

EMPATHY AND RELATIONAL CURRICULUM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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FRAGMENT ONE: DO YOU BELIEVE IN PROPHETS?

In the Spring of 2019, I was eighteen years old and sitting in a religion course at a university operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more commonly known as the Mormon church. Mandatory religion courses were a key part of the University's curriculum. These classes were predictable: opening prayer, singing a hymn, and a professor moving through church-issued curriculum. There were often several sections of the same course with different professors teaching the same content.

One day in early May, the lesson was on pre-mortal existence. The professor taught that, before we were born, each of us made decisions about right and wrong and that everyone who has ever lived already accepted God's plan of salvation in the pre-mortal existence (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.). However, certain spirits were particularly valiant and faithful in the pre-mortal existence, and those are the spirits that were rewarded with being born into the covenant of eternal marriage or, simply, born into a faithful Mormon family.

Nobody reacted to what the professor was saying, but I felt a familiar tightening in my chest. I was not born into a Mormon family. My brief dance with Mormonism started during my senior year of high school and concluded upon graduation from this university. It was jarring to hear this theology taught for the first time. I raised my hand. My voice wavered as I tried, and failed, to prevent any visible displays of emotion. "Are you saying that people who weren't born into our church were sinning before they were born?" The professor corrected me, "They weren't sinning, but they were less valiant in their obedience." The next slide was a quote from former church leader and tenth prophet in the latter days, Joseph Fielding Smith (1931), which he asked me to read aloud: "The Lord reserved the right to send into the world a chosen lineage of faithful spirits who were entitled to special favors based on pre-mortal obedience" (p. 129). This was meant to be the final word, but I was not convinced. My eyes were stinging with tears as I felt embarrassed and confused.

Still, I questioned where these ideas originated from. In response, the professor spoke with conviction, "Do you believe in prophets?" I did not answer. He continued with the same predictable, scripted explanation of Jesus Christ appearing to Joseph Smith in 1820 and restoring priesthood authority and, subsequently, the one, true church. The professor did not wait for me to answer before posing another question: "Do you believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God?" This time, I responded without hesitation, "No." He paused, processing my deviation. Without any reservation, the professor spoke bluntly, "Why don't you write these questions down instead of bringing them up in class?" I was, and still am, taken aback by such an abrupt response to what was an honest question.

This religion class taught me only one thing: questioning is shameful. However, what stayed with me most was the absence of curiosity. The professor never asked where my question



was coming from. There was no follow-up. He did not ask what it meant that I had raised my hand, visibly emotional, and pushed back on something he considered unquestionable. There was no curiosity about what I carried into the classroom or who I was outside of it. When I pushed back, he did not lean in. Instead, I was referred to a PowerPoint slide with a quote on it. Through this, the professor taught me something far more lasting than anything on those slides. This curriculum was not designed to know students and teach them in a truly meaningful way. It was designed to shape them into something predetermined—good, faithful, and obedient Mormons.

CONTRASTING EXPERIENCES

Children thrive when they feel truly known by their teachers (Ansari et al., 2020). That does not change the moment they turn eighteen. For young adults, relationships are often a form of curriculum. When faculty and staff engage students as whole people, rather than grade-seekers who come and go with each semester, students feel genuinely seen. The sense of being seen is central to their time in higher education. Strayhorn (2019) describes this as a sense of belonging—the experience of mattering, of being cared about, accepted, and valued by the institution and the people within it (pp. 28–29). The consequences of its absence are equally significant. Even a single instance of isolation or rejection can undermine belonging, and its deprivation often leads to “diminished interest in activities, loneliness, self-hatred, disengagement from life (often through suicide), or, in the context of education, disengagement from college through attrition or disinvestment” (Cohen, 2011, as cited in Strayhorn, 2019, p. 40).

This article includes two personal reflections in the form of regressive curriculum fragments (Poetter, 2024, p. 23) for which I also provide in-depth, ongoing analysis throughout the paper. The concept of the regressive step in the *currere* method was established by Pinar (1994), who described the regressive as observing the functioning past, taking “special notice of one’s past life-in-schools, with one’s past life-with-school teachers and one’s past life-with-books and other school-related artifacts” (p. 23). Reflecting on my undergraduate experiences in this way allows me to examine how scripted curriculum compromises human connection and the conditions under which empathy can be given and received. When there is limited space for critical thought, nuance, or for questioning what happens when the reality of a student’s life does not fit into the curriculum they are taught, there is equally little space for empathy. The first fragment reflects what is compromised when curriculum is designed to shape students rather than to know them. The second reflects on what becomes possible when relationship and empathy are prioritized in higher education.

The fragments represent intentionally contrasting experiences. One is defined by a form of scripted curriculum and the absence of empathy. The other is defined by relationships and the deliberate prioritization of empathy over rigidity. Scripted curriculum

refers to a wide variety of curricular materials or pre-packaged lesson plans that explicitly script out exactly what the teacher will say, show, and do—and often even how students are expected to respond—so that the teacher only need read from a manual in order to deliver the lesson. (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020, p. 195)

At my university, students were expected to respond to the curriculum with religious devotion.



UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY

To understand how relationships function as a form of curriculum, it is important to establish the connections to empathy: what empathy is, how it develops, and how the relational conditions of education (or the lack thereof) are impacted. The word “empathy” is relatively new to the English language, first referenced around 1908 as a translation of the German word *Einfühlung*, meaning “feeling-into” (Silke & Brady, 2022, p. 15). When discussing empathy, it is important to distinguish it from sympathy. The terms are often used interchangeably, but sympathy refers to something more shallow. Sympathy involves acknowledging another’s suffering from a distance, but empathy is much more active as it requires one “to imagine how others feel in their shoes, rather than thinking about how you would feel if you were in their shoes” (Silke & Brady, 2022, p. 16). Empathy is not an internal feeling or sensation but, rather, the active, outward practice of being genuinely curious about the inner workings of another person’s life.

There are two main dimensions of empathy. Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand another person’s perspective and emotional state, and affective empathy is the willingness to share in another’s emotions (Silke & Brady, 2022, p. 13). Together, these dimensions form what empathy researchers consider to be essential to both individual and societal development as empathy forms the foundation of self-worth, healthy relationships, productive friendships, and strong communities (Brennan & Dolan, 2022, p. 335). Empathy is, at its core, deeply relational. It is not something that is given or received in isolation.

Integrating empathy into higher education and its curriculum need not be complicated. In its simplest form, listening is itself an empathetic act (Murphy, 2022, p. 12). In any classroom, when educators are openly curious about who their students are and genuinely listen, they model empathy. Those who are never on the receiving end of empathy are rarely equipped to offer it to others. Similarly, within education, students who rarely or never receive empathy are often unprepared to extend it to their peers and, as their development continues, to their co-workers, family members, and neighbors.

If empathy is relational, then so must be education and curriculum. In *Education and Human Relations*, Ashley Montagu (1958) argued that schools are places for “the practice of human relations” and that education begins to lose value when it is not informed by the principle of humanity (pp. 13, 21). To teach without attending to the student is to miss the point of education entirely. Montagu (1958) goes on to state that “education is for humanity first, and in the facts afterwards” (p. 16). This framework has direct implications for how curriculum and its relational potential is understood. Traditionally, curriculum pertains to the planned and often scripted content of education. Pinar’s (1994, 2019) view of curriculum invites a more expansive, potential-filled understanding.

According to Pinar (1994), curriculum is not only what is taught but it also includes “the self-conscious conceptualization” of lived experience through time (p. 19). That is, curriculum is the ongoing process of examining how an individual’s personal and intellectual history is actively shaping who they are and who they are becoming. Educators cannot accompany students in this process without first coming to know them. When curriculum is rigid and scripted, there is little space for students’ individual histories, questions, and identities to be truly known and engaged with. Without recognizing students as whole people with unique histories and experiences, education will continue to fall short.



LIMITATIONS OF SCRIPTED CURRICULUM

Not all educational environments are conducive to the relational dimensions that empathy requires. Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020) explain that scripted curriculum is a means of advancing traditionalism and standardization in education (p. 196). The form of scripted curriculum that I experienced in the religion class was a means of advancing conformity to church doctrine and diminishing nuance.

Proponents of scripted curriculum might argue that it is a means of ensuring consistency and structure. However, when considering scripted curriculum through a relational lens, the limitations and harms are evident. Positioning students as passive recipients of standardized curriculum limits the potential for genuine human connection. Furthermore, scripted curriculum limits the ability of an educator to be curious about their students and to adjust the curriculum to better meet their needs. It becomes difficult for students to bring their full selves into the learning environment because, before they even enrolled in the class, the ideal and expected responses had been predetermined.

When a deviation from the script occurs, students may feel diminished, belittled, or silenced. The inability of the educator to deviate from the script may cause them to be unable to respond to the student who has deviated in a meaningful way. This communicates to students, just as the religion professor communicated to me, that experiences outside of the dominant norms are inconvenient. When students feel like they are an inconvenience or an afterthought, there is no meaningful relationship, and there is no potential for empathy. In my experience, this led me to believe that the part of myself that didn't fit neatly into the script was not worth seeing.

SENSE OF BELONGING AND RELATIONAL CURRICULUM

The consequences of invisibility are particularly evident in higher education. Strayhorn (2019) explains that sense of belonging pertains to the student's perceived social support on campus, as in experiences of mattering, being cared about, accepted, and valued by the institution and campus community (pp. 28–29). Sense of belonging is essential to student success, and it is built through human encounters and the exchange of empathy.

Schlossberg (1989) puts words to this experience more precisely through her theory of mattering and marginality. When students feel noticed, cared for, needed, valued, and appreciated in ways that do not require them to separate themselves from parts of their identity, a foundation is established that supports further development, social relationships, and academic growth. Marginality, its opposite, is the experience of not fitting in, of occupying space in an institution without being fully welcomed by it. As Schlossberg's (1989) argument supports, true mattering happens when a student knows that every part of them is noticed and valued, and not only the parts that align with institutional expectations.

Relational curriculum describes all of the ways in which institutions and individual educators teach students that their identities, questions, and experiences are welcome. It operates through formal pedagogy and institutional culture, but it also operates, and perhaps operates most powerfully, in the individual interactions between a student and a faculty member, a student and an administrator, and a student and anyone within the institution who has the opportunity to either see or overlook them. These moments need not be monumental, as the day-to-day interactions can



culminate into something significant. Empathy lives in these spaces, regardless of their perceived (in)significance.

At the heart of these interactions is something deeper than pedagogy or policy. Montagu (1958) understood this well, stating that the most significant human desire is to be loved and to love others (p. 48). It is through this love, care, respect, and knowledge of others, that we “value them, come into a relationship with them, and very often, fulfill our purposes in the world” (Poetter, 2024, p. 150). Relational curriculum, at its best, is the practice of that fulfillment.

PEDAGOGIES OF CARE

Scripted curriculum forecloses the conditions under which genuine teaching relationships can form. It limits the potential for human connection and the conditions that support students in feeling a sense of belonging or mattering. Care theory, as established in the work of Nel Noddings (1984), provides a framework for understanding what such conditions make possible. This perspective on caring in education conceptualizes teaching as a personal relation that is built through listening, dialogue, reflective response, and trust (Noddings, 1984, as cited in M. Smith, 2024). The distinction between caring as a virtue and caring as a relation is central to this framework. An educator can work hard, hold high standards, and sincerely believe that they care for students yet fail to fully establish a caring relationship. This is caring as a virtue. Caring as a relation is only fully realized when the person being cared for recognizes it (Noddings, 1984, 2005). With this, it becomes clear that a curriculum can be designed, or scripted, with the best of intentions and the best of virtues. However, if the students do not experience feelings of being seen, known, and valued within, the caring potential of curriculum is unrealized.

Gravett et al. (2024) extend this through “pedagogies of mattering.” They argue that, within higher education, there has been an emphasis on “discourses on the significance of relationships within learning and teaching as a means to offer a counter-view to an uncaring marketised HE (higher education) system” (p. 388). Pedagogies of mattering expand the relational emphasis as they question who matters within educational spaces and make plain the notion that “who matters and how care is distributed entails ethical and political questions” (Gravett et al., 2024, p. 392). This framing is useful for understanding that deciding who matters, and whose questions are welcome, whose identity is acceptable, and whose full self is worth knowing are not neutral decisions. They are often politically, socially, or, as was demonstrated in my experience, religiously motivated. Pedagogies of mattering emphasize that the relational choices that educators make, such as whose questions are welcome, are forms of curriculum.

FRAGMENT ONE ANALYSIS

My experience in the religion class was uncomfortable, but it also demonstrates what scripted curriculum does to the relationship between a student and an educator. The professor was not curious about me or the life experiences behind my emotional reaction. The script had the answers: quotes from church leaders and repetitive professions of faith that took the place of genuine engagement. The script, created by the Mormon church and executed by the university, was designed to produce religious devotion. It also predetermined what constituted an ideal student: one who fits neatly into what the church teaches and does not question.



When I deviated, the professor's default response was to redirect me back to the script and advise me to keep future deviations written down rather than voiced in class. This supports the argument of Fitz and Nikolaidis (2020), who believe that scripted curriculum and the prioritization of compliance limit the intellectual participation of both teachers and students (p. 196). A relational response would have displayed curiosity about which parts of my experience led to my question and emotional reaction. It would have been an opportunity for discussion and learning from each other, rather than from a script. Instead, the professor defaulted to what the church had deemed appropriate. This is not to say that he committed any personal moral failing. The problem at hand is structural. He, too, had been subject to the script.

The impact of this religion class lingered far beyond that classroom. For the remainder of my time at that university, I felt a jolt of anxiety whenever I saw him on campus and planned my remaining required religion courses carefully. I was determined never to sit in his classroom again. Even when I succeeded, I struggled to distance myself from the defensiveness his class had taught me. I entered every subsequent religion course already closed off, anxious, and braced for the moment when questions would be unwelcome or I would be reminded that did not fit into the Mormon ideal. A single interaction had made an entire dimension of my education feel like something to survive rather than something to engage with. As Strayhorn (2019) describes, the consequences of lacking belonging on campus are significant: diminished interest, loneliness, and disengagement (p. 40). I knew all of these well. However, within those same years, there were equally significant experiences in which I was encountered as a whole person in spaces where empathy and relationship took priority over rigidity and compliance.

FRAGMENT TWO: THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

It took me a long time to feel settled as an undergraduate student. Off-putting experiences like the one I had in religion class had crushed any sense of belonging that I may have been developing within my first few semesters as a student. I struggled to feel secure on campus, and I struggled to engage with my academics. This changed during my last two years there.

After bouncing from major to major, I finally settled on sociology. I was told it was a pointless major and that earning a bachelor's degree in sociology was essentially signing myself up for graduate school, as if that were a bad thing. The concerns did not deter me from pursuing what, for the first time in my undergraduate experience, felt truly engaging. It was in a sociology class that I remember first thinking to myself, "I wish this class were longer."

It was as a sociology student that I was invited into the sociological imagination, which C. Wright Mills (1959) describes as the capacity to understand how one personally connects to the broader historical and institutional forces that have shaped them (pp. 5–6). The religion class, and every other script that had predetermined what I was expected to believe and become, were no longer things that passively happened to me. The sociological imagination was enabling me to see the structures, systems, and scripts behind them.

In 2021, as we were newly returned to in-person classes after the isolation of the pandemic, I enrolled in a Protest, Conflict, and Social Change course. In the months before this semester, I had been thinking about gender, sexuality, and what it meant to be an LGBTQ+ student at a university that did not have a reputation for welcoming students of diverse identities. In the early weeks of the semester, I decided to approach the professor. I was nervous, but the desire to do something with the thoughts that had been living in my mind for months overpowered my nerves.



I explained what I had been thinking and asked whether there was space within the course to do something with it. To my surprise, the professor was curious. He encouraged me to keep thinking, keep synthesizing, and to do something with my ideas. That encouragement changed the trajectory of my educational journey.

By the end of the semester, the professor had allowed a small group of students in the class to do our final project together, which required us to propose some sort of social change. We centered LGBTQ+ student experiences on our campus. The professor supported us as we prepared to present our project to the Honor Code Office, a place on our campus that was usually associated with discipline and reprimand. On the day of the presentation, we spoke about something that, even with our intention to approach our presentation with respect, felt quite radical: LGBTQ+ students at our university deserved better. Some of the Honor Code Office staff came to our presentation, listened, and engaged. I had not expected that. This project was the foundation that my senior thesis would build upon.

In the semesters that followed, the professor continued to encourage me to keep thinking, keep writing, and keep synthesizing. When I began a thesis project examining how topics like gender and sexuality were discussed at our institution, he supported that, too. When the thesis was complete, he allowed me to present it at a department faculty meeting. The presentation was frightening, to say the least. It was one thing to have done the work, but it was another to stand in a room of professors at a religiously conservative university and speak about it.

My voice was steady, but I was not. As I began to speak, a professor I did not know interrupted with contrarian remarks. Rather than engaging with curiosity or empathy, he engaged with criticism and defensiveness. The room suddenly felt much smaller. My voice grew shaky and my eyes began to sting. Determined to get my point across, I steadied myself enough to respond, although the emotions I would have preferred to keep to myself surfaced anyway: “I don’t know what you want me to say. I’m trying to present my work.” I continued, speaking about the reconciliation of sociology, faith, and our obligation to build bridges of understanding.

When the presentation ended, I hurried to the bathroom and leaned against the cold tile wall. My eyes were red as I squeezed them shut and stopped fighting the tears. I thought about how badly I wanted to belong, how carefully I had tried to mask myself and perform the right beliefs. The religion class in the Spring of 2019 had taught me that I had to align myself with what this school believed if I wanted to be accepted. I thought that I had gotten over that. I knew how to think, and I had become increasingly comfortable in voicing my thoughts, even the critical ones. Yet, there I was, several years later, feeling the familiar sting of rejection for suggesting that maybe there was a different way of seeing things.

The series of events that followed was unexpected. The contrarian professor sent me an apology. Faculty members, even ones I had never taken a class from, affirmed my work. Several people from outside the sociology department who I had come to trust and who knew my background and beliefs had attended. They never pressured me to be someone I wasn’t, nor did they ever lecture me or question my faithfulness. They were simply kind.

I am unable to pinpoint a single moment of belonging in the way that I can pinpoint single moments of shame, embarrassment, and rejection. What I do remember is a pattern of curiosity through educators who listened, asked what I thought, and treated student ideas as worth developing. This is empathy in practice. These moments accumulated into something far more impactful than the rejection that had met me at several points along the way. The parts of me that I had been told to write down rather than voice turned out to be starting points for critical reflection.



In receiving empathy, I began to understand, more deeply, what it meant to extend empathy to others.

FRAGMENT TWO ANALYSIS

The experiences described in the second fragment stand in stark contrast to those of the first. Where the religion class offered a script in place of relationship, many of my experiences as a sociology student exemplified the conditions under which genuine care, as Noddings (1984, 2005) describes, could be established, recognized, and felt. The professor who leaned in when I voiced concern about our campus was modeling what Noddings (1984, as cited in M. Smith, 2024) described as the essential work of the caring educator: attentive listening, motivational displacement toward the needs and concerns of the student, and a willingness to respond in ways that affirmed rather than redirected. I was not redirected to scripted curriculum. This is certainly an example of care, but it is also an example of empathy.

CARE AND RELATIONSHIPS

The religion professor likely believed that he was acting in my best interest by redirecting me to the script of religious doctrine. However, as Noddings (1984, 2005) explains, he may have “cared” in the virtue sense but had not adopted the relational sense of caring. My recognition of care within the sociology department aligns with what Noddings (2005) is describing when she says, “In a caring relation or encounter, the cared-for recognizes the caring and responds in some detectable manner A student may acknowledge her teacher’s caring directly, with verbal gratitude, or simply pursue her own project more confidently” (para. 6). The sociology professor’s response and encouragement for me to keep thinking, writing, and synthesizing was, without a doubt, essential in allowing me to “pursue [my] project more confidently” (Noddings, 2005, para. 6). My education in the sociology department also closed the relational gap that the religion class had left open. In alignment with Gravett et al. (2024), these experiences allowed me to feel that I mattered and belonged within my educational space. The questions of who mattered, who belonged, whose questions were worth pursuing, whose ideas were worth developing, and whose full self was welcomed were receiving vastly different answers in the sociology department.

MOMENTS THAT MATTER

The presentation of my senior thesis exemplifies the new answers that I was beginning to internalize. While I certainly knew that the script still existed, it was gradually becoming less impactful in my life. This was clear when the contrarian professor emailed me an apology, when other professors affirmed my work, and in the consistent exchanges with university administrators who supported me throughout. These were, as Gravett et al. (2024) would say, moments that mattered (p. 396). They mattered not only in the moment, but in what they made possible afterward.



WHO MATTERS?

Schlossberg (1989) argues that true mattering happens when a student knows that every part of them, not only the parts of them which align with institutional expectations, is noticed, valued, and cared for. In my experience, my institution of higher education was inextricably linked to the religious institution of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Aligning myself with the expectations of my university was to align myself with what the Church considered to be God's standard of obedience and goodness. I was keenly aware of the parts of me that failed to align with such values and norms. These were the parts of me that had been treated as inconveniences or deviations. As a sociology student, I received something different through the experience of being known, and the parts of me that I had been instructed to write down rather than express were now starting points for critical reflection. This is precisely what Gravett et al. (2024) mean when they describe pedagogies of mattering as asking who matters within educational spaces and recognizing that "who matters and how care is distributed entails ethical and political questions" (p. 392). At a university where belonging was largely contingent on doctrinal alignment and religious devotion, choosing to extend care to a student whose questions disrupted that alignment was not a neutral pedagogical choice. It was a choice that joined me in questioning if there might be a different way of seeing things, even if that way deviated from the script.

HUMANITY FIRST

Montagu (1958) emphasized that "education is for humanity first, and in the facts afterwards" (p. 16). The sociology department operated within this principle, as their curriculum was not limited to the facts taught during class. It also included "the self-conscious conceptualization" of lived experience through time (Pinar, 1994, p. 19). My senior thesis project and the group presentation to the Honor Code Office were not the point. The point was that I was being accompanied through the ongoing process of examining how my personal and intellectual histories were actively shaping who I was becoming. Those who accompanied me through this process were practicing what Montagu (1958) described as the art and science of being human (p. 21). In doing so, they were modeling something that I, as someone whose past experiences have since motivated me to pursue a career in student affairs and higher education, hope someday to extend to others.

EMPATHY IS THE WHOLE POINT

Empathy is at the heart of all that has been described. As explained by empathy scholars Mark Brennan and Pat Dolan (2022), empathy is the foundation of self-worth, healthy relationships, and strong communities. They go on to argue that empathy is perhaps the central factor in all aspects of individual and societal development (p. 335). Empathy is not a soft skill or something used to simply enhance education. It is at the core of humanity, and it is what makes education meaningful.

Empathy, as Silke and Brady (2022) explain, is not an internal feeling but an active practice, or the ongoing, outward work of being genuinely curious about the inner life of another person (p. 16). It requires both the cognitive willingness to understand another's perspective and



the affective willingness to share in their experience (Silke & Brady, 2022, p. 13). Both dimensions were present in the sociology department in ways they were not in the religion class. The professor who leaned in, invited me to think critically, and encouraged me to keep synthesizing was not simply being kind. He was practicing empathy and was teaching me how to do the same.

This is what it means when we discuss learning how to care for others as we ourselves are cared for (Noddings, 2002, as cited in M. Smith, 2024). With this in mind, it is safe to say that those who are unfamiliar with receiving empathy are rarely equipped to extend it to others. The experiences I have described in this fragment were the beginning of my understanding of what it means to extend empathy. As I was seen as a whole person, I began to understand what it means to view others in the same way. This is a practice of humanity, and it is not a small thing. It is, as Montagu (1958) might have agreed, the whole point of education.

THE AFTERMATH

By the start of my final semester, I knew I was done. I would finish my degree, and my relationship with Mormonism would end. I was grateful for all that this institution had given me and equally ready to move forward. The sociological imagination had given me the language and the confidence to examine what had shaped me. The relational curriculum I engaged with had shown me that questions and critical thought were not meant to be written down and stowed away. Deviating from the script was not a moral failure. To think critically, to voice concern, and to push back did not constitute disobedience. I did not leave the faith out of anger or spite but out of the critical thinking that my educators had modeled and encouraged.

There is an irony in this. The university I attended was designed to produce lifelong, faithful members of the Mormon church. They hoped for graduates who would marry in the temple, raise children born in the covenant, and carry the script of faith forward into the next generation. This script did reach me. There was a time when I was faithful. I attended church, studied scripture daily, and prayed day and night. I cherished the words of the prophets, taught Sunday School, participated in temple ceremonies, wore the temple garment, and prayed that I would find an eternal companion and be prepared to fulfill my God-ordained role as a wife and mother. The script was a part of my life for several years, even during times when I was struggling with my faith. I sincerely believed that this script was sacred and ordained by God. Still, as my education provided me with the tools needed to examine my faith, I found the courage to deviate from the script and to do so without shame.

I would be remiss if I were to allow anyone to believe that I harbor any resentment toward my undergraduate experience. I recognize the difficulties, but I also cherish much of my time at that university. The people who showed me kindness and love are dear to me, and their impact did not end at graduation. It was because of them, the empathy they extended, the curiosity they modeled, and the care they provided, that I chose to pursue a career in student affairs and higher education. I hope, in my own work, to share that empathy with others.

CONCLUSION

The experiences reflected upon and analyzed in this article are uniquely personal, but the concerns they raise are not. Scripted curriculum is not limited to religious universities. It exists



whenever an educator prioritizes compliance, conformity, and predetermined ideals rather than curiosity, connection, and the actual students in their classrooms. When this occurs, the relational conditions that empathy requires are diminished.

The concern that education can produce academically capable graduates who lack anything more is not new. In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis (1943/1947) spoke of what happens when individuals are educated without moral and emotional formation: “We make men without chests and expect out of them virtue and enterprise” (p. 16). The warning was clear in the 1940s, and it is clear today. When someone is educated without prioritizing their moral and emotional formation, we cannot be surprised when they fail to demonstrate the virtues that were never modeled to them. One such virtue is empathy. The result is graduates who have been academically shaped but not truly known. They cannot be reasonably expected to extend what they have not received. Still, not all hope is lost. As bell hooks (1994) taught, “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (p. 12).

Reflecting on my educational journey reminds me of Simon and Garfunkel’s (1970) song, “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” As an undergraduate student, empathy and human connection were a bridge over the troubled water of scripted curriculum and religious pressure. I did not always have access to this bridge. My environment attempted to construct one out of rules and shaky theology. That bridge did not hold. The bridge that would prove to be sturdy enough was built by those who, in Pinar’s (1994) terms, accompanied me through the ongoing process of examining how my personal and intellectual history was actively shaping the person I was becoming. It was built through curiosity rather than compliance, through relationship rather than redirection. Simply, the bridge was built through empathy.

Joseph Smith (1842/1921) wrote 13 statements that describe the basic doctrines and practices of the Mormon church. The 13th article reads:

We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things. (p. 58)

In a way, I still believe this. My belief is no longer in the religious doctrine. It is in the virtues that I have seen embodied by some of the most impactful people I crossed paths with throughout my undergraduate education. These are people who listened, asked what I thought, and never led me to believe that my belonging was contingent upon my religious beliefs or my obedience. In doing so, they embodied this article of faith more fully than any script could have enforced. They were honest, benevolent, and good. They had hope in me, which I leaned on when I had no hope in myself. They extended empathy to me and, in doing so, taught me about extending empathy to others. As I enter the field of student affairs and higher education, I hope to be for someone else what those educators were for me.

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