

FROM THE EDITOR

IN A ROOM DOWN THE HALL
FROM THE BISHOP'S OFFICE

By Dan Wotherspoon

MY SON, ALEX, has just turned sixteen, and I'll soon be privileged to ordain him a priest. I'm looking forward to performing this ordinance. Only four short years ago, our ward's bishop called to tell me he felt he could not allow me to confer the Aaronic priesthood on my son and ordain him a deacon.

I disagreed with the bishop's decision, which had come the morning of the ordination and after a week in which the bishop and I had met once and had had a phone conversation about my follow-up letter to our meeting. Even today, I think he made the wrong decision, but our impasse has a back story and, ultimately, a bright ending.

My family and I moved to Tooele, Utah, exactly five years ago. Our move came a year-and-a-half past my having earned a Ph.D. in religion and as I was still licking my wounds from a second year of disappointments in the academic job market. I was teaching several courses as an adjunct instructor and working as a manager at the overflow homeless shelter Salt Lake sets up every year for the extra men, women, and families who need housing and services during Utah's cold winters. We were leaving a ward in Bountiful that we had enjoyed, having made several good friends and finding a few faithful thinkers (including Tom Rogers, whose short reflection on his spiritual path is included in this issue, page 30) who had helped me remain positive about the Church. Yet, at the same time, most Sunday mornings I headed off to attend Salt Lake's First Unitarian Church. Their services boosted my spirit and usually presented me with a few ideas to chew on during our ward's afternoon meetings.

Given my work at the shelter and this dalliance with a more liberal faith tradition, at the time of our move I was, in many ways, a Mormon transitioning into a spirituality I thought was broader. I was keeping my feet in Mormonism, but my head and heart were playing with bigger themes than I felt I were being discussed in LDS meetings.

The house we purchased was in a new

housing development, where seven to ten families moved in each month. Given this rate of growth, it isn't surprising that by tithing settlement time in December, we still hadn't officially met with our bishop nor received callings. Because I worked swing shift at the shelter, I couldn't attend the tithing settlement, but my wife, Lorri, did. As she and I talked the next day about how it had gone, she mentioned she had been the last appointment of the evening and after talking about tithing, because no one had been hurrying them, "we talked some about you."

She briefly rehearsed to me how, after filling in the bishop about my current work and frustrating search for a full-time university position, she told him a little about my conflicted feelings toward the Church. After hearing Lorri's summary of what she had said to the bishop, I felt okay about being a subject of discussion, even if I hadn't been there to explain myself. Lorri's comments sounded fair and accurate enough. "Good that he knows," I thought.

A few days later, the bishop dropped by to call me to serve in the Sunday School presidency. I would have enjoyed that calling, but because it came so closely on the heels of Lorri's meeting with him, I was taken a bit aback by the offer. "That calling sounds like a nice fit for me. I'm just surprised, given your discussion with Lorri the other night."

He looked a bit confused. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I thought Lorri had told you that I was struggling with a lot of Mormon beliefs and wasn't sure how well I still fit in the Church. So your asking me about a calling has caught me a bit off guard."

"Oh, yes. She *did* say something about that. What is it you're having doubts about?"

I wish I could take back the half hour that followed. Not only because it began the chain of events that ultimately kept me from ordaining my son nine months later, but also because I *now* know so much better how to talk positively about my beliefs and the reasons I value and want to maintain a solid

connection with the Church. But I wasn't as settled then. And he *had* asked about my doubts, not my faith."

"Hmmm, where do you want me to start?" And then, idiot that I was, I couldn't shut up, and as his eyes grew wider, I began to take a sort of perverse pride in my ability to shock him with my heresies. I walked him through them all.

As I would finish one point, he'd pick up on something I had said that made him wonder about something else, and before we stopped, we'd gone through all the specifically Mormon stuff and on to my wider doubts about the character and power of God, the existence of a devil, and especially my struggle to believe in Jesus as the Christ and the need for a universal Atonement. All along, I mentioned what I felt were strengths in the various positions I was sharing, but the cumulative force of my direct rehearsal of doubts was overwhelming. Seemingly shell-shocked, he got up to leave, asking my permission to allow him to pray again about the intended calling. I understood. We shook hands, and he left.

I don't remember if he ever told me he'd decided against my becoming a member of the Sunday School presidency, but I never received that or any other calling while he was bishop. In the months that followed our meeting, I'm sure the bishop and I smiled and said hello whenever we saw each other at church or around town, but we didn't speak again about my feelings or theology—until Alex was about to become deacon age and I surprised the bishop by expressing an interest in performing the ordination.

IKNEW Alex's birthday was coming up and had wrestled for several months about whether I wanted to perform this ordinance. By then, my shelter job had ended, and I had decided that even as much as I had enjoyed working there, I was more infatuated with the *idea* of being a social worker than actually *being* one. So I rejoined the gang at Benchmark Books (where I had worked for several years previously), continued to teach philosophy and ethics courses, and began another cycle of applications in the hope of landing a full-time faculty position.

Although my theology hadn't really changed much, sometime during this same period, I had begun to feel more *Mormon* in the tribal sense. I had begun to worry a bit less about how boring Church meetings were and was starting to feel more comfortable just being among *my* people. Much as Bill Bradshaw shares in his wonderful reflection

in this issue (beginning on page 27), I can't say I was immune from launching into a few rants and raves when I'd return home after hearing some particularly inane comment at church; but overall, I had begun enjoying my Church associations again.

Living in this greater optimism, I convinced myself that I did want to be the one to ordain Alex. I wasn't sure what I believed about the priesthood. (Is it really a power that was restored exclusively to Latter-day Saints and genuinely passed on through ordination? Or is it a power available to all who will claim it, meaning the ordination rite is more of a formal invitation for that person to reach for it so they might better serve and bless others?) Still, I felt fine about performing the ordinance. I was active in the ward and wasn't guilty of any sins that might preclude my participation. Further, I was hoping that the intimacy of placing my hands on my son's head might make a memory that would strengthen our bond with each other, and that my participating might also help him feel more connected with his great-grandfather (whom he'd never met but who'd ordained me an elder) and all the other good men in my priesthood line of authority.

I shared these feelings with the bishop, along with far more careful and much more

positively worded statements about my beliefs, not just my doubts. I really didn't expect he'd say no.

But he did. In his call that Sunday morning, he told me that after prayerful consideration, he felt he couldn't allow someone who didn't have a strong conviction of "Jesus as the Christ" or of the Atonement to confer the priesthood. I expressed my disagreement and disappointment but told him I wouldn't stand in the way of Alex's ordination. Lorri's parents were on a mission in Australia, which prevented Alex's grandfather from being available to perform the ordinance. And because we hadn't really thought ahead to ask someone to step in for me in case I wouldn't be allowed to do it, the bishop volunteered to ordain Alex.

I was, of course, upset by the way things were turning out. And so was Lorri. She had served in several Primary presidencies and knew firsthand of many instances when bishops had practically dragged inactive fathers out of the bars and had them clean up a bit and attend church for a week or two so they could baptize their child. In most cases, following the baptism, neither he nor the child would be seen at church again. She wondered how it is that some bishops would go to such great lengths to allow those fathers to be part of these sacred events, yet ours

would not allow me—someone genuinely *trying* to stay positive about the Church—to be part of this special event in our son's life.

I appreciate Lorri's support more than I can say. But we agreed this was Alex's day, and he didn't need to know how much we were hurting. And so, following that day's meetings, we gathered in a room near the bishop's office for the ordination.

IF there's one thing about my son with which no one can disagree, it is that Alex has a lot of personality. And he'd apparently been telling people about his ordination that afternoon, so quite a few people attended. Along with all of the bishopric, standing in the ordination circle were Alex's scoutmaster, our home teachers, and several other men who'd been captured by our son's crazy likability.

The ordinance went fine, and as smiles were flashed and hands shook and people turned to leave, I found myself standing up, trembling, asking if everyone could stay for a few more seconds. My heart had been pounding during the ordination as just a glimmer of the idea about what I was now starting to do had begun to form. I'm sure both Lorri's and the bishop's heart skipped a few beats as I asked if I could say a few words.

And, blessedly, good ones came tumbling

2003 Sunstone Christmas Party

Thursday 4 December, 6–8 pm

Featuring a special reading at 7:00 by

Carol Lynn Pearson

from her book, *A Stranger for Christmas*

At the Sunstone office
343 N. 300 W., Salt Lake City

Please bring an unwrapped toy
for a homeless child

out. I thanked everyone for coming and helping make this occasion special for Alex. I thanked the men who had participated in the ordinance and let them know that I appreciated their role in my son's life, their good examples of mature men who are striving to be good and helpful and live the way God wants us to live. And then I spoke to Alex, telling him how much I loved him and how I had wanted to be the one to ordain him that day. I explained that he didn't need to worry that I was doing anything wrong that kept me from performing the ordinance, but that because of my schooling and reading and experiences, I had a pretty complicated understanding of a lot of things in the Gospel. But I assured him that I was actively trying to figure these things out. "I want you to know that I really *am* wrestling with Heavenly Father about these things, and I promise I won't let go until I get my blessing. And you know, we only struggle with things we really care about. And I care a lot about the Church and trying to know what Heavenly Father wants for me."

I DON'T know exactly what a twelve-year-old can comprehend and if, through his embarrassment about being told publicly that I loved him, Alex heard or understood what I said. And that's okay. Two years later, our new bishop allowed me to ordain Alex a teacher and today feels fine about my ordaining him a priest. I'm not really bothered that until I am given the chance to confer the Melchizedek priesthood and ordain him an elder, Alex's priesthood line of authority is not the same as mine. His begins with the name of a good bishop who prayerfully made a decision that to me still feels like the wrong one. What I think about instead is how God still had some leftover grace for me, his complicating son. And I will forever be grateful for the words and feelings that came that day, in a room down the hall from the bishop's office. ☺

WELCOME MATTHEW WILLIAM HATCH!

Born 20 August 2003
to John and Emily Hatch

Just a few days after his dad had finished his work organizing and making things run smoothly at the Sunstone symposium, Matthew entered the world—nine weeks early and weighing just 4 lbs, 15 oz. Thanks to great care at the University of Utah hospital, Matthew came home four weeks later and is doing wonderfully!



Ghost Between Us



HIS FIRST BOOK, HIS FIRST REVIEW

EIGHTY-EIGHT YEARS OLD, FILLED WITH THE LOVE FOR A HUSBAND SHE BURIED THIS YEAR AND THE MISERY OF A LIFE LABORING UNDER THE YOLK OF AN UNYIELDING PATRIARCHY, RHODA THURSTON IS MY FIRST REVIEWER. HOW MUCH GOOD FORTUNE CAN ONE MAN ASK FOR?

*Dear Friend Mike Oborn,
I just love to keep reading your book and making notes of the ideas that help me.*

I was just thinking, your book is a blessing to wake up people's curiosity to find out what else Joseph Smith gave us, along with a whole new set of nuts and bolts.

The scenario you give about how the love of a father and son can override the boundaries of cultural dogmas, even if for one moment and if only in their hearts, is wonderfully shown in Matt's rescue from Stephen Burgess.

And Matt's love for his father's honesty and courage, and why he would rather be known as the grocer's boy than anyone's apostle, reveals your integrity.

A SOLDIER'S LAMENT (final verse)

*And yet there is a hatred that purifies the heart
The anger of the better against the baser part
Against the false, the wicked
Against the tyrant's sword
Against the enemies of love
And all that hate the Lord.*

I am grateful Matt found Kate after each had suffered a disappointing first marriage. What a miracle she is as the love of Matt's life, to be all they can be together.

Best Wishes,
Rhoda Thurston

GHOST BETWEEN US

Romance & suspense by Mike Oborn

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