

SPIRITUAL PATHS AFTER SEPTEMBER 1993

*A coin that balances on its edge—that's the space I've claimed for myself.
I'm not in, but I won't be out, either.*

A DECADE ON THE THIN EDGE

By Lavina Fielding Anderson

IT'S AN HONOR TO APPEAR ON THE SAME PROGRAM with these thoughtful, creative minds with whom I have long been affiliated by affection and enterprises of serious inquiry into aspects of the theology and culture of Mormonism. When historians of the future figure out how and why we were selected for the crackdown ten years ago, they may very well decide that I don't merit inclusion in the company of scholars as thorough as Michael Quinn, feminists as thoughtful and passionate as Lynne and Maxine, or theologians as insightful as Paul and Avraham; but I hope to remain in that company because I share with them a vision of Mormonism as a supremely beautiful and empowering set of principles, however much we as individuals and the Church as an institution may falter in applying them.

I have sometimes heard people say things that can give the impression that others of the five people on this panel somehow "deserved" to be excommunicated or "had it coming" for some reason or that they didn't value their membership, while I'm somehow different and that I've somehow "done it right" by remaining attached to Mormonism while the others have withdrawn from activity or chosen other spiritual paths. I can't tell you how intensely uncomfortable such suggestions make me. None of us "September Six" deserved to be disciplined. And each of us is making a continuing contribution to Mormonism by the diverse paths we have walked during the past decade. I have complete faith that a future view of Mormonism will come to the same conclusion.

Ten years ago this summer, with the events of September 1993 still a month in the future, I realized spiritually (even though I was still resisting the knowledge intellectually), that I would be excommunicated, that I should not attend the court, and that I would not be reinstated quickly. I had already accepted those consequences, since the only way to deflect them

was to accede to my stake president's demands that I, first, stop talking to the press, and, second, stop talking to people who feel injured and betrayed by actions the Church had taken, whether on the general or local level. I knew I wasn't going to do either. So part of what I had spent the summer deciding was what to do about the consequences.

Here I'd like to pay tribute to my husband, Paul. As you can imagine, we did a lot of talking that summer. He helped me ask the hard questions and be honest with the hard answers: What would this do to Christian, then twelve and a new deacon? What would it do to our parents and brothers and sisters, all of whom were active, temple-married, calling-holding members (just as we were. I had three callings at the time). Were the issues really *that* important? Was I truly being called, on some spiritual level, to keep bringing bad news to an institution that traditionally responded to bad news, not by dealing with the message, but by punishing the messenger? Would I keep on attending church? *Could* I keep on attending church? Was I acting out of love, or out of pride and pique? I claimed to love Mormonism and the Church; could that love survive my being excommunicated? Excommunication was allegedly going to dissolve our temple marriage and our sealing with Christian. And above all, it was going to cause enormous pain and terrible disruption. Was it worth it? How could it possibly be worth it? *Why* was it worth it?

Those months of dialogue were sobering, clarifying, and steadying. Paul never got angry. He never threatened. He never minimized the importance of the issue to me. And even though he was working for the Church, he never ever, not even once, asked, "What if this jeopardizes my job?" (I was the one who asked that question. And for the record, Paul's supervisors remained personally very supportive of him.)

That was Paul in August. But in September, Paul never asked another probing question. He instantly, wholeheartedly, and completely gave me his unequivocal support, including the enormous benefits of his personal spirituality, sense of humor, and instinct for justice that kept him fair to both the Church's side of things and to me. He never horribilized what



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was happening. He dealt with his own anger by following Jesus' commandment to pray for those who spitefully use us.

Part of my decision during that summer was to remain as active as possible and live a completely Mormon lifestyle within the limitations imposed on me. I had three reasons. First, Paul and I wanted Christian to grow up understanding and appreciating his Mormonness. If I stopped going to church, he almost certainly would, too. Second, I had been enormously inspired by the example of Juanita Brooks and the shunning and threats she and her family endured to bring to light the facts of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. I consciously and purposefully took her as my model. Third, the Church itself had taught me that making a morally correct decision often resulted in unfair punishment. Under those circumstances, the solution was to live out the correct decision, accepting the consequences with grace and graciousness.

Even though I had made that decision, I wasn't sure I could live it out, week by week. It's a blessing of a magnitude that I cannot even begin to express that I've been able to. And now I have a fourth reason. I have felt, in the decade that has passed, that I have a distinct calling in the kingdom (not the Church) to "do" church vicariously for all those who no longer feel safe or welcome in their own wards. I think the phrase "out of sight, out of mind" truly applies to the excommunicated. Bishops don't want to deal with people who aren't following the "repentant sinner" script. Well, I'm the one who isn't going away. Just showing up, Sunday after Sunday, means that I'm bearing a testimony of presence, even when I can't bear any other kind of testimony.

And to give my ward its just due, I can honestly say that nobody, by so much as a lifted eyebrow, has ever communicated to me, Paul, or Christian that they find our presence undesirable. I have a theory: Because the stake president decided to do the excommunication himself, ward members could see it as something that happened "over there" at the stake center. They didn't have to take sides for or against me or the bishop. My reinforcing theory is that uttering the sentence of excommunication preempted discourse on the subject, and my ward has responded with silence. Only two people in my ward have

ever mentioned it to me. I'm not a project. I'm not a horrible example. I'm not an object lesson. I'm just there every Sunday, behaving Mormonly.

I haven't relied on the Church to provide my spiritual life since I was a teenager, but my spiritual life is deeply rooted in Mormonism. Since being excommunicated, I've learned a great deal about partaking of the sacrament spiritually when I'm forbidden to partake physically. I've also learned that it's more important to have the temple in me than to have me in the temple. Ten years ago, when I made my decision, I felt at peace with it. I still do. Being excommunicated is something I've been aware of every day of the past ten years, but I haven't once wished that I'd decided differently.

THIS DOESN'T MEAN it's easy. One Sunday morning soon after the excommunication, Christian was passing the sacrament to our section of the chapel. Paul, who was sitting on the aisle, absentmindedly took the bread and without thinking, started to pass the tray to me. Christian, startled, hung onto the tray while I leaned over and urgently whispered, "Don't!" We were frozen in a terrible little tableau of ironies—Christian resisting Paul to obey the Church's injunction that I could not partake of the emblems of the Savior's atonement; Paul, trying to include me because it felt so natural; I intervening to assure my own exclusion.

One lovely older sister, my last visiting teaching com-



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panion, did ask several times, "When are you coming back?" Since she usually asked while we were both standing in the aisle after sacrament meeting on our way to Sunday School class, I found the question both peculiar and painful. Finally, I said, "I'm here every Sunday. I never went anywhere. I'm as back as I can get in my heart. What happens next doesn't depend on me." She stopped asking, which was a great relief.

It wasn't that I minded talking about it. It's just that it was really clear that my priesthood leaders didn't know what to do next. We've had three bishops in the last ten years. I've kept track of my attendance at Church, and I'm petty-minded enough to be pleased that my sacrament meeting attendance has matched or surpassed that of the first two bishops. At my request, the man who was the bishop when I was excommunicated gave me a blessing a few days before the court. He asked to interview me only once and then spent most of the time talking about how bright and intimidating he found Christian. Soon after his release, this bishop stopped attending church, divorced his wife, and married a younger woman. I truly regret what his decisions did to his personal life, but I find it ironic that he would have presided over my court if the stake president had instructed him to.

Paul and I had a personal friendship with the second bishop and his family. Soon after he was called, I told him that I wasn't expecting him to intervene with the stake president on my behalf because of our friendship. He looked relieved and said that he tried never to ask the stake president anything unless he knew the answer was going to be yes. I took that as oblique confirmation that the stake president didn't know what to do, either. He had answered my first letter asking his



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counsel about what I needed to do to be rebaptized by telling me I had to stop thinking the General Authorities could do wrong, and he hadn't answered my second letter, which asked for clarification of that quite remarkable statement. That was eight years ago.

I pointed out to both the first and second bishop that the *General Handbook of Instructions* allows nonmembers to be called as accompanists and choristers. The second bishop authorized the Relief Society president to ask me to accompany the hymns in Relief Society as an uncalled but permanent substitute. I've been doing that now for about three years and enjoy it very much. Ironically, Relief Society pianist is one of the three callings I had ten years ago when I was excommunicated, which actually says more about the rarity of musical ability in our ward than it does about my skills.

Our third bishop is a young man who moved into the ward only a few years ago. His wife is a nurse and also an executive in a ward auxiliary, and their children are preschoolers. I haven't felt like imposing one more demand on this stretched-to-the-limit man.

AS I THINK about the Church and me, the image that keeps coming to mind is that of a coin. We often think of

Church membership in binary terms, like a coin flip. Heads you're in; tails you're out. (Or maybe, considering which portion of the anatomy gets used during most meetings and which portion of the anatomy tends to get people crossways of the Church, that should be rephrased as: heads you're out; tails you're in.) But those aren't the only two choices. The third alternative is the coin that balances on its edge—a very narrow base, very vulnerable to toppling one way or the other. That's

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the space I've claimed for myself. I'm not in, but I won't be out, either. It's a balancing act every day.

I do not consider myself a marginal Mormon. That would be something I did to myself, by moving myself to the margin. I consider myself to be a marginalized Mormon, shoved to the outer edge by the action of punitive and frightened Church leaders. That's too simplified a view, of course, but the image is often helpful to me.

I thought of it during last summer's Sunstone symposium as I finished embroidering Christian's temple apron. I'd started the apron earlier that summer in Nauvoo as I commemorated the twenty-year anniversary of Pilgrimage, a women's retreat group that has been very influential in the development of my Mormon feminism. I had the apron tucked in my bag and carried it through our tour at the Nauvoo Temple open house, the first time I've been in a temple for ten years and the last time for heaven knows how long. Christian wore that apron into the sealing room at his wedding last September in the San Diego Temple while Lorie Winder Stromberg and I sat in the lobby and she told me about Daniel Rector's death. Creating that temple apron is an example, I think, of living with the ambiguities of a coin balanced on its edge.

Mormonism is my world. It's my language, my people, my music, my history, even my leaders. My God is the Mormon God. I'm not rejecting Mormonism. I'm not trying to reform Mormonism. I'm trying to remind Mormonism of the truth and power and glory of its paradoxical assertion of absolute freedom and absolute love, a paradox that is reconciled in Jesus Christ. That's why I'm Mormon. That's why I love Mormonism.

I WILL CONCLUDE with a hymn and a prayer. The hymn is one sung by members of the Community of Christ and sent to me ten years ago by friends from the John Whitmer Historical Association. I'd like to publicly thank all of those friends, including Bill Russell and Ron Romig, who are here tonight. Christian, Paul, and I fell in love with this hymn and sang it repeatedly in our nightly family devotionals over the next several years.

*Gentle God, when we are driven
Past the limits of our love,
When our hurt would have a weapon
And the hawk destroy the dove,
At the cost of seeming weak,
Help us turn the other cheek.*

*Gentle Spirit, when our reason
Clouds in anger, twists in fear,
When we strike instead of stroking,
When we bruise and sting and smear,
Cool our burning, take our pain,
Bring us to ourselves again.*

....

*Let our strength be in forgiving
As forgiven we must be,
One to one in costly loving,
Finding trust and growing free,
Gentle God, be our release,
Gentle Spirit, teach us peace.¹*

The prayer is an anonymous "Prayer for Enemies" written in sixteenth-century England, also given to me by a friend ten years ago:

Merciful and loving Father,

*We beseech thee most humbly, even with all our hearts,
to pour out upon our enemies with bountiful hands, what-
soever things thou knowest will do them good.*

*And chiefly a sound and uncorrupt mind wherethrough
they may know thee and love thee in true charity and with
their whole heart, and love us, thy children, for thy sake.*

*Let not their first hating of us turn to their harm, seeing
that we cannot do them good for want of ability.*

*Lord, we desire their amendment and our own.
Separate them not from us by punishing them, but join
and knit them to us by thy favourable dealing with them.*

*And seeing that we be all ordained to be citizens of one
everlasting City, let us begin to enter into that way here al-
ready by mutual Love which may bring us right forth
thither.²*

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ☩

NOTES

1. Shirley Erena Murray, "Gentle God, When We Are Driven," *Sing for Peace* (Independence: Temple Worship Center/Herald Publishing House, 1994), no. 16.
2. Anonymous, 16th century English prayer, in Elizabeth Goudge, *A Diary of Prayer* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1966), 78. Copy courtesy of Jill Mulvay Derr.

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