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DECENNIAL REFLECTIONS



By Peggy Fletcher

WHEN HE WAS A BOY, MY FATHER, THE QUIET, studious scientist, thought he would marry a Madame Curie type and they would spend their lives doing meticulous experiments together in their tidy, ordered house. Instead, he found himself presiding over a family of nine lively, talkative, independent spirits (including my mother) and a chaotic, laughter-filled home. Night after night at the dinner table, as he dabbed at the spilled milk that somehow always found its way onto his suit pants, I would hear him moan: "If I had known in detail what marriage and children were like when I was courting, I'd never have gotten married. But," he would quickly add, "I'm very glad I did."

I guess we never know exactly where our commitments will take us. Eleven years ago this August, I agreed to help Scott Kenney start a magazine. I gave it about as much thought as if he had asked me to direct a roadshow for my ward. The enterprise sounded fun, like an adventure. Not being particularly visionary, I had no sense at the time that I was walking into a whirlwind. Looking back now, I like to think I see God's involvement from time to time, nudging events, sending people, and whispering ideas.

Choosing the name "Sunstone" seems like one of those magical moments. After months of heated discussions, we rejected such suggestions as "The Vineyard," "Rough Draft," "Chrysalis," "The Mormon Student," "Stratavarious," "The

Nouveau Expositor," "The Harbinger," and several others. We settled finally on "Whetstone," but when Scott mentioned this to Robert Rees, then editor of *Dialogue*, he balked. We had intended to imply a sharpening of our wits, a refining of our minds and ideas, but Bob pointed out that those who didn't like the publication would say we were sharpening our knives against the Church. He recommended "Sunstone" instead. Tired of discussing it, and almost completely unfamiliar with the term, we all hesitantly agreed.

I confess I had neither seen nor even heard of the Nauvoo Temple sun stone. With a bit of research, I discovered there were thirty sunstones on the temple (forming the capital of the pilasters), as well as thirty star stones and thirty moon stones. The sun stones were the largest, measuring four feet by six feet, and weighing some three thousand pounds. But the intended symbolism was unclear. The face on the stone is enigmatic, at once ominously scowling and benign, depending on the viewing angle. And there is confusion about what the two hands above the sun are holding; are they horns of plenty, symbolizing the fertility of the restored gospel, or trumpets sounding an apocalyptic call?

Because the sun stone is almost all that remains of the Nauvoo Temple, it stands as a historical link between the generations, reminding us of the continuity of truth. As a genuine icon, it represents the integral nature of artistic expression and religious sentiment. But the sun stone points to much more than these. In terms of Mormon theology, the sun stone is obviously a symbol of Jesus Christ, the light of the world. The sun is also an explicit symbol for the dwelling place of celestial beings and the quest for perfection, a belief in the truth and light which battle the dark side of human life. The sun is the

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source of all creation and regeneration; indeed, of life itself.

The stone, on the other hand, is a physical image, representing the union of matter and spirit. It also suggests a firm grounding in reality, a concern with the practicalities of this world. Moreover, the stone is the Church. "On this rock I will build my church." The rock of our salvation.

Because there are no instant identifications which would place it in a fixed category, the meaning of SUNSTONE can be created afresh with each new reader. The possibility of multi-level interpretation, the very mystery of the name, allow it a richness of meaning.

How completely the contents live up to name, only time and the readers can determine. My own assessment is that we have succeeded miraculously at some of our goals and failed dismally at others. But the striving has been instructive. I have repeatedly encountered "teaching moments" and have learned much.

Here are a few things I have come to understand:

1. The tone of an article is often more important than the content. Criticisms offered without rancor, bitterness, self-righteousness, or whining are consistently the most effective ones. The wisdom of the saying, "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar," seems increasingly evident.

2. Articles that affirm an institutional position or elaborate in some original way a standard doctrine are very rare, and when available, they are often dull or poorly written. It is easier to communicate with clarity and feeling those things we dislike or wish to reform than those we accept and embrace. Creative adrenalin seems to accompany criticism more readily than praise does.

3. Mormon writers seem most at home with the passive voice, academic prose, and numerous footnotes. Perhaps because of the authoritative nature of our faith and tradition, writers tend to rely too heavily on authorities outside themselves. They are least comfortable taking responsibility for their own ideas. Too, with a few obvious exceptions, it seems more acceptable to write honestly about dead people than about living ones.

4. Even Mormon intellectuals are not very interested in reading about or listening to other religions.

5. News reporting about the Church is almost completely uncharted territory, for which there is little if any competition. Also, news coverage in the finest journalistic tradition will always be perceived by some of our readers as "gossip" or

"rumor-mongering." News printed on nice paper is more acceptable to some than exactly the same news printed on newsprint.

6. The terms "positive" and "negative" are regularly misapplied to articles and issues dealing with Mormon topics and are often completely beside the point. The questions should be: Is it fair? Is it honest? Is it accurate? Is it well-reasoned? Is it informative? Does it make me think, or reconsider old ideas in a new way? If the answer is yes, then it is positive.

7. All small businesses face cashflow problems; they come with the territory. In addition, business sense (like changing a tire) is not necessarily a male genetic inheritance, nor is it bestowed with the priesthood.

8. Simple Mormon folk are sometimes more open than Mormon intellectuals are. We all have our biases which we close to discussion.

9. Every author (including me) needs a good editor and several rewrites. Authors who are most interested in communicating their ideas, and are self-confident generally, readily accept suggested changes.

10. Strength and support often come from surprising sources. Many times those with the least riches make the largest donations.

11. It is a great pleasure to publish the work of little-known authors. Discovering talent in unexpected places confirms our theology: spiritual insights belong to all God's children, not just the elect.

12. Although it resembles them in many ways, SUNSTONE is not and never will be a "normal" periodical. Christian virtues like compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness ought to be evident in both the writing and the governing of SUNSTONE.

13. SUNSTONE is not for everyone. Many people live genuinely good, virtuous lives without a second thought for the knotty complexities of contemporary issues. Others are temperamentally incapable of avoiding them. For the latter group, a periodical like SUNSTONE becomes more than a magazine, almost a way of life.

14. A good sense of humor is absolutely essential to involvement with any publication like SUNSTONE. Whenever you think you've reached the bottom of the hole, there's always farther to fall. While you're falling, you should at least be able to laugh. Never take yourself too seriously.

A single list could not possibly contain all the good things I've learned while working for SUNSTONE.

Reliving the past ten years this month has been nostalgic and, for the most part, gratifying. I am pleased and proud to have been associated with the fine authors whose work graced the pages of the magazine, and the fine editors and staff who have willingly sacrificed and strained to bring those ideas to the reading public. It has been instructive to see the controversies that have embroiled us. Issues that once

Pontius' Puddle



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burned passionately are now reduced to embers; others continue to blaze, and some that seemed only smoldering brushfires have burst into flames. As I note the trends we accurately predicted, and those we curiously (and maybe stupidly) overlooked, I wonder what the next ten years will bring.



FOURTEEN YEARS LATER

Sunstone presumes a vast Mormon middle ground of people committed to the Church and unafraid to explore issues.

I FIND myself agreeing with much of what I wrote in 1985. Tone is still what distinguishes a piece deemed “negative” by a lot of readers. Passions are more easily aroused by ideas that challenge the status quo than by those that support it. Mormon writers still rely too heavily on the passive voice and show little interest in other religions. I am still impressed by many ordinary LDS people living holy lives without ever hearing of *Sunstone*. Some developments, though, I could not have predicted back then. I’ll continue numbering my thoughts from where I left off.

15. I expected the little bits of news published in *SUNSTONE* (and the defunct *Sunstone Review*) would be outdone by several news magazines or papers devoted entirely to LDS news. That has not really happened. To be sure, many LDS stories are published in papers across the country and globe (usually one obligatory missionary or genealogy story), and tons of information is shared on the Internet. But Mormonism does not yet have the equivalent of *National Catholic Reporter* with its in-depth analysis.

16. When I left *Sunstone* in 1985, it had survived what I thought were surely its worst economic straits, and I thought it would soon be in a better financial place. It was in competent hands and would soon be self-supporting. Dream on. Mormonism’s volunteer ethic may actually work against independent enterprises like *Sunstone*. LDS church members are used to participating in activities that feel like they’re free (actually, they pay heavily, about 10 percent of their income), and they get their magazines at bargain basement prices. Where are the donors who I thought would surely put the magazine on

sound footing?

17. Which leads to my next insight. We built *Sunstone* on the presumption that there was a vast middle-ground in Mormonism—people who are committed to the Church and unafraid to explore issues, including even the Church’s origins and doctrines. We did not foresee the current polarization, which erodes the middle-ground essential for enterprises like *Sunstone*. Today, many people feel forced to choose. Some have concluded that loyalty to the Church implies closing off all questions; while others who have questions or ambivalence see no reason to stay in the Church. I meet fewer people who choose to stay, eyes open, and work from within. Mormon intellectuals have divided into factions, and dialogue among many of them is rancorous, when at all. For example, once associates at BYU-affiliated FARMS were regular *Sunstone* contributors; now they stay away. Once many feminists found a home in *Sunstone* and the Church; now some of them have moved on to other endeavors.

18. The topics that engaged us have changed with the times, too. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the hot controversies were abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, how to write Mormon history, and, to a lesser extent, Book of Mormon historicity. Homosexuality was just appearing on the Mormon consciousness. And the discussions of it then were academic, less activist, than today.

19. The consequences for discussing controversial topics are harsher now. During the time I was editor, there were always rumors of people being called in or intimidated by Church leaders, but in the 1990s, we have seen intellectuals excommunicated, disfellowshipped, or generally shunned for their writings. BYU professors have even been denied tenure for writing for the magazine.

20. Being at the center of the *Sunstone* universe for so many years, I did not imagine that as my life circumstances changed, some of the issues would retreat in importance to me. I am now in the mainstream of Mormon life, raising children, serving in church callings, trying to be a good wife. Though there are many days when I chafe at things my fellow ward members do and say, there are an equal number of days when I wince at the statements of fellow *Sunstoners*. During the 1993 excommunications of the “September Six,” I was in California attending to my dying child. The juxtaposition provided me with an important perspective. Nevertheless, my faith has been and continues to be enriched by the open exploration of truth that *Sunstone* undertakes. My spiritual life would be diminished without it. ☐