

Essay on “For the Man in the Red Jacket”

BY TY CAMPBELL

Ten years ago this October I felt pulled from a daze like coming out of anesthesia. I was on my mission, and I had been in the field for one month. It was a warm October. The Japanese maples looked on fire with color.

My companion and I were in an old suburb of Kyoto with old streets that only fit one car and with houses that smelled of old moss and wet rock. I could barely understand the language.

In the middle of our meandering as we tried to get people to talk to us, we approached a little old man with a tanned, wrinkled face and gray-white hair who stood in his garden. We greeted him and he lifted his head from his task to look at us.

Without listening to any of our words, he said directly to my eyes, “Be good.” It was a very short sentence, and I can’t even recall if it was in my native tongue or his, but that short, seemingly ordinary phrase answered so many latent questions that I had not wanted to ask myself.

My first thought was “of course I am trying to be good.” But I never responded verbally to the old man. The man’s tone, his expression, his confidence, and the power of his words took any reaction of rebellion from my mind. Our conversation lasted thirty seconds, but I can still remember his tone, the power in what he said. Years later those words still come to my mind periodically. “Be good” has become one of those standards that I measure myself by year in and year out. It is one

of my constant quality assurance checks. This is exactly what I thought of when I read Tyler Chadwick’s poem. “Have you made time for grace?” is one of those questions that you can probably respond to with a “yes,” but upon reflection you ask yourself, “Have I made *enough* time for grace?”

When I thought about the poem, the question and the answer of “For the Man in the Red Jacket” kept giving different meanings. Eventually I settled on the one answer that made the most sense to me. Sure I have made some time for “grace” or God or sacred things, or at least I think I have, but is that enough? The question is the answer. The point is to keep asking. Was the poet running in the rain because of a sacred natural communion that can occur, or was it because that is when exercise was scheduled? Do we make “time” for grace out of blind habit, duty, or desire?

These are questions that I am excited for LDS authors to be asking. I am excited for LDS artists to push the meaning of the common, the uniqueness of the banal and everyday. Tyler Chadwick and other artists like him have an eye for the real, for the sustained effort that life requires. This is what helps audiences understand themselves. This is what gives our unconscious thoughts, feelings, and anxieties real expression. This is what gives us a common humanity. Such writing is refreshing. Not only in its style and topic, but in that I take a deeper breath when I finish the last line. ■