening mid-semester holiday and learn more about their forebears—to become oral historians, that is.

My sample of brief but moving accounts—particularly of the sufferings of parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents; of aunts and uncles under, first, their earlier landlords, the occupying Japanese, and finally the ruthless forces of their Revolution—were often horrendous and deeply poignant. The Chinese people's suffering has, I discovered, known no bounds. It is in every way equal to the millennia-long oppression of simple Russians. This particular assignment and the idea of it were entirely new to our students, something they weren't much conditioned to think about, close as they all were to their immediate, still living family members.

Those who presided over the branch of the Church we attended for expatriates were remarkably gracious and generous on our behalf. Most were former missionaries or mission presidents who had served in Taiwan and who, because of their rare language facility as Westerners, were now the CEO's of major legal, accounting, and consulting firms that had arrived in China on the commercial ground floor after the normalization of relations under Deng Xiaoping. These individuals were now multi-millionaires, two of whom who have since been called to the Quorum of Seventy. On one occasion, at a conference of the mainland China District, one of these brethren dutifully translated for the government official who frequently dropped in on our meetings, while the presiding Brethren from Hong Kong quickly adapted their remarks to the spirit of the twelfth Article of Faith. The Chinese official kept nodding his head in vigorous agreement, and we knew that the congregation's immediate interests had been sacrificed for a greater, long-range cause.

The summer after that year in Beijing, I returned to China, this time as a student to Nanjing University. An American friend and I managed to visit a nearby Buddhist monastery and converse there with several novice monks

who spoke surprisingly good English. With the earnestness and openness of his countenance, one of them particularly stood out for me. From a group photograph, I isolated his striking image and have, in my post-retirement mode as a portraitist, tried several times to capture, both in oil and pastel, what for me has become a kind of icon—as various fashionable images of the Savior serve for many a Mormon. I still feel I have fallen short but keep trying: this young Chinaman's radiant gaze still eludes me and transcends my ability to depict it. Does this say something about my own spiritual deficiency? Or is all of this just some erratic obsessive-compulsive fetish—a figment of my all-too-mortal imagination? I know very little about this earnest young true believer, who might have so easily chosen his peers' far more materialistic and conventional way of life, especially in a society in which such ascetic religions are generally viewed as antiquated anathema. But something about his face resonates with me, and—whatever it is—I consider it China's spiritual gift to me.

## CONCLUSION

**Y**EARS AGO, IN a particularly thoughtful essay on ecumenicism, Tancred I. King wrote the following:

Christianity can gain from Islam a heightened awareness of the majesty, the grandeur, and the absoluteness of God. From Hinduism, Christianity can gain greater respect for meditation and reflectiveness. From Buddhism, Christians can understand the impersonal side of ultimate truth. The Confucian emphasis on humanism, social order, and filial piety can enhance Christian life. From Taoism and Shintoism, the Christian can more fully realize the sacredness of nature."<sup>2</sup>

In a memorable endorsement of the spirit of King's assertion, the First Presidency published the following statement in 1978: "The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light."<sup>3</sup>

King's observations would seem easy enough to apply. In practice, however, difficult ironies often abound as we attempt, bewildered, to reach across boundaries and interconnect. This is no less the case here at home between ourselves and others who see things quite differently: in my own case, former students and colleagues who, now disenchanting, have left the Mormon fold; and at the opposite end of the spectrum, friends, neighbors, and relatives whose political philosophy so markedly differs from my own. On one or another of those same two counts, even some of our children and closest kin do not see things as we do. But we must all still engage in *vzaimnoe sosushestvovanie*—mutual co-existence—as the Soviet propagandists used to put it. And, while remaining as forcefully committed as ever to what



JEANLELUC. ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

**The Chinese seemed to eagerly lean into wherever they were going, whatever they were doing (so many up early in the morning on their bicycles).**

gives our own lives special meaning and motivation, respect for the other's right to his or her position with sufficiently empathic understanding of his or her reasons for it.

While once waiting for a plane in the Istanbul airport, I looked up from my hard metal chair at the row of seats facing me. There sat eight or nine Middle Eastern women, all swathed from toe to top in their heavy, suffocating burkas. I thought they were elderly, though it was hard to tell. Then, looking a little beyond them, I spied four Hassidic gentlemen, with ringlets dangling beneath their black fedoras, each wearing phylacteries on his forehead and a large striped prayer shawl about his shoulders. The men were standing sideways in a passageway behind the women, bobbing up and down as they recited their morning prayers. Though in such close proximity, each group was entirely oblivious to the other.

If I'd dared, I'd have taken a picture. The juxtaposition of these two colorful yet so contrasting human clusters was uncannily reminiscent of their (or their counterparts') uneasy co-existence in Israel. The fact that neither deigned to notice the other further conveyed the certainty each had of their own superior self-contained world—which made me wonder if what they projected might not reflect more than just the impasse between Jews and Muslims on a planet where by circumstance of birth alone so many different ethnic, cultural, and religious alignments keep us at such an aloof and suspicious distance, all offspring of the same Creator yet strangers to each other.

Quite by contrast, I once chaperoned a group of ten American students on a memorable odyssey to Yugoslavia. Most of them were Jewish, from New York City. Under the auspices of the Experiment in International Living, they would each become the adopted member of a Yugoslavian family, the “brother” or “sister” of that family's counterpart their same age and gender.

Just days before their departure, they learned that we had been assigned to an all-Muslim community in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In fear and trembling, my six or so Jewish wards ventured eastward—as if to their doom. But not to worry! As we shortly discovered, the Bosnian Muslims—inheritors of 400 years' of Turkish cultural and religious conditioning—were nevertheless as indifferent to events in the Middle East as they were to Tito's communism. About the only danger my students faced was the Turkish coffee their hosts served at every meal—so thick one had to eat it with a spoon; so strong, it actually provoked heart palpitations in some of my charges. The overall relationship was placid, with not the slightest shade of cultural clash.

Which of the two circumstances was, I've since asked myself, the more ideal—the studied mutual disdain of those older parties in the Istanbul airport, or the far calmer indifference to the other's ethnicity on the part of our hosts and my students in that small Muslim town?

Should we not try for greater awareness, even engagement with each other—with all the awkwardness, risk, even danger that might entail? If others view us with undue suspicion, shouldn't we—with faith emboldened by the restored gospel's perspective on universal kinship—look beyond those differences with broader understanding and the earnest yearning to bridge them? And finally, if that is how we ought to respond to those of another background, might we not feel as much impelled to reach out—despite our very real differences—to all within the fold of the Lord's church?

That may well be our most imposing and most needful obligation.

## NOTES

1. Thomas F. Rogers, *Huebener and Other Plays* (Orem, UT: Poor Robert's Publications, 1992), 245.
2. Tancred I. King, “Missiology and Mormon Missions,” *Dialogue* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1983), 48.
3. Statement of the First Presidency, 15 February 1978.