

# STRETCHING TOWARD THE LIGHT

Peggy Fletcher

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A good editor is like a ghost, presumably of the benign sort. One slinks about rearranging furniture, pointing fingers, levitating tables or entering other bodies for a walk in their shoes. Quietly whispering, breathing. And all of this with a certain stealth. The less obtrusive, the more successful. A ghost's presence should be sensed or felt but never known for certain.

My most natural instinct is ghostlike; my most comfortable robe is anonymity.

Because of this I have (with rare exception) assiduously avoided revealing myself in the pages of this magazine. I generally prefer unsigned pieces or unacknowledged rewrites of other people's prose.

Moreover, I have long trusted (wished really) that this magazine would be judged for its own merits and not on the temple recommends of its editors, that the thunder of an editor's personality would never diminish or quiet the resonance of an author's music. I wanted the editors to be seen as ticket-takers and spectators while the real action was in the writers' arena.

It seemed apparent to me—and, I thought, to any reasonable observer—that those immersed in the SUNSTONE enterprise had a thoroughgoing commitment to the restored gospel. If there were no fundamental belief in and contin-

uous loyalty to the Church, wouldn't their time be wasted? Why would intelligent, energetic Latter-day Saints do such a thing?

I have come recently to think that that is a naive if not entirely inappropriate view.

I have never liked push-button testimonies. To me, beliefs are lived out, written in the lives of the believers, like the picture of Dorian Gray. To rehearse too often one's deepest convictions violates their sacredness; out of profound reverence the Israelites were forbidden even to speak the name of their God. Easy, repetitive proclamations of faith seem to me somewhat empty, lacking substance, without the necessary combination of thought and moment.

All of this said, there is still a season for confessing belief. I may sense or feel the emotions of my beloved, I may even trust that his emotions are real, but there is nothing quite like the old-fashioned words, "I love you" to convey the power of the sentiment.

Last summer as part of the publicity efforts for SUNSTONE's annual theological symposium, Gene England and I were invited to be guests on KUTV's "Take Two," a half-hour phone-in talk show. The host, Rod Decker, is Salt Lake's version of Donahue: aggressive to the point of combat, with a fondness for lively, even hostile discussions. During the last commerical

break, Decker turned to me and said, "We have thirty seconds left. I am going to ask one last question, okay?" (Did I have a choice?) When the cameras resumed, he innocently queried, "Some time ago you published an article which caused quite a stir called, 'The Phenomenon of the Closet Doubter.' Are you a closet doubter?"

"No."

"Are you an open doubter?"

"No. I'm a believer." End of program.

In the ensuing weeks as I made the rounds on television and radio stations announcing the symposium, the staff fielded numerous phone calls asking about me and my level of orthodoxy. Is she "active?" they wanted to know. But the most troubling call came from a good and gentle friend.

"I understand," he began hesitantly, "the need to be politic when talking about SUNSTONE to the general public. But how could you have lied on television?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you were a believer."

As we talked on, I think I satisfied him that I had not sold my soul for a little publicity. But the conversation lingered in my thoughts, indeed, insinuated itself into many sleepless mind-dialogues. Had I so thoroughly played the ghost that my self was unknown even to my friends?

You see, I *am* a believer.

My father taught me the careful, thoughtful search for truth. Examine the claims, weigh the evidence, and embrace that which seems most true. Then revise your beliefs as your experience, understanding, knowledge, and vision increase. Faith is constantly shifting, always deepening. Commitment in the midst of uncertainty,

he said. "Peggy my girl: If you can find a more true church, I'll join it with you. But while we look, we need to be committed to this one. It's the best we yet know."

Service, said my mother with her life, is the way to truth. One can only (nay, best) see God in other people. She gave me a passion for doing, for cheering the underdog, fighting the good fight. Rules are for the people, not people for the rules. "That program won't work in New Jersey," she routinely informed us when she, as MIA president, disregarded a Salt Lake directive. For her, atonement is empathy writ large.

Together these goodly parents gave me their gift of believing which has consistently steadied me through my years of emotional and intellectual storming.

That God exists is fundamental to my faith. I know him only in nuances, glimpses, shadows. Others may hear trumpets; I don't. But I trust that he is there, somehow guiding, possibly shaping events, sometimes intervening, sometimes not.

That Jesus Christ was literally, physically raised from the dead makes absolute sense to me, experientially and even intellectually. The reality of his resurrection colors all of my other seeing. I believe through him we are meant to embrace life utterly, that death in all its darkest, most terrifying aspects can be overcome. Even daily sorrowing seems less grinding, more endurable.

So, too, teachings of the Christ offer our best hope at explaining the inexplicable, at seeing in the glass just a bit less darkly. There is a great deal of what Jesus taught (maybe even most) that still eludes me (I can easily sympathize with his disciples' somewhat bumbling behavior) but I trust in the sub-

stance of things to come.

If ever there were a prophet in these latter days, Joseph Smith was one. I believe in his vision and prophetic calling. Like Old Testament prophets, he offered a mighty critique of culture in its most entrenched spheres—theological, economic, political, and social. He dared to question centuries of Christian tradition, insisting a restoration of lost truths was necessary. Indeed, he wanted to begin again with a Christianity that was at once old and new. That Joseph Smith was mortal and very fallible, there can be no doubt; that Joseph delivered the mind and will of God to his people as best he knew also seems evident.

David O. McKay was the prophet of my youth, to me a fitting heir to Joseph. Beatific and knowing, he gave me reason to trust that the heavens were yet open. Certainly God must pour himself out to humanity in each age, maybe differently but no less lovingly, no less real. Why close the canon of scripture with such finality?

I value symbols and promises. Eight-year-old Peggy was unclear about being baptized. I don't *know* the Church is true, I insisted. Not sure I want to *join*. A bishop with wisdom and a walk in the woods convinced me. "Doubt is good," he said, "it helps us learn and judge. But baptism need not imply certainty, only intention, desire." I think of that bishop Sunday after Sunday as I hear the words, "That they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him . . ." Can I really say *always*? Then follows the assurance, "that they may *always* have his Spirit to be with them." Symbol and promise, cadenced together.

Wedding men and women into

the eternities, sealing the generations, and working for the dead fit neatly into my understanding. It seems appropriate to signify ritually these attachments. For better or worse, we *are* connected to one another. Husband and wife—parent and child—friend and friend. We belong to the whole; salvation is, in some sense, collective.

And, lastly, "activity" as a symbol of commitment has consistently been important to me. I may have had just about every Church calling available to females, including that formerly very powerful position of Sunday School chorister (subject for another editorial in itself). Commitment in the midst of uncertainty, said me dad.

"Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.

And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief." (Mark 9:24-25)

Ditto and amen.

To be a ghost is much easier than to be a person with flesh (some of it sagging) and bones (many of them short) and spirit (most of it weak). Ghosts need not be embarrassed, need not make mistakes, need not apologize, are never responsible. People do all of these and *are* responsible.

The people who publish SUNSTONE should be more than phantom editors; they ought to be trusted friends as well. In the next ten years, then, I promise we will more regularly express our personal affirmations, our devotion to the kingdom, and our love of God as well as our struggles and agonies. For it is finally clear to me that you need to know that we—with you—are stretching toward the light.

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