

A long-time student of Mormonism shares how his spiritual life has been influenced through his study of Mormon scripture, history and theology, and his many associations with Latter-day Saints.

AMONG THE MORMONS: MY JOURNEY AS A LIAHONA CHRISTIAN

By Les Gripkey

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I have borrowed the term, "Liahona Christian," from a blogpost that used the phrase to describe one of my favorite Christian writers, Marcus Borg. Like me, Borg grew up Lutheran, left Christianity, then found a way back by focusing on experience rather than belief. I think Borg would appreciate Joseph Smith's grand fundamental principle of seeking truth wherever it may be found and the imagery of the Liahona as God's divine compass. Peggy Fletcher Stack writes: "Like Joseph, whenever I find something that is true by all the exacting standards I require, I simply graft it onto my faith and call it Mormon. By this means, it becomes the only true church."¹ Since I have never been LDS, I take my true experiences in and out of Mormonism and call them, for now at least, and somewhat with tongue in cheek, "Liahona Christianity."²

I HAVE BEEN FASCINATED WITH MORMONISM SINCE I was ten years old and discovered a Book of Mormon in a motel drawer on a family trip through Utah. As I think back to that time, I can't be sure what captivated me then—the notion of a lost book translated from hidden plates, Joseph Smith's visions, or was it just my good Lutheran parents warning me away from it that made the book all the more intriguing? I also hold open the possibility that the book itself planted a spiritual seed.

I am struck by Lowell Bennion's appraisal of the spirit that animates the LDS faith:

Mormonism began as a boy's search for truth. A youth, with eyes lifted heavenward, praying to God



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for knowledge on the morning of a spring day symbolizes the spirit of the religion of the Latter-day Saints.³

In some ways, this image of a young man intensely searching for truth also symbolizes my spiritual journey, which has come to include Mormonism in experience if not as a set of beliefs. Of course, I do have beliefs that have grown out of my experience, but generally what people believe is less important to me than what they do. I grow interested when I see goodness as a fruit of any spiritual path, and I have witnessed much goodness in the Mormon tradition.

I grew up in a conservative Lutheran family in Southern California, where I attended church every Sunday and the church's elementary school during the week. I have many good memories of my friends and teachers. But I also remember asking a teacher: "Do you mean that if people in the middle of nowhere can't believe in Jesus because they haven't heard of him, they're going to hell?" The bottom-line answer was, "Sorry, yes." My gut reaction was, "Well, that's not very fair." I could tell that my questions were not welcome. The first time I remember seeing my father cry was when, at sixteen, I told my parents I was not going to attend church any more.

As a youth, I envied something about the community of which my Mormon friends were a part. I first read the Book of Mormon all the way through in high school (after promptings from my LDS friend, Steve, who hadn't read it himself but "knew" it was a good thing to do). I read it partly to "one-up" Steve, but I did pray about it as well.

Soon after, I read Fawn Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*, for which she was excommunicated. After high school, I contacted Brodie at UCLA and was lucky enough to meet several times with her in her office and at her home. I found her to be quite generous with her time—a gracious, supportive person, who seemed quite friendly towards Mormonism. Besides helping me with research, she directed me to the offices of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon*



God the Father of us all, uses the men [and women] of the earth . . . to accomplish his purposes. . . . Perhaps the Lord needs such [people] on the outside of His Church to help it along. They are among its auxiliaries, and can do more good for the cause where the Lord has placed them, than anywhere else. . . . Hence, some are drawn into the fold and receive a testimony of the truth; while others remain unconverted.

—ORSON F. WHITNEY, April 1928

Thought near the UCLA campus and suggested that I introduce myself to its editor, Robert Rees, whom she obviously respected. I barely remember meeting Bob there and would be surprised if he remembers either. What I do recall is how hanging out in the *Dialogue* office that summer with administrative secretary Linda Smithana was a spiritual oasis for me. I still remember how loving, non-judgmental, and helpful Linda was with a single friend of hers who had gotten pregnant.

I approached my study of Mormonism intellectually. I believed that Joseph Smith and Mormonism had been shown to be something other than what they claimed to be, but I continued to collect and study Mormon books extensively in all areas—history, theology, literature, culture. When friends questioned me about my interest in things Mormon, my usual answer was that Mormonism was a microcosm of the growth of America and growth of religion in general.

On the other, less intellectual, hand, I loved traveling to (and through) Utah for general conference with Steve, milling around Temple Square with the crowds, staying with the family of one of his returned missionary companions during our Salt Lake visits. I really enjoyed attending the original touring production of *Saturday's Warrior* multiple times. Some of my favorite reading was Douglas Thayer's *Under the Cottonwoods*, Virginia Sorenson's *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*, Wallace Stegner's *Mormon Country*, and Vardis Fisher's *In Tragic Life*. Something about Mormon life and culture felt comfortable and alive to me, although I could not see any possibility of accepting its belief system.

For most of my college years, I flirted with agnosticism, though I most often described myself as a "spiritual person without a religion." I also developed an interest in Eastern spiritual traditions and started to practice meditation. I eventually encountered a book called *The Christian Agnostic* by Leslie Weatherhead (probably then the best-known British Christian author besides C.S. Lewis), which showed me a way to step back into my Christian tradition by introducing me to the concept of looking to where Jesus pointed—to learn to love—rather than at what I did or didn't believe about him. This approach to Christian life was further expanded by attending Quaker services and, later, by reading author and teacher Glenn Clark and participating in the summer camps he

founded, Camps Farthest Out (CFO). These camps are week-long programs of Christ-centered integral practices designed to balance heart, mind, body, and spirit.⁴

Although my interest in Mormonism waxed and waned during the years, it never left. Sometime in the '80s, I decided to simplify my life, which included selling most of my large and fairly rare Mormon book collection. In the midst of doing so, I was blessed with a realization as I met with polygamist book dealer Ernest Strack. As we went through my collection in the attic of my friend's house in Provo, Ernest and I talked for hours, during which I seriously disagreed with him on a variety of issues. But he had such a spirit of love about him that I realized that whatever our spiritual focus, we can use that focus to grow in love—or to put up walls of fear. It's up to us.

AS I READ the Ostlings' *Mormon America* in 1999, I was reminded of the many things I appreciated and the many things that disturbed me within Mormon faith and culture. I thought back to Robert Rees's inquiring spirit, evidenced through the years in his editing and writing for *Dialogue*, and wondered if he had been able to remain in the Church amid all the controversies. (Interestingly, I realized that I hoped he *had*.) After some searching on the Internet, I was surprised to find Bob living a mile or so away from me in northern California, on the banks of the same river I lived on in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Besides learning that Bob was still an active Mormon, I also discovered Sunstone and ordered tapes of two of Bob's talks, which I found quite inspiring.⁵ I found that Bob had experienced a shift in his spiritual life which was similar to mine—a shift from head to heart.

One of the most valuable essays I've discovered in my studies of Mormonism and Christianity in general is by former Church historian Leonard Arrington, entitled "Why I Am A Believer," found in the wonderful collection, *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars*. Arrington writes:

Because of my introduction to the concept of symbolism as a means of expressing religious truth, I was never preoccupied with the question of the historicity of the First Vision—though evidence is overwhelming that it did occur—or many of the other reported epiphanies in Mormon, Christian, and

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Hebrew history. I am prepared to accept them as historical or as metaphysical, as symbolical or as precisely what happened. That they convey religious truth is the essential issue, and of this I have never had any doubt.⁶

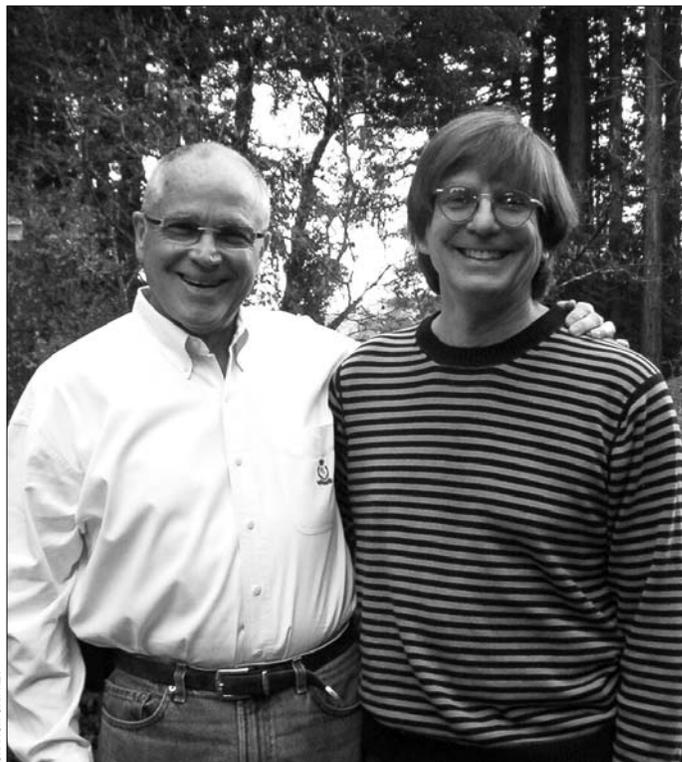
Another "perspective-changing" essay for me in the same volume was John Kesler's "Facing Spiritual Reality." John's journey, then and now, has moved me towards viewing Mormonism through a lens of experience and practice rather than as a set of beliefs. A convert, whose story is similar in ways to mine, John really seemed to live the challenge of Alma 32—letting a seed of interest grow into practice and continuing his practice while questions remained, but all the while acting on what was revealed to him. I was struck by John's description of his two nights of intense prayer, a journey through darkness into light that reminded me of Joseph Smith's prayerful, visionary struggle as a boy. (A voice came to John at the end of second night of prayer which told him that the Book of Mormon was true; the voice also made him a promise which did later come true). Throughout his search, John writes of his efforts to listen to his "tuning fork"—to pay attention to the people, writings, and concepts he was drawn to that resonated positively with him. John's words have led me to pay more attention to my own "tuning fork."

One idea that resonates well with my tuning fork is Peggy Fletcher Stack's assessment of Joseph Smith:

Like Harold Bloom, I believe Joseph Smith was a religious genius. He was imaginative and energetic and confident. So confident he could say, "God told me to say this, take notes." . . . [I]t would be essential for any prophetic person to trust his inner voices. And because of that faith, he believed that every impulse he had came from God. They hadn't, of course, but God needed a person like Joseph to break through the heavens. How many of us would be as focused and responsive to the voice of God? This was his strength and his weakness. In some fundamental way, most prophets are flawed. David, Moses, Moroni, Paul, to name a few. With great gifts come great temptations.⁷

Another resonance is Juanita Brooks's estimation of Joseph in a letter to Dale Morgan:

I do not believe that he was a conscious fraud or imposter. The things that were real to him may not seem real to [Fawn Brodie] nor to you . . . but I think they must have been to him. I have felt it was his own deep and sincere convictions that attracted and held his



SHANON GRIPKEY

Neighbors Robert Rees and Les Gripkey, Santa Cruz Mountains, 2007

followers. . . . I believe that it is possible for human beings to tap the source of all good, to contact God direct, if you will. I believe that there were times, rare perhaps, when Joseph Smith did that. I believe that it was those times that held his people to him in spite of all his human blunderings and frailties and mistakes.⁸

My tuning fork has also been drawn to C. Jess Groesbeck's Jungian-based theories of the Book of Mormon. Groesbeck has a strong testimony of the Book of Mormon while being open to quite naturalistic theories about it. He writes:

The cultural and familial systemic process that [Joseph Smith] went through, and the influence of that cultural system, made him ready as a designated, chosen individual with the proper kind of temperament to be open, to be able to virtually have a stream of consciousness that would reveal what the Book of Mormon was, which in essence was a symbolic history of America.⁹

I have also been deeply moved by the films of Richard Dutcher. *God's Army's* depiction of a spiritual journey, viewed through a prism of the Mormon faith, to me contained powerful universal themes. It also gave me a much better insight into what LDS missionary life is like and made me more empathetic and open towards missionaries. His *States of Grace* helped me feel the heart of Mormonism, the heart of Christianity, the heart of *any* sincere spiritual journey. The film reminds me of the parable of the Prodigal Son, portraying the beauty and power of God's unconditional love and grace, showing how suddenly they appear at just the moment we are ready.

SOMETIME AROUND THE same period in which I was reading *A Thoughtful Faith* and seeing *God's Army*, I decided to reread the entire Book of Mormon. I did so with heart, mind, and soul. I did have one strange experience while reading Lehi's dream. Everything (meaning the words and the world outside) seemed to turn multi-dimensional, the colors becoming ultra vibrant. I continue to recall that experience with wonder. I also find that despite significant problems with parts of it, I have a really warm place in my heart for the Book of Mormon. I love Nephi's introduction, Lehi's dream, the stories of the Liahona, the law of opposition in all things in 2 Nephi 2, and the sermon in Alma 32 on faith growing as a seed. For a while now, I have said that I view God's "chosen people" to be those people who choose God. Along these lines, I find the verses in Mosiah 18 to be the most beautiful passage on baptism I've read anywhere:

[A]s ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; . . . and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; . . . and comfort those that stand in need of comfort. . . . If this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord? (Mosiah 18:7–10)

I also decided to do what John Kesler described doing in his essay—to humble myself and take the missionary discussions, which in all these years, I had never done. I put away my copy of the *Missionary Guide* and shut off as much as possible my knowledge of the proselytizing questions and strategies. I sincerely prayed and read the scriptural selections and responded to questions honestly, without assaulting the missionaries with unnecessary critiques. (The missionaries didn't always understand the concerns I did bring up, such as when, in response to their question about whether I would have a problem with tithing, I responded, "No, except when it is used politically, particularly to support something like California's Proposition 22 to exclude homosexuals from the definition of marriage, which I consider mean-spirited.")

I was struck by a question John-Charles Duffy posed at a past Sunstone symposium session (which I paraphrase): "Is God speaking to me through this particular faith tradition, regardless of what I feel about historical and theological problems?"¹⁰ The moment I heard the question I felt, "That's the right question for me; in some way, God *has* spoken to me through Mormonism."

AS THINGS STAND now, I view Joseph Smith and Mormonism as a catalyst on my journey, but not the landing place. I value Mormonism for the opportunities it provides to daily connect earth with spirit—to contrast, examine, sift, and sort ideas like facets of a diamond, looking for truth everywhere possible. Lowell Bennion captures well what draws me to Joseph Smith:

The Prophet Joseph Smith was creative. Everything he touched became a new thing. In him was something of the curiosity of a child, the imagination of an

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artist, the practical zeal of a reformer, the idealism of a utopian, and the fire of a prophet.¹¹

I see Joseph Smith as an imperfect alchemist and explorer, whose desire to know God and spirit took him beyond the surfaces of his familiar nineteenth-century biblical knowledge, popular myths, and folk magic to his Sacred Grove experience. Although I question how he interpreted and explained his experience, he was brilliant in creating a map for others to follow—a map that has helped many to be closer to God and goodness.¹²

The LDS church moved from the synergy of Joseph's explorations to often deadening bureaucracy. (This is not unique to the Church—most organizations do this.) I see SUNSTONE and *Dialogue* as providing opportunities to continue the tradition of exploration that Joseph Smith instigated—looking for our own levers of truth. And although I've sometimes found LDS meetings to be ploddingly dull, I've also had quite a few synchronistic experiences that have ignited a creative spark within my spirit.

While visiting one of the Gospel Doctrine classes Bob Rees taught, I realized that what the Book of Mormon has meant in his life and heart, as well as in the lives of others, is what speaks to me. That sense has led me to keep examining the book until I have come to consider it scripture. I share Bob's reason for seeking spiritual experience: "One might say that the whole purpose of the gospel and the Church is to provide us with opportunities to experience God's love personally and to share that love with others."¹³

I appreciate many things about the Mormon experience—the simple goodness of many in the community; the integration of spiritual and worldly life; the rites of passage; the symbolism; the strong moral foundation; the importance of children and family; Joseph Smith's example of continually searching for greater truth.

What pushes me away from Mormonism? The lack of simplicity; the heavy focus on prescribed belief, sexual guilt, nationalism, and authoritarianism; the treatment of outsiders; attitudes toward homosexuals; the less-than-equal place of women. I also find embedded in the Book of Mormon's concept of God something I find quite disturbing—God as an inconsistent being who can be loving or murderous. While the contradictory, Old Testament-style God who commands "Thou shalt not kill" and tells Nephi to murder Laban in 1

Nephi 4 is not unique to the Book of Mormon, painting Jesus with the same brush is. Whether taken literally or symbolically, Jesus as destroyer in 3 Nephi 9 is a gross distortion of Jesus's message of unconditional love, completely incompatible with his core teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. It suggests, for me at least, less inspiration with possibly a bleeding through of Joseph's subconscious conflicts.

But, even with major problems such as these, my spirit is activated as I attempt to make sense in my own heart and mind of these seeming contraries. Their presence in a volume of scripture that I otherwise value very highly causes me to become more conscious of how I view God, Christ, and scripture: God as a being or force consistent with universal principles of goodness, where the means are consistent with the ends. Jesus Christ as a person who did not resist but stepped through the letter of the law and cultural barnacles of his time with a centered love, showing us a third way, beyond fight or flight, to deal with conflict and violence. Scripture as humankind's sometimes beautiful, sometimes awkward depiction of our developing understanding and interaction with God, in which we sometimes ascribe quite human, and at times even subhuman, motives and actions to God. In the end, I agree with Leslie Weatherhead that I judge scripture by Jesus, not Jesus by scripture.¹⁴

Today, although I'm a member of the United Methodist Church and visit other Protestant denominations as well as Quaker, New Thought, and LDS services, I have not yet found a permanent spiritual home. My deepest spiritual connections are at my annual Camps Farthest Out retreat, at Sunstone, and in an ongoing prayer group. I would be happy to be able to step out of my walking in the shadows of faith, but I must be able to do so with harmony of heart, mind, and spirit. I feel strange to be in this position myself and yet to find myself feeling sad when some of my Mormon friends feel the need to leave their tradition. With no judgment towards those who do leave, I generally agree with Peggy Fletcher Stack:

I found that I was most drawn to people who remain involved with their faith community, even if it is a struggle . . . because out of the tension between belonging and conforming is born creativity and growth.¹⁵

And I like Eugene England's analogy of the Church being the "School of Love" (using church in place of Martin Luther's original example of marriage):

Martin Luther, with inspired perception wrote, "Marriage is the school of love"—that is, marriage is

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not the home or result of love so much as the *school*. I believe that any church can be a school of love and that the Mormon Church is the best one. . . because the Church provides the best *context* for struggling with, working through, enduring, and being redeemed by our responses to those paradoxes and oppositions that give energy and meaning to the universe.¹⁶

And I do contemplate the possibility that God's plan is for us to be right here where we are, acting as headlights in the midst of organizations that may sometimes encourage us to remain tail-lights.

Lately, I have been most moved by Phil McLemore and John Kesler's approaches to Mormonism as a path of experience: Phil in conjunction with yogic practices which correlate with Christ's vision of wholeness; John with mediation and integral techniques explored in his work with Ken Wilber and Zen master Genpo Roshi.¹⁷ Theirs are practices rooted in the groundedness of the Mormon faith while also letting truths from other traditions help open our wings to connect with God directly, finding, in Lowell Bennion's words, "our own sacred grove." I am also moved by the personal stories I hear at Sunstone and on MORMONSTORIES.ORG podcasts; read in books such as Richard Bushman's *On the Road with Joseph Smith: An Author's Diary*, Alan Rex Mitchell's *Angel of the Danube*, and Coke Newell's *On the Road to Heaven*; and experience in films such as *Troy Through a Window* and *New York Doll*. For me it seems, biography is indeed theology.

IT IS DIFFICULT for me to imagine any church being anything more than a church that is "true for me" because of what was shown to me during the most profound spiritual experience of my life. Late one afternoon, while contemplating a question a friend posed about good and evil, I stood up and looked outside. The sky seemed to open, and I felt all conflict melt away. I knew, unquestionably, that love is the true reality of the universe, that all conflicts and divisions are shadows of reality—just words and human-made situations. I was transformed that day and the next in my dealings with people and was able to *experience* what it felt like to have no conflict or division. Since that time, I have viewed spiritual traditions as being a means or focus to help us open to a place of greater goodness and love in ways we can understand with our limited brains and in terms of cultural symbols we are familiar with.

My challenge today is how to form a workable set of practices that helps me be a good steward of the gifts of grace that God gives to me and use them to be a more loving person. I thank the goodness and the creative impulse within the Mormon tradition for the part it has played in my spiritual journey. 

NOTES

1. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Tales of a True Believer: Picking up Faith along the Way," *SUNSTONE*, April 1995, 54.

2. "Liahona Christian" is a play on the term "Liahona Mormon," which along with the term "Iron Rod Mormon" was coined by Richard Poll in his famous essay, "What the Church Means to People Like Me" in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1967): 107–17.

3. Lowell L. Bennion, *Religion and the Pursuit of Truth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1959), 13–14.

4. Glenn Clark, *A Man's Reach: The Autobiography of Glenn Clark* (New York: Harper and Row, 1949).

5. Robert A. Rees, "Pillars of My Faith," 1999 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, audio recording SL99191; Robert A. Rees, "What's Right with the Church," 1999 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, audio recording SL99312.

6. Philip L. Barlow, ed., *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars* (Centerville, Utah: Canon Press, 1986), 230.

7. Stack, "Tales of a True Believer," 52.

8. Newell Bringhurst, ed., *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 49–50.

9. C. Jess Groesbeck, "Joseph Smith and the Coming forth of the Book of Mormon II: A Cultural View," 2002 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, audio recording SL02153.

10. John-Charles Duffy, panelist, "Author Meets Critics: An Insider's View of Mormon Origins," 2003 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, audio recording SL03275.

11. Eugene England, ed., *The Best of Lowell Bennion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 56.

12. Even my "Joseph Smith worst-case scenario" seems fairly charitable to me: It is some combination of the conclusions reached by Robert N. Hullinger in his book, *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), and by William D. Morain in his *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr. and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1998). Hullinger accepts Joseph's accounts of his spiritual experiences but feels Joseph then may have sometimes fudged things to help God. Hullinger writes:

I believe that Joseph Smith tried to defend faith in a personal God against denominational strife and popular skepticism. He staked out the principle of continuous, personal revelation as the ground for battle and regarded himself as defender of God. The Book of Mormon was an apologetic for Jesus Christ. (xv)

Morain views as formative Joseph's incredibly painful and traumatic leg operations as a youth and the death of his brother Alvin. He writes:

The Book of Mormon . . . was a monumental effort for Joseph Smith, Jr. It was an impassioned expression of his conflicts as he dramatized them through the interplay of his many ancient characters. The book is probably no more nor less fictional than such Old Testament books as Genesis or Ruth. . . . However, the "validity" of The Book of Mormon lies not in literal truth any more than does Hamlet. . . . It is "valid," however, as one person's metaphorical expression of the themes of guilt, punishment, redemption, grief, and the ambivalent relationship of man to "father" and "brother." To the extent that these expressions are universal in human experience and that meaningful communication occurs with the book's readers, The Book of Mormon is indeed as authentic a religious work as much of the more traditional body of "scriptural" writing. (126–27)

13. Robert A. Rees, "It Has Opened My Heart Wider to Experience His Love," in *Converted to Christ through the Book of Mormon*, Eugene England, ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 193.

14. Leslie Weatherhead, *The Christian Agnostic* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 95.

15. Stack, "Tales of a True Believer," 49.

16. Eugene England, "Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel," in *Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Tabernacle Books, 1999), 4.

17. See, for example, Philip G. McLemore, "Mormon Mantras: A Journey of Spiritual Transformation," *SUNSTONE*, April 2006, 20–31; Philip G. McLemore, "The Yoga of Christ," *SUNSTONE*, July 2007, 30–45; John Kesler, "Pillars of My Faith," 2007 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, audio recording SL07291.



LETTERS FROM MOTHER

Always contained a weather update.
Not a bulletin but
a black inky cumulus formed
near the top of the page,
as if rain were news,
or snow accumulated like pride,
and wind, no matter
from which direction, proved
she could still stand up to the world.

I got into the habit of writing weather
back to her, sending warm temperatures
north, sunshine
if I could, so she might
believe in heaven.

She didn't.
Mother sent back word of what went wrong,
what someone said, what she said back.
Wondered if I remembered so-and-so who used to live
just two doors down from what's-her-name.
How all her friends were dying.
Each week plain brown envelopes
stuffed with layers of onion skin
arrived, arthritic handwriting
scratched like lightning across each page.

I'd set each envelope aside
but eventually I'd sigh,
glance toward the sky and read,
as sure back then as I am now
that nothing can be done
about the weather.

—DAVID FEELA