

Come Follow Me
Elo Viz production
Week 15
Easter

This Sunday we are blessed to celebrate Easter. What a wonderful time of the year when plants and trees that appear to be dead come back to life. As we prepare for one of my favorite holidays, I'd like to share a couple stories that get to the heart or the center of the reason we celebrate Easter. I will reference two talks and the links to both talks will be on the website:

“Victoria Ruvolo was driving home on November 2004 from a concert in which her niece had performed. As she neared her house, her windshield was suddenly smashed in by a twenty-pound frozen turkey, which had been thrown from a car traveling in the opposite direction on the two-lane road. The turkey shattered the glass in the windshield and bent the steering wheel before “crushing the bones in her cheeks and jaw, fracturing the socket of her left eye, causing her esophagus to cave in and leaving her with brain trauma.”¹ Her friend in the passenger seat managed to stop the car and cradled her head until the ambulance arrived. Victoria didn't wake up until weeks later in a rehabilitation hospital.

She learned that “her attacker was Ryan Cushing, an 18-year-old college freshman.”² With Ryan facing a potential sentence of twenty-five years in prison,³ Victoria decided to reach out to Ryan's lawyer to figure out a way for a more lenient sentence. Victoria said:

On the day we went to court, . . . [Ryan] walked in with his head hung down and looked so upset with himself. When I saw him there, my heart went out to him. To me he looked like a lost soul.

Once the case was over and it was time for him to walk out, he started veering over towards where I was sitting, and every court officer was ready to jump on him. They had no idea why he was coming towards me, but as he walked over to where I was sitting and stood in front of me, I saw that all he was doing was crying, crying profusely. He looked at me and said, “I never meant this to happen to you. I prayed for you every day. I'm so glad you're doing well.” . . . All I could do was take him and cuddle him like a child and tell him, “Just do something good with your life. Take this experience and do something good with your life.”⁴

After Ryan's release from serving six months in prison, he taught school children about empathy and forgiveness. Aunt Vicky—as Victoria was known to her family—extended her love to Ryan, her attacker, in a similar way that she shared her love with her own nieces and nephews.⁵

Victoria later said, “Some people couldn't understand why I'd done this, but I felt God had given me a second chance, and I wanted to pass it on.”⁶

Meanwhile, another connection was being made. In October 2005, President Gordon B. Hinckley gave a masterful sermon on forgiveness. He recounted the experience of Victoria Ruvolo.⁷ One of the people listening that day was Chris Williams. Chris later said:

I sat there in that conference and I asked myself the question, “Could I do that? . . .” And I didn't know. . . . That was an incredibly powerful exercise to go through, to “fore-give” people, to walk through life with that kind of attitude.⁸

That is fore—*f-o-r-e*, as in before—givenness. Asking ourselves, “Is that something I could do?” and deciding that it is something we want to be able to do prepares us to be better able to forgive other people.

Not even a year and a half later, an intoxicated seventeen-year-old driver crashed into the car Chris was driving, killing Chris's wife, Michelle, their unborn child she was carrying, and two of their other children, Ben and Anna. Yet somehow, in his extreme grief and shock, Chris, as he was still sitting in his crushed car, knew he had to let go and forgive this unknown driver of the other car.

Chris later learned that the driver was Cameron White. Chris met with Cameron at a juvenile detention facility, and Chris and Cameron talked about how the deaths of Chris's family members had affected Chris and the rest of his family.

Cameron . . . looked directly into [Chris's] eyes and asked, “After all that I've done to your family, how is it that you were able to forgive me?”

[Chris] leaned forward and said, “If there is anything you have seen me do, or heard me say, or have read about me regarding forgiveness, you should know that it was merely the Savior working through me.”⁹

<https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/steven-m-sandberg/light-forgiving/>

In a talk given by President Holland in 1984 he shares this account from church history:

“In the early years of the Church the Prophet Joseph Smith had no more faithful aide than William W. Phelps. Brother Phelps, a former newspaper editor, had joined the Church in Kirtland and was of such assistance to those early leaders that they sent him as one of the first Latter-day Saints to the New Jerusalem—Jackson County, Missouri. There he was called by the Lord to the stake presidency of that “center stake of Zion.”

But then troubles developed. First they were largely ecclesiastical aberrations but later there were financial improprieties. Things became so serious that the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith that if Phelps did not repent, he would be “removed out of [his] place” (*HC* 2:511). He did not repent and was excommunicated on March 10, 1838.

The Prophet Joseph and others immediately tried to love Phelps back into the fold, but he would have nothing of it. Then in the fall of that violent year W. W. Phelps, along with others, signed a deadly, damaging affidavit against the Prophet and other leaders of the Church. The result was quite simply that Joseph Smith was sentenced to be publicly executed on the town square in Far West, Missouri, Friday morning, November 2, 1838. Through the monumental courage of General Alexander Doniphan, the Prophet was miraculously spared the execution Phelps and others had precipitated, but he was not spared spending five months—November through April—in several Missouri prisons, the most noted of which was the pit known ironically as Liberty Jail.

I do not need to recount for you the suffering of the Saints through that period. The anguish of those not captive was in many ways more severe than those imprisoned. The persecution intensified until the Saints sought yet again to find another refuge from the storm. With Joseph in chains, praying for their safety and giving some direction by letter, they made their way toward Commerce, Illinois, a malaria swamp on the Mississippi River where they would try once more to build the city of Zion. And much of this travail, this torment and heartache, was due to men of their own brotherhood like W. W. Phelps.

But we’re speaking today of happy endings. Two very difficult years later, with great anguish and remorse of conscience, Phelps wrote to Joseph Smith in Nauvoo.

Brother Joseph: . . . I am as the prodigal son. . . .

I have seen the folly of my way, and I tremble at the gulf I have passed. . . . [I] ask my old brethren to forgive me, and though they chasten me to death, yet I will die with them, for their God is my God. The least place with them is enough for me, yea, it is bigger and better than all Babylon. . . .

I know my situation, you know it, and God knows it, and I want to be saved if my friends will help me. . . . I have done wrong and I am sorry. . . . I ask forgiveness. . . . I want your fellowship; if you cannot grant that, grant me your peace and friendship, for we are brethren, and our communion used to be sweet.

In an instant the Prophet wrote back. I know of no private document or personal response in the life of Joseph Smith—or anyone else, for that matter—which so powerfully demonstrates the magnificence of his soul. There is a lesson here for every one of us who claims to be a disciple of Christ.

He wrote:

Dear Brother Phelps: . . . You may in some measure realize what my feelings . . . were when we read your letter

We have suffered much in consequence of your behavior—the cup of gall, already full enough for mortals to drink, was indeed filled to overflowing when you turned against us

However, the cup has been drunk, the will of our Father has been done, and we are yet alive, for which we thank the Lord. And having been delivered from the hands of wicked men by the mercy of our God, we say it is your privilege to be delivered from the powers of the adversary, be brought into the liberty of God's dear children, and again take your stand among the Saints of the Most High, and by diligence, humility, and love unfeigned, commend yourself to our God, and your God, and to the Church of Jesus Christ.

Believing your confession to be real, and your repentance genuine, I shall be happy once again to give you the right hand of fellowship, and rejoice over the returning prodigal.

“Come on, dear brother, since the war is past,

For friends at first, are friends again at last.”

Yours as ever,

Joseph Smith, Jun. [HC 4:141–42, 162–64]

It only adds to the poignance of this particular prodigal’s return that exactly four years later—almost to the day—it would be W. W. Phelps selected to preach Joseph Smith’s funeral sermon in that terribly tense and emotional circumstance. Furthermore it would be W. W. Phelps who would memorialize the martyred prophet with his hymn of adoration, “Praise to the Man.”

Having been the foolish swimmer pulled back to safety by the very man he had sought to destroy, Phelps must have had unique appreciation for the stature of the Prophet when he penned:

Great is his glory and endless his priesthood.

Ever and ever the keys he will hold.

Faithful and true, he will enter his kingdom,

Crowned in the midst of the prophets of old.

[“Praise to the Man,” *Hymns*, no. 147]

<https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland/robe-ring-fatted-calf/>

Sisters and Brother, it is our duty and our lot in this mortal life to do as each of these people we heard about, and especially as the Savior showed us how to be. To forgive as He did. Might we ponder the power of this principle as we remember Jesus suffering in the garden, dieing on the cross and resurrecting from the tomb for sinners like you and me.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.