A friend of mine, whose name I will change to protect the innocent (let’s call him Augustine), told me of an experience he once had during his prodigal adolescence. Augustine knew he was doing wrong, that his life was spiraling downwards, and he could feel the darkness of the Abyss looming up to eclipse the glimmer of spiritual light that remained within him. While washing dishes in the sink of the pizza joint where he worked, and under the influence of a substance condoned by neither the Word of Wisdom nor common sense, Augustine noticed soap bubbles floating lazily in the air around him. As he reports it, while watching the bubbles suspended in front of him, he was suddenly filled with and overwhelmed by the Spirit of God in such a powerful way that it left him overjoyed and speechless. This moment of inspiration in the middle of wickedness marked a turning point in his life and serves as a touchstone for my message.

In life, as we all know, there is the Ideal and then there is the Real. There is no question that putting ourselves in ideal places can, and often will, lead to flashes of insight. But other moments of discovery or inspiration cannot be scripted and come to us quite spontaneously. When it comes to feeling the influence of God or spiritual promptings, for example, the ideal scenario finds us in church or in the temple, praying or reading the scriptures. In reality, however, the still, small voice will sometimes come to us, as it did to my friend Augustine, during periods of rebellion, great personal darkness, or just random distraction: when we’re about

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to commit sin, for example, or while we’re paring our fingernails, or digging out a tree root from the backyard.

Likewise, when it comes to discovering great truths about life and the humanities, the ideal finds us in front of a great painting in one of the world’s finest museums, or listening to a Brahms concerto featuring a brilliant pianist, or reading a great classic from world literature (preferably in the original language). In reality, however, we sometimes find that our greatest insights about life or the human condition come flooding into our hearts and minds when our child hands us a colorful crayon drawing of our family; or when we are stuck in traffic, scan the radio dial, and stumble upon music we have never paid attention to before; or when we are waiting in the doctor’s office and, lacking anything to read, look up and begin to study the anxious faces of the other patients.

Life is filled with both kinds of discovery: those that come after considerable forethought and preparation, rewarding patience and perseverance with the sought-after prize; and those that flash upon the mind, out of a clear blue sky, so to speak, when one least expects them. Although, in the retelling, most success stories tend to emphasize the preparation-perseverance continuum, I would like to give a bit of airtime to the other side of epiphany, that more-common-than-we-might-care-to-admit phenomenon of pleasant surprises where we least expect to find them.

There is a Buddhist metaphor for this kind of discovery: the lotus blossom. The lotus is a plant that rises above the water and blooms with beautiful flowers and a delightful fragrance. It is everywhere in Buddhist iconography, since Buddhism emerged in India, a land blessed with lotus flowers, which rise up from the bottom of murky swamps through the water to bloom in all their glory. The lotus serves as an apt symbol for Buddhist enlightenment, and in popular lore throughout Asia, but particularly in Japan, much is made of the fact that this most beautiful of flowers thrives and blooms in the midst of slime, mud, and filth. It is a fitting metaphor for how Buddhism perceives itself: a means to transcend the sorrows and pain of the world. It is also an apt reminder that even the most vile of sinners can escape the world’s influence and achieve enlightenment.

There is an aesthetic parallel to the lotus motif that is sometimes conflated in both Buddhist art and classical Japanese literature: the paradox of a moment of singular beauty appearing in the midst of great ugliness. The lotus reminds us that sometimes we will find the ethereal where we least expect it, tucked away in some dark corner of the world, far from the bright colors and splendor of the city, a hidden flower whose mundane or even vulgar surroundings enhance its beauty and its purity. The lotus, then, stands for an idea that many great traditions of philosophy and art share in common: if one dares venture outside the walls of convention and contemporary fashion, into the swampy hinterlands, there is a world of beauty and insight awaiting discovery. In the spirit of the lotus, then, I will present a few blossoms of truth from the shallow muck of my limited knowledge, examples of surprises discovered in the oddest places, hidden flowers that demonstrate the value of expecting the unexpected.

Serendipity, usually referred to as a “happy accident” or “pleasant surprise,” is the act (or art) of having things turn out well in spite of oneself. In 1754, Horace Walpole coined the term after a twelfth-century Persian fairy tale, “The Three Princes of Serendip,” wherein the said princes were able, using logic and observation not unlike that of Sherlock Holmes, to clear themselves from charges of theft and wind up garnering riches and being appointed advisors to their former captor. (As someone who has studied the circuitous paths stories take as they migrate across cultures, I must note that the original Persian tale made its way into English first via a sixteenth-century Venetian translation that was translated into French and then adapted into an English version, all of these being very serendipitous for Horace Walpole.)

In considering, then, the role of serendipity in our lives, Louis Pasteur came up with the maxim, “Chance favors the prepared mind.” Many of my colleagues demonstrate this well, having studied long and hard to become masters of their disciplines, now able to leverage
that preparation into works of great genius and beauty. In contrast, my own research proves that there are times when chance favors the wandering mind as much as the prepared one. In other words, sometimes looking at things from the wrong perspective, intentionally or not, can lead to valuable discoveries as well. By adopting unconventional perspectives we are often able to discover new insights and wrest new meanings from even very familiar contexts. In other words, I have learned to embrace my inner misreader.

Let me tell you a story that reveals why I sometimes choose to misread. Many years ago, before I came to BYU, I was on study abroad in Japan with a group of Colgate University students. We were in Hiroshima, at the Peace Memorial Park in the early evening, and the sky was overcast and gray. In that sultry twilight several of my students walked over to a rectangular fountain that surrounds the memorial cenotaph there and pulled some spare change out of their pockets.

“Did you know that if you set it up just right, a one-yen coin will float in a glass of water?” I asked them, remembering a trick that I had learned as a missionary.

“Really?” one student responded, as he tossed a one-yen coin underhand out onto the water.

“Not like that . . . ” I began, but to our complete surprise his coin landed softly upon the water, slowly spinning as it floated away in the gathering dusk.

The students, to a person, stood still and uncharacteristically silent, watching. We had just come from the museum, and were sobered by its graphic depictions of the atrocities of the bombing. And there, before the memorial to the victims, we all watched a small miracle in that coin floating upon the water. Afterwards, back at the hostel, we talked about what had happened, and after discussing probabilities and modes of interpretation, most of the students read the floating coin either as an uncanny witness to the unnatural events that had happened there, or as a metaphor for how we, as individuals, could make a difference in ensuring that such atrocities would never be repeated. I still cherish that event as a highlight of my study abroad experiences.

Fast-forward nearly two decades, this time with BYU students at Nikkō, a famous shrine located in the depths of beautiful mountains outside of Tokyo. As the students wandered over to a rectangular cistern filled with rainwater from ornately decorated gutters, they saw coins at the bottom and pulled out spare change. I told them about my Hiroshima experience—or began to—when one of the students, a returned missionary, took out a one-yen coin and quickly placed it upon the surface of the water. “It floats!” he exclaimed, beating me to the punch line. Others quickly followed suit, and everyone soon had mastered the trick of making coins float.

They were all thrilled, but I was strangely disappointed, for several reasons. First, I had been upstaged and lost the chance to tell my cool Hiroshima story. Second, all the mystery was gone. What had, for me and for the first group, been a rare, even supernatural, experience was, for this group, a simple trick and a lesson in dexterity. What haunted me most, however, was the nagging temptation I felt to abandon my original interpretation of what happened at Hiroshima, to downplay the mystery in light of revised statistical probability. But I was reluctant to reject that earlier reading of experience; it had become too familiar, even sacred to me, to let it go, even in the face of new understanding.

And from this I realized that there was a truth I gleaned from my misreading of the probabilities at Hiroshima that I would have never come to know had I been fully informed of how easily a one-yen coin can float upon the water.
away the curtain and reveal that it was only dexterity and physics, nothing supernatural at all. And I would have robbed myself and my students of a misreading that underscored a profound lesson of the human experience.

The point, then, is that we probably misread more than we read, but glean truth from our efforts nonetheless. So I believe firmly in the idea that sometimes we can stumble upon valuable truths even if we are clueless about all the details and facts.

I come to this belief with what I perceive to be a modicum of intellectual integrity. When I was a graduate student at Princeton, I was fortunate to have been studying comparative literature when the department brought Hans-Robert Jauss, the famous reception theorist, to campus for a week-long visit. He gave several lectures, took the graduate students out to dinner (since I did not drink any of the wine, he gave me the cork as a memento), and even held office hours. I spent an hour with him, talking about his ideas, and I remember his enthusiasm for what I was doing—applying his theories in the realm of Japanese literature, far beyond their usual targets—because it underscored one of the basic tenets of his approach: art is found just beyond the edges of our expectations, where we are challenged to interrogate strangeness. I loved his expanded, even redeeming, interpretation of the experience of irony: the unexpected can be both beautiful and edifying.

And so I invite you to think about the times when you have stumbled upon beauty in ugly places or have found truth just beyond the edges of your expectations. Life is filled with these hidden flowers: a lotus can blossom from the mud; a sagebrush buttercup can emerge from the snow melt of early May; redemption can spring from a depressing novel; a dispensation-initiating series of revelations can come forth from a burned-over frontier district; and one can sometimes find a surprising joy and comfort at a funeral.

I want to share a few serendipitous discoveries from my translation and literary experiences that suggest the value of looking beyond our expectations. In the course of research, and especially when writing up scholarship, even the best-planned investigations and studies are highly unpredictable. The irony of the research proposal writing process is that one must predict what one will discover, when in fact most of the time we discover just the opposite or something completely different along the way. This species of serendipity is a constant source of wonder to me. I am amazed at how often the scholarship that draws the most attention or that I feel most satisfied with emerges not from carefully thought-out and reasoned outlines or systematic study but from hints and suggestions that crop up along the way.

We all have moments when we find, while writing up something or elaborating on a very simple thought, that words on the page or screen seem to suggest new ideas, thoughts, or avenues for investigation that have turned out to be much more significant than the original intentions. So I have also come to understand that an important aspect of scholarship is a willingness to follow where new clues lead, even if they run into dead ends, because often there are things "out there" that enlighten us as well, sometimes in even more fundamental and earth-shaking ways.

Likewise, in the course of teaching, we may have well-prepared material before us, but sometimes the best teaching moments occur when that material serves as the framework upon which either class discussion or the sudden flow of new ideas leads the moment to become a revelatory rather than a pedagogical experience. We may be far from a revelatory topic (in my case it has happened right in the middle of an explanation of a passage of The Tale of Genji) when a student question or comment, or maybe even just the barest whisper of an idea, suddenly opens up a new vista on the subject or, more likely, on life itself. And, for a brief moment, as teacher I become the vessel through which a particular insight
flows. It is one of the great blessings of teaching, and I am grateful that it is not a rare one.

When I was studying at a Japanese university years ago as a Japanese government research fellow, I dabbled in kyūdō, or classical Japanese archery. What I learned from that experience was that often the Zen approach to learning a skill involves a great deal of repetition to build muscle memory (think Mr. Miyagi). My kyūdō teacher kept telling me that once I learned the movements intuitively I would hit the target consistently. And it was true. But throughout my training I kept struggling with my inner American that just wanted to shoot a bunch of arrows from all over the place until my brain and body figured out what to do. I was trying to find the balance between conscious, intentional effort and the improvisational state of no consciousness.

Another, more recent discovery is Gabriela Montero, a pianist who does classical improvisation at the end of her concerts because she sees improvisation in the classical piano tradition as a lost art, one that used to be regular expectation for virtuoso performances. When interviewed about this, she noted, “It’s almost as if I’m in a different state of consciousness when I improvise. . . . I find it quite spiritual. It’s like water that gushes out; it’s inevitable and always changeable. And it’s not really something that I control. . . . When I improvise, I tap into some kind of musical universe that I’m very connected to. I’m like an open vessel. Where does it come from? I really don’t know.” In teaching, as in music or even archery, we can sometimes become open vessels and, like Montero, come to rely upon the happy accident of inspiration to tap into a wider universe of truth. This is yet another side of serendipity.

Serendipity led me from a study of Japanese oral storytellers to the Ainu, aboriginal inhabitants of Japan whose language and culture diverge dramatically from the Japanese. I learned that Ainu have a long tradition of shamanism, and their oral storytellers also have a tradition of narrators who speak in the voices of those from the world beyond, much like the Victorians or Spiritualists who wanted to commune with the dead in their séances. Among the traditional Ainu, storytellers also narrate using the voices of animals, which are actually gods who choose to come among humans disguised as animals, both to enjoy their company and to surrender their physical bodies in return for prayers and offerings.

The Ainu storytelling perspective opened up to me a new way of looking at the narrating voice. The Ainu shaman represents the medium through which gods from another world are able to speak to the people, and I realized that this is also fundamentally what happens with translation: people from another language, era, or culture find a voice in our world through the mediation of a translator. And so it follows that a competent translator should be like a skilled storyteller, able to incorporate both conscious aptitude—a panoply of voices and personas—as well as improvisation—being in tune with the audience and the flow of the moment—as they seek to embody voices from other cultures and other times.

I have recently augmented my thinking about translation with some actual translation experience, focusing on a Japanese poet named Kajii Motojirō (1901–1932). Modern Japan has witnessed a number of brilliant young writers cut down in the prime of life. Kajii, whose life spanned the first third of the twentieth century, rode the wave of modernist experiments to create his own style of eloquent, introspective fiction. He died having finished only twenty short works and leaving behind many unfinished manuscripts just as the tide of war washed upon Japan’s shores. Kajii was born in Osaka and studied in Kyoto and Tokyo, but at the young age of nineteen he contracted tuberculosis, which eventually led to his premature death at age thirty-one. His works, in the ensuing decades, have found recurring favor among critics, readers, and translators.

I have been translating two of his works that have yet to be formally published in English, largely owing to the difficulty of rendering the poetic and symbolic power of their brief but dense language. In my versions I have been attempting to practice a kind of translation that transcends mere correspondence. Taking my lead from the Ainu storyteller, I want the author to speak from the dust, as it were. I do not want my translations to be the reconstitution of dead texts showing us a dead world, but rather a resurrected series of thoughts and impressions coming to us from another place and time, showing us new ways to see our world.

Kajii began these two works during his recuperation at a hot springs resort on the Izu peninsula, and they reveal his own struggle to come to grips with his terminal illness. The earlier of the two is entitled “Out of the Blue” (Sākyō, 1928) and opens with the poet reflecting on events from his recent past. He describes discovering natural phenomena that mirror his own emotional and intellectual tensions. The later is called “A Picture Scroll of the Dark” (Yami no emaki, 1930) and describes his penchant for taking solitary walks in the dark in order to learn to see its beauty.
Translating these essays has brought me two happy accidents. The first involves a peculiar, even metaphysical, event that occurred as I was finishing up a prepenultimate translation. It was a beautiful November afternoon, clear and sunny. I was rewriting, reading over the original, and smoothing the translation. There were a couple of sections that I still had reservations about, in particular the odd cloud formation that plays a central role in the essay. As I kept working over the language, tweaking my own, I began to see images in my mind's eye that were increasingly more detailed, showing the view he described. So as I “saw” the cloud more clearly in my mind the depth and symbolic power of the poetic language hit me as well, so powerfully that I felt almost as if I were at one with Kajii, seeing the world through his eyes rather than just trying to understand his words.

This experience paralleled those I have had searching out ancestral haunts. I have been fortunate to be able to visit the birthplaces or home areas of many of my distant ancestors, in an attempt to get into their skins, to understand their lives better, which has been a rich and rewarding pursuit, one that has taught me powerful truths about forging bonds between the hearts of fathers and children. And that, oddly enough, is how I can best explain the experience I had translating this Japanese poet. I have no genealogical connection with him, but somehow, through reading his words, I felt a similar kind of atavistic whispering to my soul that helped me add the finishing touches and bring the English essay into greater harmony with the Japanese.

Just as I finished up (it was in the late afternoon), I noticed a cloud perched in the sky outside my north-facing office window. It was an odd weather day; a cold front was moving in and the wind blew wisps of clouds back from the east over the crests of Mt. Timpanogos and Cascade Peak. The sky was a deep blue and the cloud contained a few lavender edges. But what struck me most as I first noticed it and then returned my gaze five minutes later was that, although the cloud was slowly rotating in a clockwise direction, it was standing still in the sky. And although the upper fringes kept breaking off and disappearing into the blue sky, it did not reduce in size. I continued to watch that cloud on and off for the next half hour, and it never moved from its fundamental position in the sky, and although its outline changed shape a bit, it never grew smaller. Returning to my translation I realized, with a slight shiver, that my cloud and Kajii’s giant cloud were essentially the same.

The strangeness of this correspondence still baffles and amazes me. Did it really happen? I am as prone to skepticism as the next person, but I chose to read this as real, and as a gift, a physical manifestation that my translation was on the right path, somehow.

But what does all this mean? Kajii sees the cloud as a Buddhist metaphor for life: we come from a void (the sky), live our lives in a sort of precipitated vapor of sorrow and illusion, and then disappear back into the painless void once more. He was a young man with a terminal illness, confronting his mortality and reading nature in ways that embodied the deep emotions and paradoxes of his life. As I watched the cloud outside my office window that afternoon I realized that I, too, could read meaning into nature—multiple meanings, in fact, if I applied academic or spiritual readings (or misreadings) to the symbol of the cloud.

In his essay, Kajii found a first step towards transcendence in recognizing the nature of the cloud in the azure sky: it represented his own, sorrow-filled life as a kind of limited, vaporous, temporary state that would ultimately return him to a place of endless clarity. It helped him see that what he suffered alone was part of a larger cycle. I have found similar comfort through his insights as I contemplate my own and my family’s inevitable mortality and, in a very personal way, find my life greatly enriched by this particular act of translation.

Reflecting back on the experience, I think this pleasant surprise was meant to teach me something about the humanity of translation, that when we seek to serve another through reincarnating his or her words in another tongue we are, in a sense, helping to build
connections between souls, embodying, in an oblique but powerful way, a kind of literary Spirit of Elijah. As I put my heart and soul into trying to divine Kajii’s experiences and thoughts through his writing, literature became the medium connecting two very different souls—Kajii and me—in a unique conversation. Our hearts, I believe, were turned in the same way Elijah’s spirit saves the world in the latter days, by teaching us to avoid the objectifying bigotry of stereotypes and see others as souls to love, souls who can speak to us from the past and across cultural and linguistic divides. In other words, I think that if we open ourselves to the spirit of translation, our hearts might be turned to dead authors or poets just as fully, or even more so, as they can be turned to seventh-great-grandmothers or undocumented siblings who died as infants.

The second happy accident came during my much more involved process of translating “A Picture Scroll of the Dark.” The essay underwent multiple revisions and is the more structurally complex of the two and unfolds on two levels. Superficially, it is a mini-memoir, a collection of related memories retold with fond and loving description. More deeply, it is an allegory that reveals Kajii’s own struggle to come to grips with the death sentence imposed upon him by tuberculosis. Structurally it follows a nighttime journey, upstream and into the dark, wherein he discovers a wealth of beauty where he least expected to find it, enough, in fact, to fill a picture scroll. And we, as readers, are led to see this elegantly painted scroll through his enlightened eyes.

One scene in particular stands out in the essay: his discovery, one evening, of a fellow traveler in the darkness. Here is the passage:

Along the way stood one solitary household with a tree in front—perhaps a maple?—bathed in light like a magic lantern, it alone shining luxuriantly in that immense, dark landscape. The roadway itself brightened slightly at the spot, but this made the shadows ahead even darker as they swallowed up the path.

One evening I noticed a man—like me, without a lantern—walking further up the road. I saw him because his figure suddenly appeared in the illuminated space in front of the house. The man, his back turned to the light, gradually receded into the darkness and vanished. I watched the entire scene, moved in a strange, singular way. Stirred by the man’s disappearing figure, I thought, “In a short time I’ll be walking into the darkness just like him. If someone were to stand here, observing, they’d probably see me vanish, the same way he did.”

Kajii, for whom seeing and coming to enjoy the beauty in darkness is his discovery alone finds that another person has been walking, just like him, along the same dark path. It is a signal moment wherein he realizes that the isolation he feels as he faces his own imminent death is, if not universal, at least quite common. And I believe it is because of this sudden revelation that he continued to polish and refine this longer essay for several years before publishing it: he was reaching out to those fellow travelers of the dark path. One of Kajii’s main motivations for writing appears to be the need to preserve and document his impressions of a fleeting life.

In this essay, then, Kajii the dark-walker has been taking his solitary night journeys as if a lone pioneer exploring new aesthetic terrain. But when he sees someone else on the same dark path—ahead of him, no less—walking without a lantern, Kajii has no choice but to conclude that the dark path is anything but solitary; that there are others who choose to walk alone in the dark at night to discover its hidden aesthetic pleasures. As he watches the traveler disappear into the darkness he considers—perhaps for the first time—that there could be others behind him, for whom his sudden appearance and disappearance would be equally shocking, cheering, and instructive. From this perspective, death takes on a new meaning. Hitherto both ostracized and creatively liberated by his terminal illness, Kajii finds grounds for a common humanity in his own impending death. Walking alone in the dark he has discovered a fellow traveler, and although he knows not what lies ahead in the darkness, both his new aesthetic appreciation of the dark and the realization that it is populated with fellow travelers takes away the sting, offering even the promise that, as one can discover beauty and tranquility in darkness, so can one hope that there is an abundance of both light and beauty in that darkness we now fear as death.

My own journey, through literature and life, leads me over and over to the conclusion that there is virtue, loveliness, value, and glory to be found in the most unlikely places, even as we confront our own mortality, if we but have the courage to look for it. I hope this brief glimpse into the other side of epiphany will encourage us to expect, and to find, an abundance of pleasant surprises.

Note
1. The etymology of the word Serendip, which is an old name for Sri Lanka, is another curious path, and the word serendipity has been included, in a random Internet survey, among the top 10 most difficult English words to translate.