

FROM THE EDITOR

WHEREIN I JUSTIFY MY EXISTENCE

By Stephen Carter

YES, YOU ARE in the right place. Yes, this is a *bona fide* SUNSTONE magazine. The only thing that has changed is the editor's name on the masthead.

Strangely enough, it's my name.

It's kind of scary to see it sidle into its place next to the worthy names of Dan Wotherspoon, Elbert Eugene Peck, Peggy Fletcher Stack, Allen Roberts, and Scott Kenney. I feel like an Osric suddenly called upon to play Hamlet.

Whether there was a divinity that shaped this particular fate of mine, you'll have to judge for yourself. Let me tell you how I got here.

My story starts in 1997 when I first met Eugene England. He had just become writer-in-residence at Utah Valley State College (now Utah Valley University) and was in the initial stages of planning what is now the Mormon studies program. By a great stroke of luck, he hired me as his administrative assistant, and I became deeply involved in his work. I got to sit in on both private and public scholarly symposia with some of the most interesting people in Mormon studies, such as Armand Mauss, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Jan Shipp, Terry Givens, and the late Dean May. This period was a formative one for me, because for the first time in my life, I heard Mormonism discussed with discipline, intelligence, and spirit.

I realized only later how unique my tenure with Gene was. Few undergraduates are privileged to take part in gatherings in which religious and scholarly discourse is carried on with such skill and wisdom. I attribute the unique spirit of these meetings to Gene's commitment to Joseph Smith's concept of "proving contraries." When one proves contraries, Gene always argued, you aren't doing so to identify which is right and which is wrong but to experience the tension between them. It is the experience of dwelling in this tension that makes you wiser.

The scholars Gene brought together were skilled in the art of dwelling in tension. They didn't jump ship when the conversation got hard. They didn't bail when someone challenged their ideas. In fact, they saw these moments as opportunities. They knew that ideas

can grow only when they are interacting. And the best way to make ideas interact is to put them in tension.

ONLY days after Gene died, I moved to Alaska and began a master of fine arts program in creative writing. Then, just because I could, I also finished a Ph.D. in narrative studies.

During that time, I became fascinated with the structure of stories. I discovered that the great characters of fiction are those who are stretched between two competing values. Think of Asher Lev, stretched between his devotion to his religion and his passion for art. Think of *The Merchant of Venice*, where justice and mercy vie for the souls of Shylock and Portia.

I also learned that the great stories of the world have second acts. This may seem like a silly thing to say, but so many stories set up the problem (the job of the first act) and then resolve it (the job of the third act) with little to no struggle in between. I'm here to tell you that it's the struggle that makes a story great, because that's the time when the opposing forces are at their most powerful, when they wreak their full havoc on the character. Rest assured that any character emerging from the second act without scars is a cheater.

I began to see that Gene was right. Those who dwell in the tension, those who are willing to go through their second act, gain much. Those who jump out too early lose much. Perhaps this is the wisdom behind the adage, "Endure to the end."

THAT is how the foundation for my passion and commitment to the mission of Sunstone was laid. Sunstone is the place where Mormons can come to dwell in the tensions that arise from their religion and from the rest of the world. It happens to all us. We find ourselves inexplicably pummeled by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. During these times, we need a place to wrestle in spirit, as Jacob did, as Job did, as Jesus did. It needs to be an independent place; it needs to be open, respectful, and rigorous.

Thus, Sunstone is necessarily a place of labor. No spiritual journey is a primrose

path; it is a "steep and thorny way to heaven," as Hamlet put it. The people you find at Sunstone are not the ones who have jumped. They are the ones who are still trying to navigate their vessels between the whirlpool of Charybdis and the teeth of Scylla. They are the ones who have been brave enough to plunge deep into the second act of their story.

But getting through the second act isn't the end.

As Elie Wiesel said just a few months ago, "I believe that whatever we receive, we must share. When [I] endure an experience, the experience cannot stay with me alone. It must be opened, it must become an offering; it must be deepened and given and shared."¹

The act of composing your story is a heroic journey in itself. "It is essential that the writer undergo the journey," playwright David Mamet says. "That's why writing never gets any easier."²

And then we, the audience, become the beneficiary of that double journey. "The true drama . . . calls for the hero to exercise will," Mamet continues, "to create in front of us, on the stage, his or her own character, the strength to continue. It is her striving to understand, to correctly assess, to face her own character [...] that inspires us—and gives the drama power to cleanse and enrich our own character."³

My editorial philosophy for SUNSTONE will follow in Gene's tradition. There are contraries all around us, and we will prove them. We will wrestle within their tensions. We will do so with rigor and artistry. We will open the conversation. We will plunge into our second acts. And when we find our way out the other side, we will shape our journey into a story and share it.

As the novelist E. M. Forster writes, "One can, at all events, show one's own little light here, one's own poor little trembling flame, with the knowledge that it is not the only light that is shining in the darkness, and not the only one which the darkness does not comprehend."⁴

NOTES

1. Elie Wiesel, "God is God Because He Remembers," *All Things Considered*, 7 April 2008, http://www.thisibelieve.org/dsp_ShowEssay.php?uid=41283&topessays=25&&start= (accessed 16 September 2008).

2. David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 19.

3. *Ibid.*, 43.

4. E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (New York: Harcourt Trade Publishers, 1962), 76.