

Interview with Tyler Chadwick

BY TY CAMPBELL



What was your process for writing “For the Man in the Red Jacket”?

I crossed paths with the man in the red jacket early June 2008 during a morning run through the streets of Ogden, Utah. Our brief encounter consisted of me running past him with a slight nod and him stopping to ask me a question: “Have you necessarily taken the time to find out what grace is for?” I imagine he was a transient yearning for some company, holding onto a question that someone had, perhaps, recently asked him, words that had offered him a source of hope. And though I didn’t stop to give him an answer (for any number of reasons), his question struck me with some force, so much so that I just couldn’t shrug his appearance off, as I have so many similar encounters, and I wondered if by being hospitable to this stranger’s words I was actually entertaining an angel sent to renew my devotion to God (see Hebrews 3:12).

Whatever the case, his question hung around for a while before it faded into the crawlspace of memory; but not before I’d blogged about the experience (something I did as soon as I finished my run that morning) and written what now stands as the first two stanzas of the poem (something I started, I think, just moments after the encounter as, increasingly rain-soaked, I made my way home).

What about your internal thought processes led up to making the moment you captured in the poem so poignant?

The year leading up to this “revelatory” run in the rain was a challenging one in the Chadwick household. The previous June, on Father’s Day, in

fact, my dad had a heart attack (what a present that was for him!), something that sent me into a bit of an emotional tailspin.

Then, in November, we discovered a leak in our roof, but not before rain had seeped through one of our walls into the living room and we had to rip out the water-logged sheetrock on the wall and ceiling to find the leak and then figure out how to fix a hole in an asphalt and gravel roof for almost no money (because, well, we had none to spare on house repairs). Needless to say, we spent that winter with a tarp-covered roof because you can’t very well make roof repairs when it’s too cold and wet and snowy for the repairs to take and when you have no money to make the repairs anyway.

During all of this I was going to school, working on my master’s degree through National University, my wife was working full time in a bank’s mortgage department, and we were expecting daughter number three.

Then, the following January—and here’s the real kicker—she was laid off just days before the baby was due. With no income, no insurance, a leaky roof, etc., we felt we were at wit’s end. With some divine help, we worked out our insurance issues in time for our daughter’s birth and, almost six weeks after she’d lost her job, my wife was hired by the Church’s real estate department. And I thank God for that.

I’m convinced the only way we made it through this time was with an overflowing helping of grace, something I still feel like we didn’t deserve. But that’s one thing grace is for, isn’t it: to fill in where we’re lacking? So, when the man in the red jacket asked me last summer if I’d taken the time to find out what grace is for, it stuck because grace was already on my mind.





How do you feel your faith has influenced your writing? Do you feel that it has freed or constrained your creative expression? How?

My experience and faith as a Latter-day Saint has definitely defined the way I approach my poetic vocation, especially my understanding of and approach to language. The more I study the gospel and become acquainted with God through his own words, given to us in our weakness, through human language, the more I realize the power of words, as illustrated in our Mormon literary heritage in which our wordsmith forebears felt genuine anxiety and deep convictions about the postmodern subjectivities of language; yet, in the words of Eugene England (from his commentary in *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*), they “retain[ed] faith in its ability to communicate shared insights across time and space, based on their conviction that speech ultimately is connected both to the material universe and to our own minds because God is the creator of that universe and illuminates our minds” through language. And therein, I think, lies the power and virtue of words and the Word of God, as conveyed in this slight paraphrase of God’s words as given to Joseph Smith when the Prophet was in Liberty Jail:

“No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the [acts of language], only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile—reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy; that he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death.” (D&C 121:41–44).

In this sense, I believe, my faith both frees and constrains my creative expression (I don’t see the freedom and constraining of expression as mutually exclusive enterprises)—constrains it in that my commitment to such a theology, such a God compels me to use my language responsibly, to refine it according to the needs of my audience, my community, in such a way that it bears the greatest influence; and frees it in that this movement toward a more refined personal rhetoric allows me (though not without much effort) to say the things I want to say in the best possible way, to textually capture experience, and to wield the power of words in mind- and soul-expanding ways. At least that’s my hope. ■