

A DECADE REPORT

I don't feel a need to be angry. I like who I am and who I'm becoming while seeing and trusting a higher wisdom and pattern to it all.

EXILE AND RETURN: FROM GNOSTIC MORMON TO MORMON GNOSTIC

By Maxine Hanks

AS THE SAYING GOES, “IN THE FUTURE, EVERYBODY will be world-famous for fifteen minutes.”¹ This could apply to the Church if it continues to discipline its feminists and scholars. Every heretic is a news story. You may be next. Or you already may be among those whom the Church has summoned for “discipline” during the past ten years. Whether dismissed, placed on probation, disfellowshipped, or excommunicated, Mormon heretics are a subculture with visibility of its own.

There are few things as controversial or life-shattering as a summons to a Church court. Church discipline is fifteen minutes of fame that hijacks your life. Suddenly your place in the world is reversed overnight—from insider to outsider, from ally to enemy. You are an “apostate.” You play a drastic new role in family, Church, and community, as a negative figure, a focal point for dread. This is the fast track to scandal.

Andy Warhol said we’d be famous for fifteen minutes, but it never seems to end. My fifteen minutes of fame are turning into fifteen years—from the Associated Press coverage of *Women & Authority* in January 1993, to *Vogue* magazine in June 2003. In between, it’s been constant print and TV interviews. Something about this journey is momentous enough to keep the media continually interested.

Why us? Why me, “in the spotlight losing my religion”?² Perhaps because the story is so obvious; the drastic transition from Latter-day Saint to apostate heretic is simple for outsiders to grasp. It’s formulaic, really—a feminist in a patriarchal religion gets excommunicated . . . that’s kind of a no-brainer. I am a sound bite.

However, the Mormon heretic story is worth discussing in public particularly because it cannot be discussed within the Church. By default, Mormon conflicts are mediated by the media. I appreciate the opportunity for self-reflection that the

media provides. Without the media, we could not see our culture or ourselves; we would not become self aware. Mormonism needs a mirror if it is to mature.

Yet, publicity is a stress all its own. It’s difficult to convey the complex position of a scapegoat or a symbol of feminism. I found myself functioning as a mediator for the media, transiting different perspectives from proto- to post-Mormon, translating between faith, feminism, and a secular world.

How does one digest the evolution from Mormonism to a new worldview? Or embody it? Today I have fifteen minutes to explain this transformation, fifteen minutes to describe a decade of metamorphosis launched by fifteen minutes of fame that changed our lives forever in September 1993. Quite simply, this is a transition that never ends: the losing of our former lives and the finding of ourselves.

Looking back, do I have any regrets? No. And yes.

I don’t regret excommunication, because it gave me myself; it refined and matured me. But I do regret its costs to my life, my family, and my livelihood. The price was far more than I ever expected or would have guessed. I regret the pointless loss of affinity due to fear, embarrassment, exclusion, and guilt.

Yet I don’t regret leaving the Church. Given who I was, and what the Church was in 1993, there was no place to go but out. Mormonism was limiting to me, so I needed to test the limits of Mormonism—to see who I, and the Church, really might be. I discovered that I am more than Mormonism, and that God is far bigger than one church. Excommunication opened the door to a larger cosmos, inside and outside myself.

I do regret the stigma of excommunication, which tainted my reputation and my book. It was unfair to the book and its contributors to lend them a heretic status by association with my excommunication. Church discipline is a personal issue. My book was a separate matter, a group text. And it was not unorthodox: it was merely ahead of its time—too much, too soon. I can remain outside of the Church, but I really wish the Brethren would reinstate the book.

Is there life after excommunication? Yes. It’s harder, but it’s better in many ways. What do you do after leaving the



MAXINE HANKS is a writer and instructor in Salt Lake City who specializes in women’s and religious studies. She’s also a media and communications consultant. She can be reached at <maxinne@juno.com>.

SPIRITUAL PATHS AFTER SEPTEMBER 1993

Church? You change. What have I been doing for the past ten years? Healing, and suffering, and learning.

What was hard? Being alone and seen as a threat. Being a feminist and thus feared, misjudged, rejected. Lacking support for my work. Living with disapproval and writer's poverty as constant companions.

What was better? I found myself. And I found God, within me. I learned deeper patience, wisdom, and understanding. I am more than I was before excommunication.

And I won't stop evolving or working for a better world. I've continued writing and speaking about women's issues in Mormonism and religion. I co-taught a course at the University of Utah on "Women in Mormon Culture" for seven years. I've edited or co-authored more books, and published in a variety of magazines and newspapers.

One positive outgrowth of *Women and Authority* was feminist networking, which has continued to be a love of mine. The Mormon Feminist Network became an Internet organization in 1998 with email lists and a website. Along with that, I've nurtured the idea of Moonstone, a foundation to support feminist work and spirituality studies in Mormon and religious culture.

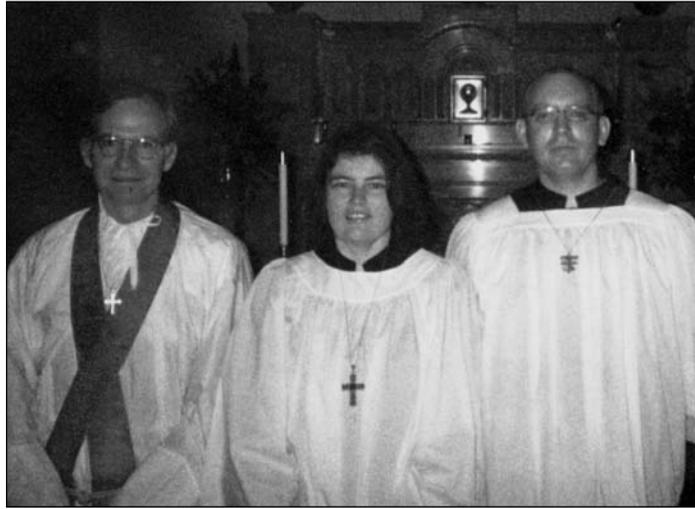
However, the most challenging and rewarding work in the last ten years has been my personal journey and spiritual search—the work of my own soul.

What have I learned along the way? I learned to adapt, change, migrate, evolve into something new. This wasn't easy, so I'd like to share a few of my transitions and what they taught me.

THE FIRST TASK was surviving excommunication and its scapegoating. That sounds dramatic, but it was quite a challenge. A scapegoat is one who is judged wrong or guilty at a time when it is the most dangerous to be so. One is blamed for a larger group problem. This can destroy one's reputation, and it often does.

It's a monumental task to wear the dread for a whole group, and even harder to rise above that group blame. Scapegoats can't defend themselves because they lack credibility and they're stuck in a negative role for an entire group. I can't tell you how important and heartening it was to find support, to be defended, validated, thanked or appreciated. Those moments were beacons in the night. I'll never forget the vigils or the full-page ad in the *Salt Lake Tribune* organized by J.D. Williams, which listed dozens of names in support of us heretics.

To survive, I had to constantly define my own role and



Ordination day, October 1999, Holy Cross Chapel
(L to R) Reverend Lance Owens, Maxine Hanks, Reverend Troy Pierce

image as a heretic, rather than be defined by the Church as an apostate. I had to somehow own the power of rejection and speak from that place, without internalizing the invalidation. Obviously this is tricky. Along the way, I developed "Seven Habits of Highly Effective Heretics" (which I don't have time to enumerate, but maybe if I print them in a pamphlet, it will become an international bestseller).

The key was learning to act from the core truth of who I am, rather than succumb to what others believed

about me. It's hard to hold onto your true self in the face of false or negative versions. You have to know your true role rather than play a part scripted by others. It's like being Miranda from *The Tempest* but cast as Kate in *Taming of the Shrew*; Miranda's part doesn't match that play. While Miranda sees a brave new world, others see her as Kate, a tempest to be tamed. It took me seven years to diffuse the energy of Church disapproval and find my way back to my own play. I now see myself as a scapegoat who escaped—an *escapegoat*.

MY NEXT TRANSITION was finding community. As I look back at all the really good advice I got, I realize the best came from Lorille Miller, who left Mormonism and became a prominent Unitarian. Right after my excommunication, she warned me, "Maxine, you need to find a community; you can't stay on your own, alone." At the time, it made no sense, because I prefer being on my own. My strength had always been my ability to stand alone. Belonging was a foreign concept to me, and a lot harder to do. But I believed Lorille because I respect her, so I visited a variety of churches, determined to find one that worked.

I had previous experience with other faiths because I had been led from an early age to attend other churches, starting with the Methodist faith at age five. I had visited nearly every church in my hometown, from Catholic mass to summer Bible school. They'd all held an attraction then and still do today.

As I searched for a new community, I was impressed by the Unity faith; I liked the Catholic grandeur, Episcopal ritual, RLDS equality, Unitarian humanity, and Quaker democracy. The Restoration Church offered me an apostleship, but that was a little extreme (deacon was more my speed).

Mainly I just wanted a place where I could finally be ordained! It was pretty simple. That was my acid test. I wanted a church that would give women the priesthood, because I'd always felt a personal call to priesthood, and I was weary of being shut down.

A DECADE REPORT

Fortunately, I found a temporary home with the Sunday Gathering—an independent congregation of post-Mormons who formed in 1993 to support Lavina Fielding Anderson and the September Six. We held a service once a month for two years, co-chaired by Scott Kenney, Louise Degn, Marti Jones, Ardean Watts, me, and others. It was short-lived but blissful, ending on Sunstone weekend in August 1995.

Then in 1996, I discovered that my spiritual path specifically coincided with archetypal patterns, myths, and an initiation path in Gnostic tradition. This synchronicity repeatedly manifested in dreams, visions, intuition, and my reading. I continually rediscovered myself in a variety of gnostic manifestations, from Sophia to Kabbalah, hermeticism to the Nag Hammadi, to the heretics and mystics, even the Masons and the Mormons. I began attending Gnostic Mass in 1997 and was baptized in 1998.

Finally, I was ordained to the Melchizedek priesthood (minor orders) in 1999, embarking on a path of ordination that still takes years, but this time the permission was inner; a gnostic is governed by guidance within. I'm not a priest yet; I currently hold the office of exorcist, because that's my spiritual work now. I serve with two male priests (both former Mormons) and we celebrate a Gnostic Mass on Sundays in the Holy Cross Chapel.³

Anyway, Lorille was right. I needed to belong. And that simple shift triggered my healing. To really find belonging, you have to move beyond the role of the rejected one, shed your internalized rejection or outsider status. At some point, you have to cease not belonging and start belonging. You can't stay in the role of the rejected one forever; you can't stay in a negative place too long. Being wrong or bad can't remain the basis of your life; you need a positive role that has life-giving energy.

For me, this meant moving beyond the role of the rejected feminist. I had to leave my bad-girl role and non-status to become something positive. This was difficult to do after four decades of non-status in Mormonism, which had become a way of life.

First I had to fulfill my heretic role, take it to conclusion. Then I had to transcend it, move beyond it. This was only possible by finding priests who would accept me and work with me, grant peer status and offer belonging. This is why ordination was so important. I needed acceptance. It's not the end; nothing is ever finished or ideal. Even when women have the priesthood, they still have to work out gender dynamics with men. However, this one shift may be the most healing of all.

A really important part of finding myself was working with women in ministry of other faiths. My association with female clergy and leaders in the Quaker, Episcopal, Unitarian, Christian Science, Bahai, Catholic, and other faiths has been incredibly healing. These women are spiritually empowered, not waiting to receive acceptance or permission from their fellows, but actually living as ministers of God. They are my role models; they show me how to be alive in God. In 1999, several of us collaborated to create Utah Women in Ministry.

THE HARDEST TRANSITION of all was learning how to leave Mormonism. How do you really leave the “one true Church of Jesus Christ,” the “Restoration” of original Christianity, the “fullness of the gospel”? I went to original Christianity, which is always cited as the source of Mormonism, and there I found the source of both, which is *gnosis*. The gnostic experience is a larger tradition that encompasses both early Christianity and Mormonism. Gnosis is the spark of divine light that inspires all faiths.

How do you find yourself outside of Mormonism? I found myself straddling two worlds—one Mormon, and one bigger, beyond the Mormon worldview. The first was a Mormon paradigm; the second was a larger, global or cosmic worldview. A cosmic paradigm is a greater whole, where all things find a place and all are connected. God is bigger than one faith, one paradigm; God encompasses All.

So I had a paradigm shift—from the one true church to all faiths being true—each one revealing an aspect of God, a divine attribute unique to that faith. I saw that only when we value them all do we begin to comprehend the consciousness of God. To know all of God, I must know God in All.

I went from the alpha church, with power or authority over all others, to an omega church, which comprehends its place in relation to All. I went from the one above all others to one embracing all.

I discovered that I needed both paradigms in order to find myself. I couldn't disown the former (the Mormon paradigm), and I couldn't live without the latter (the global or cosmic paradigm). The two work together as integral partners, microcosm and macrocosm. I existed in both, simultaneously, discovering two dimensions of myself, Mormon and gnostic. I found that I'm a citizen of both the Mormon and the cosmic worldviews. I am a living paradox.

This transition manifested outwardly in my life as interfaith work. I joined the Interfaith Roundtable for the 2002 Olympic Winter Games and got involved with the United Religions Initiative in San Francisco. As I collaborated and worshiped with representatives of many faiths, it was exhilarating to see the global or cosmic paradigm operate in reality.

I think this shift to larger consciousness is healthy, not only for me, but it might do the Church some good, too. I see the Church moving somewhat in that direction, of recognizing a larger, multi-faith worldview beyond its own. I think this is due to the influence of the Olympics with its multi-cultural focus, and to the Church's increasing interfaith collaboration. These may have inspired the “doctrine of inclusion” presented by Elder Ballard in the October 2001 General Conference.

Based on the Eleventh Article of Faith, the doctrine speaks of “those not of our faith” and urges mutual respect for differences. It teaches “tolerance one for another regardless of the doctrines and philosophies which we may espouse.” It advises Church members to “practice the principle of inclusion of others and not exclusion because of religious, political, or cultural differences,” adding that “we are truly brothers and sisters

SPIRITUAL PATHS AFTER SEPTEMBER 1993

because we are sons and daughters of the same Eternal Father.”⁴

Of course, the doctrine refers to people *outside* the LDS faith. It might be nice if it were applied to people *within* the faith. But I think this doctrine could heal Mormonism, both within and without, if the Church will take it to its logical conclusion.

THE MOST UNEXPECTED transition of all is what I call “the return.” If it was strange or hard to leave Mormonism, it’s even stranger to return to it, after all that I’ve experienced and who I’ve become. Yet, I have found myself returning to Mormonism in new ways.

Joseph Campbell said that we can’t truly understand or appreciate our own tradition until we have left it and then returned to view it anew from the outside.⁵ To return is to re-embrace what was lost or rejected, but coming from a new place of greater wholeness. For me, it has been like coming back to Mormonism from a long journey, as a new creature, more complete, whole.

When I was LDS, I was often colliding with Church leaders, locked in conflict with them. Simply leaving released me from that enmeshment. Moving outside of Mormonism dissolved our former relationship and allowed me to see them anew, as human beings. Now I can see that LDS leaders are dealing with tremendous burdens and responsibilities and that they, too, struggle in their own lives.

Now I can accept the Church and its leaders for who they are and appreciate them. I may still disagree with them but now with compassion and empathy. I find myself working with the Church in new ways, from a place of respect.

Since 1999, I’ve worked with prominent LDS men on the Olympic Interfaith Roundtable and other projects. At first, it was awkward, but they soon accepted me and valued my work. It was their acceptance that was healing—finally being embraced for who I am as I embrace them for who they are. All I had ever wanted with LDS men was partnership. The long-elusive solution was simple after all: just being willing to work together. Now we are friends and collaborate on projects such as the annual interfaith service held in the LDS Tabernacle.

To return is to recover our ability to relate to something or someone. I recovered my ability to love the Mormon within me and the Mormons around me. How? Through my love for all faiths. This wholeness I’ve found is symbolized by the Kabbalah, a Jewish Gnostic paradigm. It’s my favorite map of the cosmos, or cosmology, because it contains and connects everything, from the uncreated source of all, to all of creation—Jehovah, Elohim, Sophia, Logos, Jesus Christ, Judaism, Christianity, heresy, orthodoxy, mysticism, materialism, atheism, gnosticism, Mormonism, Sunstone, Moonstone, angels, demons, archons, divinity, the all-seeing eyes, nothingness, and the All.

I first encountered the Kabbalah twenty years ago, at BYU of all places, where I began my study of its mystic truths. Twenty years later, this summer, I realized that Kabbalah unites both the Mormon and gnostic paradigms in one cosmic framework.

That same month, I returned to BYU to participate in a women’s seminar. So my transition might not be so drastic after all; perhaps it’s more like a reversal. I’ve come full circle—from being a kind of “gnostic Mormon” to being a kind of “mormon Gnostic.”

WHERE AM I today? I’m happy. I feel healed, and at peace—not because I’m overly positive or ignoring the bad parts of the picture, but because I embrace the whole picture. I am neither naive nor afraid of conflict. But I see our common struggles, our humanity. And I see God working in all of us. I am filled with compassion for others, especially orthodox Mormons and LDS Church leaders. Some of my favorite people are LDS men. In fact, my best friend and soul mate has been my father, who has supported me in every phase of my journey, encouraging me with his unequaled positive energy. If I have strength or courage, I got it from him.

I understand my life now, even the awful parts. I see a larger pattern to my twisting path, a cohesiveness to my contradictory journey. Like the cosmic paradigm containing all things, my life contains a bit of everything, the positive and negative, the partial and the whole. As hermetic wisdom tells us, a human being is a microcosm of the macrocosm.

I recognize my own darkness and light, my limits and limitless love, my ability and inability to cope. I see my acquiescence and my anger, but I’m more conscious of them now, so I’ve learned how to deal with them better, I hope.

To be honest, most of my anger is gone. I don’t feel a need to be angry. I like who I am and who I’m becoming while seeing and trusting a higher wisdom and pattern to it all. I know that God is making something better of me and of everyone around me.

These past ten years have brought me full circle, from departure to return. I am complete. Like the doubting Thomas, who became the gnostic Thomas, I, too, have learned that “the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. . . the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth.”⁶ ☞

NOTES

1. Andy Warhol. The earliest reference to the phrase is found in the book *Andy Warhol*, edited by Warhol, Joenig, Hulten, and Granath, and issued in 1968 in conjunction with Warhol’s Feb./Mar. 1968 exhibition in Stockholm, Sweden.
2. R.E.M., “Losing My Religion,” *Out of Time*, WB IM 9 24696-1.
3. Holy Cross Chapel, dedicated as the Church of Mary Magdalene, was the first Catholic church built in Utah (1880s). It was superseded by the Cathedral of the Madeleine.
4. M. Russell Ballard, “Doctrine of Inclusion,” *Ensign* (Nov. 2001), 35; also referenced in Robert L. Millet, “What Is Our Doctrine?”, talk given to the BYU Religious Education Faculty, 12 Sept. 2003, <home.uchicago.edu/~spackman/millet.doc>.
5. *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, with Bill Moyers, Vols. 1–6, (Burlington, Vermont: Mystic Fire, 1989), Videocassettes.
6. Thomas 3, 113. *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Revised Edition, James M. Robinson, ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).