

# THE TREMBLING FOREST OF LEE

## Journey, Perspective, and the Context of Our Condition

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In a vast valley somewhere known only to those made aware of its location there sprawls a dense and trembling forest. This trembling Forest of Lee, as secluded as it is, is no stranger to visitors inside or out. Some visitors who come upon the forest can never seem to muster the courage to step foot inside, always peering in for a time, then retreating to make camp somewhere along the neighboring landscape of canyons, peaks, and plateaus. Every so often they return to the edge of the forest as their whirlwind nature calls and wonders for explanation and a better path forward. But every time they reach the edge of their destination, the trembling forest, it's as if the energy they already spent on the courage to make it this far into their journey has been whisked away by the sweeping winds of the Forest of Lee. Perhaps entrance is simply the difference between seekers and finders. These apprehensive travelers often provide lingering whispers of speculation and wonder, and their grave questions and desires and intent can be heard humming along the outer rim of the forest; whispers and speculations wondering if all the world's winds originate from the trembles themselves. Are they the winds of change they so desire? Any speculation of wonder, and whisper of desire or intent, serves as merely an outside explanation continually reverberating off the canyon walls and the provided and working winds of the trembling forest. Whether the explanations of the trembles be insipid or inspiring, or stolen for a false truth to be utilized in some far off bureaucratic realm, they are fruitless; for they remain too many degrees of separation away from the root of their speculative condition.

There are, however, the ones who walk into the depths of the forest and never return. Each one goes alone. They walk into the Forest of Lee, having walked an immense distance to escape and understand the reality of their previous circumstance, and they take up new roots. These are they who have walked away into uncertainty and obscurity—into places previously unimaginable. They have walked away into uncertainty and obscurity to enter the Forest of Lee and have done so since the beginning of the first generation; building one upon another as each enters the still depths alone; strengthening in foundational unison.

Why do they do this you might ask? Why travel so far in uncertainty to take root and seem to do nothing except tremble?

The Forest of Lee, as secluded as it is, is no stranger to feelings such as guilt, anger, regret, ambition and courage, certainly a myriad of others. These emotional whirlwinds accompany

those who step beyond the rim of the forest and venture inside. When they do so they enter a place where these feelings flow as companions in condition to be reevaluated and better understood for their vitality and versatility—as faculties to be developed in lieu of debilitating detriment. Faculties to better align the companionship they share with the desires, intentions and the future actions springing out of their new roots. To confront the discomfort of guilt and regret is to liberate oneself. Without the discomforts of guilt and regret there is no liberation, there is no deliberation, no courage, no true sense of condition. Those who have walked away, those who wander into the depths of the Forest of Lee to bear the weight and comprehension of their newfound emotional turmoil, they have seemed to notice their predicament. God made them in His outwardly supplicating and sensing image, yes, in lieu of the senses to seek within. In lieu of the sense to seek within they must knock and hope—faithfully, for fanciful assistance. When faced with the most horrific of revelations—when struck with the unfortunate reality of their fortunate circumstances, when the reality of their world is torn asunder, a knock and a hope is insufficient action. The reality of their horrific situation was present in that moment, yet there was nothing that could be done and there was no answer to be heard or found. This is why they walk away. This is why they walk away. This is why they transform and take up root and tremble inside the Forest of Lee.

Those who walk in and take root learn quickly that seeing the Forest of Lee for the trees is to have never entered the forest at all. Rather, a tree in the Forest of Lee learns that the forest is not in it, it is in the forest, and everything, even their trembles, are appearing there. They did not enter the forest only to bring the forest along with them. They did not take up root in the forest, entwined with the rest of those who have walked away since the beginning of the first generation, in order that they may remain in the horror of their past condition. They entered the Forest of Lee to see things as they already are, and to carry with them on the winds a certainty. A certainty and clarity that is found from the edge to the very depths of the forest. Where they find who they love and how they love them, and how they can work to enhance and develop that love. They had once grown complacent; now they grow with effective intention.

Those who have stepped beyond the boundary of the rim of the forest, even a single step beyond, those who have walked away with the desire to find more fruitful roots, they discover the boundless nature upon which no-one who enters can find themselves actually looking, yet wherein everything—yes, even the trembles—appear. The trembles appear and are noticed. Newly surmised guilt—a feeling never having been known by those who have walked away—confusion and anger speeding into an unfocusing view, as well as regrets or fear of circumstance, these all arise on their own in the breadth of the forest and are subsequently noticed. They are noticed and shared at root level. They appear and are noticed. They are arranged, revitalized

and enhanced. The accompanying trembles appear and are noticed and twist and arrange and whirl away to appear and be noticed by the next tree en route, and so onward it goes until they send their trembling messages to every peak, and canyon, and valley and plateau on the sweeping winds of the Forest of Lee.

The Trembling Forest of Lee, as secluded as it seems, is seen and known by all who are aware of its location.



I am reminded of a poem by David Whyte which expresses much of this sentiment in a more concise, beautiful and thought provoking manner, and one which resides in the tradition of pilgrimage.

The road in the end, taking the path the sun had taken,  
into the western sea, and the moon rising behind you  
as you stood where ground turned to ocean: no way  
to your future now except the way your shadow could take,  
walking before you across water, going where shadows go,  
no way to make sense of a world that wouldn't let you pass  
except to call an end to the way you had come,  
to take out each frayed letter you had brought  
and light their illumined corners; and to read  
them as they drifted on the late western light;  
to empty your bags; to sort this and to leave that;  
to promise what you needed to promise all along,  
and to abandon the shoes that had brought you here  
right at the water's edge, not because you had given up  
but because now, you would find a different way to tread,  
and because, through it all, part of you would still walk on,  
no matter how, over the waves.<sup>1</sup>

There is no way to see and make sense of the world as an ex-Mormon except by ways counterintuitive to everything previously known, taught and consumed by you. The destination you seek cannot be reached from here. The culminating events of your life and the road of

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<sup>1</sup> David Whyte, "Finisterre" *Pilgrim: Poems by David Whyte*

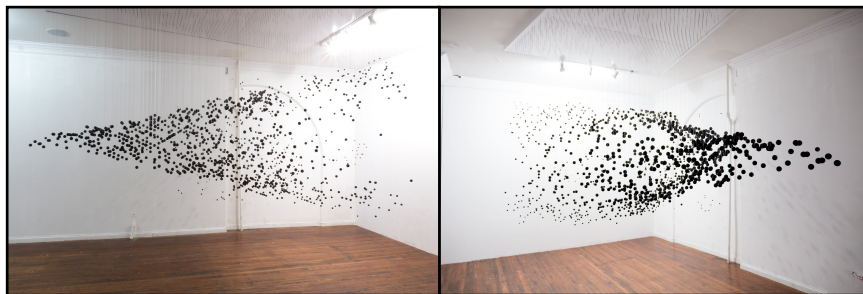
deconstruction which have lead you to the shoreline of your faith journey cannot take you any further. They are what brought you to this apex of change,

“to promise what you needed to promise all along,  
and to abandon the shoes that had brought you here.”

How did you walk as a Mormon and how will you truly walk differently now?

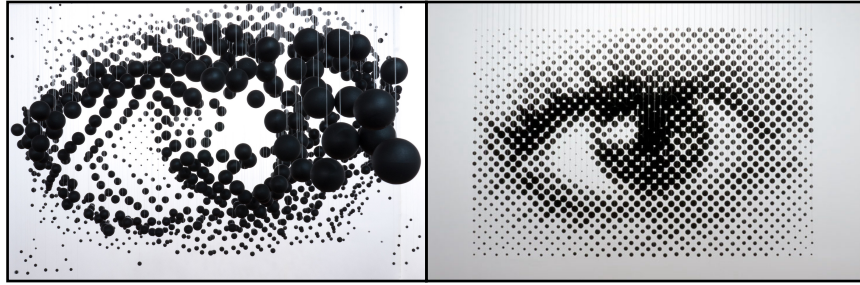


In the years following the revelations of the National Security Administration’s expanding surveillance of United States citizens certain perspectives began to shift for many Americans. Conversations regarding government and corporation tracking and rights of privacy increased exponentially, and continue in heated debate among top tech competitors and government agencies to this day. One of my favorite statements on this issue comes from Brooklyn-based perceptual sculptor Michael Murphy. In 2015 he revealed his installation entitled, *Perceptual Shift*. When one views the sculpture from the sides or any acute angle the sculpture seems to be nothing more than a disorganized mass of solid-black painted spheres dangling from the ceiling at various lengths and depths. Chaos.



Both side views of ‘Perceptual Shift,’ Michael Murphy, 2015

However, when an observer switches their view to see the sculpture directly, it transforms into an arresting, two-dimensional, monochromatic eye.



Acute view and direct view, respectfully.

The illusion this sculpture reveals is multifaceted. On one level it can be taken to show that anything can be arranged as you see it, but you likely won't find the true value in it until you take the time to work it out and change your perspective when and where necessary. On another level it can be taken to represent a community, societal, or personal blind spot; a failure to see and act upon what is directly and immediately available. The illusion can be taken to reveal a shared experience in its fabrication and our own. Its composition, when viewed at any angle long enough, is a visual example of the feeling, sense, and association we have with our body. Not as a tightly packed mass of solid elements, but as a turbulence of appearing sensations. It is the all-seeing eye of the government and the illusion that you can but move aside and not be seen. It is the all-seeing eye of god. It is the illusion of that feeling of *I* inside your head. As in *I Am* continually witnessing and glaring at my own shortcomings but as I step aside, letting Christ and the Spirit take the wheel of my will, I only see how mysterious god truly is.

At face value we see Michael Murphy's eye as an eye exists at a third-person view. Learning that we can drop that third-person perspective in this three-dimensional space to expose the explosive illusion reveals that there is no center to the sculpture, and the eye is not even an eye. It's wooden balls connected to thread. The same is found should we take the perspective and position of the eye as viewed by others. If we are this eye, where is our center, and of what are we really composed and comprising? The fact that we feel centered somewhere is just another appearance in the illusion of our fabrication should we find a new viewing perspective. From these alternative, non-centralized angles, we see that consciousness is all around us; cohesive, but not coalescing in the manners we have previously been taught to believe and perceive. Even if you take nothing into the future from noticing such a perspective, once it is seen, you cannot unsee it. That is when it becomes not a question of 'Why are we here?' But noticing clearly *that we are here*.



I would not want to diminish a masterpiece down to a singular expression, but if we are to glean anything of relevance about the beauty, importance and the mystery of art, and its relation to our perspectives on life I believe it can be found in a single quatrain written by Stephen Sondheim, from his Pulitzer Prize winning musical, *Sunday in the Park with George*.

I had fallen in love with post-impressionist works of art well before my first introduction to this musical. While growing up there was a continual battle in my mind for favorite between *The Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh and *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Le Grande Jatte* by George Seurat. It's not much of a surprise that this was the case. Aside from their individual fascinating elements, the home I grew up in was filled with art, several among them were works by one of the founders of Impressionism, Claude Monet. Since the very first production I saw of *Sunday in the Park with George* it has spoken to me in many ways and hypnotized me for countless other reasons. However, I no longer value the musical or the painting for any of the original reasons which held me captive, nor do I believe the same things about their meaning—or the meaning of life for that matter. Notwithstanding, their depth of value and context have truly been augmented, and I see them for all new arrangements of shadow, color and light.



Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte, George Seurat, 1886

George is in the process of completing his masterpiece. In particular, he is working on adding a hat atop the head of one of his park attendees—where there had never been a hat seen previously. There is a great deal happening in the lives of the main characters at this point, but of most relevance to us would have to be the intensity with which George concentrates on his painting, and the thrill—the phenomenon of relinquishing the entire world to the work that accompanies that concentration.

He is at the height of his artistry and about to complete an immeasurable contribution that will ripple throughout humanity, yet paradoxically, he continues to treat much of his personal life without expectation, as if it is static. As if the moment the painting receives its final application, life will continue just as it was before he started living in the timeless space of his masterpiece. A week passes after finishing the hat when we find George at the park working on a sketch of his mother. Mother begins lamenting about all of the changes going on around her. With her fading memory she speaks of missing trees where George says there was only an open field, as well as the warm and caring company of her husband which George confirms was never the case. She misses the stillness. She misses when it was beautiful.

This is where we see not only the intent behind the method of his painting, but we receive a revelation into his psychological and emotional perspective on life.

Pretty isn't beautiful, Mother,  
 Pretty is what changes.  
 What the eye arranges  
 Is what is beautiful.

Like Mother's memory, the past is ever-fading. Point of fact, the permanent residence of this famed painting at the Art Institute of Chicago is in its intended crisp-white frame, seated behind glass and in a room away from sunlight—primarily for preservation purposes. Unbeknownst to Seurat, due to a new type of paint used at the time the vividness and vibrance of the colors began fading a mere eight years after its completion.

One of the marks of the Post-Impressionist movement was the expression of things not as they are directly, accurately and naturally viewed by the eyes but as they may have been viewed and shaped by the mind that saw the original scene—in turn leaving it on canvas for us to view and shape again in our mind— capturing the world and mapping out potentials, building anew and growing. That is why, in the case of George and our quatrain, it is not what the eye sees that is beautiful, what the eye arranges in our present space of awareness is what is beautiful. Nothing can be statically viewed because everything is always flowing. That which is beautiful is not conventional, nor stuck in a past-time. The painting itself is a true example of what the eye arranges. First of all, there is nothing linear about the painting. In a literal sense there are no lines upon its surface. Neither is it the result of quickly splotched dots. It is a conglomeration of meticulously placed smudges, yet when viewed from a removed perspective there is complete form, and geometric shape, as well as shadow and light and movement in what should be a two-dimensional stillness. It shares and expresses the same layers of our own fundamental nature, and

its composition is a representation of the particulate feeling that often accompanies that attentive space of relinquishment for artists, and the abandonment-of-self discovered through meditation, or the use psychedelics.

At a distance we see the entire scene. Moving closer we lose the view of some of those in the image and are left with a clearer, yet more blurry depiction of grass, shadows from those standing off in the margins, and a closer view of some of those characters in the distance. At this range it is as if the painting is vibrating, as if the leaves on the trees and the waters of the Seine reveal their trembling turbulence. Examining closer still we come upon a whirlwind of ambiguous circular blemishes of various sizes and colors, then the colors themselves—whatever colors are apart from a range of frequencies. If we had a microscope or other technology we could see down to the fibers, then molecules, particles and atoms, until we can't seem to find anything except that same empty space in which it all first appeared anyway; that same space in which it was all first beautifully arranged.

If you notice, it is the same with us; and the cast of this painting, (surely not knowing that they would be immortalized in this way), they remain to help those of us looking in to witness our true selves. None of those within the painting are interacting with one another. Whether they be grouped together or not there is no implication of one to another to be found. It is clear that each individual's attention resides elsewhere. Some appear lost in thought, others attending to foliage or something off the edge that we cannot see, but no one individual directly to another. We as viewing individuals on the outside of the painting are not implicated by those within the painting—nor is it the case that we can implicate them. As we study the whole, as we take in all of its shadow and color and light we become participants in that same world—this world. We are not subjects for their attention and they are not subjects for our attention. They, the agglomeration of colorful splotches, the ones who are clearly seen there under the trees, smelling the flowers, perhaps imagining that they're wearing a hat, they are suddenly no longer felt to be separate from anyone or anything. A harmonious diffusion of color and light, sensation and stillness and flow. They are not in the past and we are not in the future. We are all only now. Living here and living in there with them; which is to mean living everywhere

Pretty is what changes, and all things that exist insinuate change. That which changes seems to indicate or implicate time. We are among those insinuations, indications and implications. We are a developing process down to the very moment. As we are putting it together, piece by piece, moment by moment, our commitment to the puzzle of life and the level and amount of attention we provide to it equals the value we receive. True value and meaning in something is precisely determined by our attention provided. You can be literally anywhere, out in the wilderness, at the supermarket, in the celestial room on your glorious wedding day or after

having performed a saving ordinance for a deceased loved one, or at work, or sitting next to your children, pets and partners in the comfort of your own home, or in traffic—you get the point—but if you are lost in thought, attending to imagined spaces, you may as well be lost anywhere, at any time. You are only as free as the attention provided to the beauty of what the eye arranges. Paradoxically, if you are recognizing the arrangement of beauty, the natural flow of consciousness, it also doesn't matter where or when you are because the profound beauty is only here in the moment you're truly attending.

This lesson of the painting, our experience and its context was a lesson learned by Dot, one of the main characters of the musical. Whenever George was working on sketches of Dot out in the park he would instruct her to concentrate, which she took to mean, *be still*. She would later reveal she came to understand that *to be still* means that she should be exactly where she is in that moment. To not be off in a dissonant past or future time. To realize that she already is still, that everything else moves in harmony with her stillness, and that through her stillness she could witness and arrange beautiful, new things—things that never were before.

To find the still space of awareness is to discover and arrange that which is beautiful. It is in this space where we can truly revitalize and evaluate experience. Regret, guilt, anger and other uncomfortable or plaguing emotions and feelings of the past can be arranged in your present circumstance to be better understood for enacting beautiful changes in your well-being, temperament and demeanor, as well as in times and places of future events requiring more of your attention than in events past.

Seurat himself summed up this context in a concise way when he said,

“Some say they see poetry in my painting. I see only science.”