

SPIRITUAL PATHS AFTER SEPTEMBER 1993

I wanted the Church to feel like home. It never did. The absence of the feminine not only makes a home lonely, but it also damages everybody in the house.

THE DANCE OF LOVE

By Lynne Kanavel Whitesides

A FEW DAYS AGO, I SAW A HAWK FLYING WITH A snake in its talons. In the Native American tradition this is the symbol of the above and the below, masculine and feminine, the rational and non-rational, a balance of the two. It is, for me, a symbol of life itself. Ten years ago, before I left the Church, I was living an extremely rational life. I had been married in the temple, my husband was a doctor, we had three children, I worked for Sunstone, I had a lot of friends. I was miserable. My life, the way it had been prescribed, was killing me. And so, I exploded out of the Church and my marriage and onto a very different path. I was looking for God and for myself.

Ever since I was a little girl, I have wanted to experience God. I used to go to sleep imagining Him, sometimes scaring myself with how big it all seemed to me. But I always knew that that was what I wanted. Like Joseph Campbell has said, I wanted not to understand the meaning of life (or God), but to experience being alive. To me, this means to experience or to merge with God. This desire is the reason I left the Lutheran Church, joining the Mormon Church when I was eighteen. I was sure this would be the path. And in a way, it was. To borrow a metaphor from Ram Dass in a reflection about death, leaving Mormonism was like taking off a really tight shoe. It enabled me to move in a direction I hadn't even known existed.

When I left the Church, I was very angry—although “angry” doesn't quite say it right. I was in a rage. As far as I could tell, the Church was full of the masculine with the feminine somewhere way out in the margins. There didn't seem to me to be a place for people to talk about the pain in their lives. The Church felt rigid, erect, with no soft places for one to find comfort, no place to be able to mourn. I thought that most people—and, for sure, most women—felt the same way I did. I wanted the Church to feel like home. It never did. The absence of the feminine not only makes a home lonely, but it also

damages everybody in the house. And as far as I could tell then and now, very few Latter-day Saints were embracing the feminine. But then, there isn't much embracing of the feminine in the world at large, period. We can see evidence of this lack every day. We live on the feminine—the earth, our mother, who gives us life and embraces us in death—and yet we are so disconnected we are trying to kill her and ourselves at the same time.

AS I SAID, I left the Church in a rage, and I have not looked back. What I did do was look inward. I realized in a dim, far-off, unconscious way that I was blaming anyone and everyone I could for what was going on in my life. My parents, my ex-husband, my friends, the Church—oh, and of course, God. Anywhere and anyone that was not me. This was an heroic attempt. It took all of my energy to be able to pretend nothing was wrong with me, to hide the pain I was in.

About this time, two things happened. I found an incredible therapist, and I began doing Native American ceremonies. Both of these, I believe, are gifts from God. One was rational; the other, non-rational. Both represented the beginnings of my own shadow work.

One of the most important things I saw in ceremonies was just how angry and hurt most people are and how out of touch they are with their pain. I saw mirrored back to me exactly where I was, and as I dimly began to see my own shadow, I identified with a dream that Carl Jung describes, where he “was in a mighty wind.” Deep fog was flying along everywhere. He had his hands cupped around a tiny light which threatened to go out at any moment. Everything depended on his keeping this little light alive. Suddenly, he had the feeling that something was coming up behind him. He looked behind and saw a gigantic black figure following him. But at the same moment, despite his terror, he was conscious that he must keep his little light going regardless of all dangers. When he woke up, he realized the dark figure was his own shadow that was brought into being by his own small light, and that the little light was his consciousness, the only light he had. He realized that his own understanding was the sole and greatest treasure he pos-



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A DECADE REPORT

sessed. Though infinitely small and fragile in comparison with what was in the shadows, it was still a light, his only light.

I believe this insight is true for all of us. Somehow I knew that if I were going to take care of, or even see, the light that was my consciousness, I had to begin by telling the truth—something that was difficult because I was so angry I couldn't really tell what was true for me.

So, I started by admitting I was really, well, *angry*. That was the beginning. The more truth I told, the more truth was revealed to me. I would go to a ceremony and then bring all of my feelings with me to therapy sessions where I would find language for what was going on inside. And finally I understood on a very deep level that everything and everyone was a mirror for me. That anyone I blamed for anything was someone holding a piece of myself that I could not yet hold. I figured out that the more I loved myself, the more I wanted all those pieces back. And back they came. I saw myself more clearly as time went on. Positive and negative. And as I took back those pieces of myself, I began to see other people more clearly. Instead of blaming them, I could now be grateful to them for being willing, on some level, to hold for me what I could not. I stopped taking everything so personally. I learned to have faith in the truth.

The more ceremonies and therapy I did, the more I felt myself coming to God. Not the god I had imagined when I was Mormon—the god Levi Petersen describes in *The Backslider* who is looking at us through the barrel of a shotgun, just waiting for us to slip up so he can punish us—but a loving presence who feels definitely personal. In a ceremony a few years ago, the medicine man said, “Instinct is prayer.” When he said those words, I felt something connect for me—an awareness that instinct is a gift that I had been cut off from because of my culture. I knew that I wanted to experience connecting with my instincts. I began to understand that whether aware of it or not, I was praying twenty-four hours a day.

DURING THIS TIME, I began to feel like Psyche, who in Greek mythology connects with the god Eros, at first without seeing or knowing him. Later, after seeing him in a forbidden moment, her desire is transformed and intensified. But she tragically loses him, leaving her only with a deep desire to be with him again. In order for her to find her way back to him, she must complete certain tasks, and as she performs them, she always finds something or



somebody to help her. Psyche's story gave me hope, because I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be able to do what I wanted to do all by myself. I, too, was having glimpses of my creator, and with a deep longing, I also had to figure out how to get back. Yet the mythic tasks in front of me were telling me truths at a level of awareness I was not always sure how to understand. Through the years, like Psyche, I have been and continue to be helped in ways I never could have imagined.

I began reading the New Testament again, this time with new eyes—and the words and life of Christ had new meaning for me. Know the truth, he said, and it shall make you free. I saw how often he took the things

people had done in the shadows and brought them into the light, helping people to know they were forgiven. In my experience, the path of truth and forgiveness is the path to freedom. I believe we all want and need to be forgiven for something—I know I do—and I believe the person we need to forgive the most is ourselves. Thank God for Jesus Christ.

I discovered Rumi, a thirteenth-century Sufi mystic who wrote hundreds of love poems to God during his life and, at the end of his life, claimed he hadn't said a word. How can you talk about that which is beyond and before language, or, as Rumi says, “the inner secret, that which was never born”? His poetry is a marriage of the rational and non-rational, a balance of the masculine and the feminine. He said, “Close the language door, open the love window.” And, “Both light and shadow are the dance of Love. Love has no cause, it is the astrolabe of God's secrets.”¹ As I read and re-read Rumi's poetry, I began to be clearer about love, knowing that I wanted to feel God's love. And through my study of scripture, through poetry, and through understanding and feeling my own love of God, I began to see life as a gift and our bodies as an amazing antenna that connects us to ourselves, to others, and to that which is greater than all of us.

TWO YEARS AGO, I was in the west desert sitting in front of a fire, praying. I had what I can only call a vision. Now I'm not a person in the habit of receiving visions, but here I was having one. I wanted to see the face of God. This has been a constant prayer of mine for years. At that moment, I had a glimpse of how amazingly beautiful God is. In fact, what I felt at that moment was that God was so outrageously beautiful that the only thing it could do was love itself. It also came to me that what I was seeing had created me. That

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I was a part of that incredible beauty. And because it had created me, it loved me as much as it loved itself, because I am made from it. Then I realized that everything around me had been created by that force as well. And if that were true, then everything I saw, every single particle in this world is holy. And if that were true, then I needed to walk on the earth and through my life in a very different way.

In this new awareness, like Moses, I must take off my shoes because I am standing on holy ground. But this is a very difficult space to stay in. I love it when I remember who I am, but I forget. A lot. I have faith in the truth. I have faith that God is here. As often as I get lost, I find my way back to myself and to God. The path I am on is extremely interesting, and I find myself grateful for every step. I am grateful for the Mormon Church, and I am grateful that its leaders kicked me out. I thank God for my life. 

NOTE

1. "The Meaning of Love," in *The Love Poems of Rumi*, Deepak Chopra, ed. (New York: Harmony Books, 1998), 50.



PAT BAGLEY