

As a closeted gay member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, I would say that I am pretty familiar with fear.

The gradual discovery of one's sexuality is typically marked with embarrassment and excitement. In my life, it was marked by the sweeping paralysis that caused me to question my every motive and action. Desperate to rid myself of my unwanted homosexual feelings, I clung to the iron rod with a fierceness that impeded me from moving forward. For years, I was convinced that I was a cursed member of God's family and that society did not have a place for me. Sure, there were plenty of active participants in the gay community, both inside and outside of the church, but I convinced myself that they could not feel any happier than me, the miserable teenage boy who thrived on secrecy and self-punishment.

Having spent the majority of my life afraid of myself and my own feelings, I was unprepared for the liberal celebration of life that I found in my Interdisciplinary Humanities 202 class. I remember vividly my professor explaining on the first day that yes, we would be studying artistic depictions of naked humans, and that no, that was nothing to be ashamed of. With the utmost tact and grace, my professor guided us through some of the most remarkable (and sometimes most shameless) monuments of human history. Behind every painting and sculpture there was a story of loss, ecstasy, betrayal, romance, violence, or catharsis. The figures depicted and the artists responsible seemed so full of honesty and sincerity. It was abundantly clear to all the students that our professor had a deep and abiding love of Jesus Christ and His gospel, and it almost seemed that her appreciation for all these works of art – even the seemingly scandalous ones – deepened her own conversion. I cannot remember the exact class period when it happened, but I felt strongly that there was something beautiful about my professor's outlook on life, and something very flawed about my own. She taught that the differences and weaknesses of the artists and models were what made them beautiful, and she loved them for it.

One day I finally had the epiphany that these monuments of art were physical manifestations of courage. There was no sense of embarrassment in the artists and authors who used words, paints, or clay to express vulnerably what they felt and experienced. To participate fully in the humanities, they had to eliminate the one constant that held my life together: fear.

The more I learned about the humanities, the more I realized that the human experience is something to be celebrated, not castigated. For the first time in my life, I dared to believe that homosexual feelings were not a reason to cower in self-loathing, but perhaps an established part of God's beautiful plan for my life. Acknowledging openly and lovingly the differences that separated me from mainstream BYU society appeared to be a much better option than dwelling under the cloak of secrecy and shame.

I know that I am not alone in my intimacy with fear. In America alone, there are thousands of people who are justifiably afraid of starvation, police brutality, discrimination, bankruptcy, and violence. Fear chokes the joy out of an individual and exposes them to exploitation and injustice. The antidote to fear, and the first step towards justice, is perfect love, for "perfect love casteth out fear" (1 John 4:18). As the events of 2020 have shown, many people believe that the social injustices of our day demand riot, anger, and self-abandon; however, in order to put an end to fear, perfect love demands that we show empathy, understanding, and patience to ourselves and others.

I saw glimpses of this perfect love in my humanities professor. In her class, and in future humanities classes, I learned how to appreciate every part of the human experience. The arts are not only concerned with the aesthetically pleasing parts of life; through almost every conceivable medium, people have honored the tragic, disgusting, unfortunate, and redemptive aspects of humanity with a grace and “perfect love” that I had never shown myself. Inspired by this example, I was able to do two important things. First, I swallowed my fear and opened up about my homosexuality to a few select individuals in my life. With their help, I overcame the false beliefs of my own inferiority and sin and began to see myself more completely. I grew to know that I am not any less of a human for my sexuality. My experience was meant to be understood and honored, not punished. My commitment to Christ became *more* sacred because of my sexuality, not less so.

The second achievement involved my work as an instructor at the Missionary Training Center. As missionaries came and went through my classroom, I made sure to share 1 John 4:18 with every single one. We discussed how fear profoundly affects the lives of those they are called to teach; the downtrodden, the impoverished, and the mistreated. We analyzed how perfect love can free these people from any stereotypes, judgements, and self-inflicted isolations that keep them bound. Promoting love and justice in the classroom has been one of the most meaningful parts of my BYU career.

In a way I never expected, studying the humanities changed my life. Across the centuries, nude figures in the arts spoke to me a message of hope, acceptance, and mercy. Now more than ever, it is hope, acceptance, and mercy that will save humanity from the social injustice and fear that plague us. I’m not sure of my place in the Plan of Salvation, nor am I sure of the political and economic solutions to the myriad of social issues we face. However, I *am* sure that perfect love born from vulnerability and sincerity, taught to me by the humanities, has the power to free the world from fear as it did to me.