

FROM THE EDITOR

WRITING AS REPENTANCE

By Stephen Carter

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For me, writing is repentance—even though I dislike that word. When I hear it, I remember all those priesthood sessions of General Conference when I sat between my dad and my brother in the darkened chapel, staring up at the huge faces telecast from Salt Lake City, their resonant voices filling the room. Scared utterly out of my mind.

I was convinced at the time that I was one of the vilest of sinners. I often couldn't sleep at night, so aware of my sins that my stomach churned. I was afraid that if I fell asleep, I would die and find out just what a complete waste of God's energy I was.

I spent many of these sleepless nights composing a will—really more of a confession, because I had very little to bequeath and few siblings worthy of it. I'd scrawl out my sins in a notebook and then stuff it into my orange lockbox, hoping my confession would buy me some leniency at the judgment bar.

But I was pretty sure it wouldn't. In my fitful sleep, I would sometimes dream that I had just died and was standing in downtown heaven. All the people there smiled at me. "Of course you're going to pass the judgment bar," they cooed. "You're such a good boy with nothing to hide."

Then I heard heavy footsteps behind me: the angels sent to escort me (Remember. Mormon angels don't have wings.) My judgment time had come. I ducked into a nearby mansion and listened to the angels thundered by, giant smiles on their faces, looking for that nice kid who would surely pass judgment and go straight to heaven. But the longer I hid, the grimmer their faces became. It was only a matter of time before they found me.

I had racked up quite a collection of spiritual infractions, you see. Like the peanut butter sandwich I had made on the sly when I was supposed to be fasting. And the pocket change I had swiped. And

the swear words I had learned. And the sins incident to (perhaps even required for) adolescence. These sins were like invisible strings tying me to the ground. They looked thin enough, but when the time came, would I be able to snap them? Or would I stay fastened to the burning earth while the rest of my family and friends flew into the sky?

Do you remember the old gray woman in Jim Henson's movie *The Labyrinth*? The one who waddles around hunched beneath the weight of a pile of junk? That was my soul—distended and cancerous, hobbled and bent with the accumulation of sin.

Obviously, I had a very Platonic concept of spirituality. The metaphors I used for thinking about my spirit presupposed a bright core, a perfect version of myself—the one that had accepted Jesus' plan in the premortal council. Sin was the stuff that distorted, dimmed, and calcified that core. Repentance was like going to Gold's Gym and working off all that flab to reveal the true me beneath; it was the chemotherapy that burned away the malignant cells I had been cultivating inside me; it was the wire brush that raked away the scum. I was always looking for a way back to purity, a way to unburden myself.

In my mid-20s, having not yet died and gone to hell, I decided to go to grad school as being a news reporter simply wasn't paying the bills. So my wife and I applied to some schools and received offers from universities in Washington and Alaska. Going to Alaska seemed scary at first, especially since we had two very young children. But you only live once, right?

During the months before we moved, I dreamed about Alaska. In one dream, my family and I had just arrived in Fairbanks, and it was beautiful. The golden, horizontal light of sunset bathed the city, and people walked blithely along the streets. But suddenly the light utterly vanished, leaving only darkness, and I fell to my knees trying to feel my way to my family, trying to feel

my way home. But I didn't know which way home lay.

That dream followed me as we flew to Alaska. I wrote in my journal of the flight,

We didn't see much because the dark gray clouds smothered everything. I started to think of Alaska as a dark country, mapless and roadless. Like the blank spots that used to denote the unexplored regions of Africa, or like polar maps.

The undulations of the clouds' surface seemed to be a snapshot taken of boiling sewage: thousands of bloats about to erupt. But then I noticed that the black nodes weren't patterned randomly, but followed each other in wormish curves, as if they were the corrugations of a dark brain brooding over an empty land. At one point, the clouds broke up momentarily, and far below I saw what seemed to be fragments of dim glass, and snaking through them, the insane scrawl of a metallic river.

Very soon after I started my graduate program, I felt pulled toward writing about my experience as a Mormon. Which surprised me, because I moved to Alaska expressly to get away from the overwhelming Mormonness of Utah. But the pull was undeniable. It wouldn't leave me alone.

However, as I wrote, I realized that even though I was the person typing, I wasn't in control of my stories. I could feel them being fought over by two forces. One was the sacrament meeting mentality that wanted to take all my stories, scrub them shiny, and tie a pretty moral around their heads. The other was the de-conversion mentality that wanted to dismiss my Mormon experiences as naïve "pit stops" on the way to true enlightenment. So insistent were these mentalities that I felt the stories were trying to tell me, instead of the other way around.

After a lot of writing and rewriting, I eventually compiled a small collection of personal essays that were as finished as I could get them. I bound them into a chapbook and gave copies to a few friends one Christmas. Upon reading them, one friend who had very cordially left Mormonism a few years before wrote this to me: "The picture I had in my mind as I read these essays was of you standing on the edge of a cliff,

kicking rocks off, taking a few running starts, but always stopping short. Never jumping. Why don't you jump?"

The question took me by surprise, and I had to think about it for a long time. Why didn't I jump? Why didn't I just burn down the house and start all over again—whether it was the world's house or the Mormon house? It would be such a relief to just say to one or the other, "I know thee not;" to declare that I could no longer serve two masters; and finally, with one house gone, settle in the other.

An artist friend said that while she was reading the essays, a very strong image came to her. She painted it for me: a slight human figure faced by two overwhelming mountains. Entranced, I immediately hung it up in my living room and began contemplating it. After a few weeks of this, I finally saw what was going on in my writing.

Those mountains were the contradictions in my life. Sometimes the priesthood is a wonderful thing to me. Other times, it's an oppressive weight. Sometimes I can feel the binding power of the temple. Other times, it seems only to cut me off from my loved ones. My mission was at once an elating and awful time.

In order to really finish any of my essays, I had to forego the satisfaction of an answer, promised at the top of either mountain. Instead, I had to forge into the canyon, filled though it was with mist and darkness. Because that was the only place not already built. It was the only place I could create myself without the dominance of one mountain or the other.

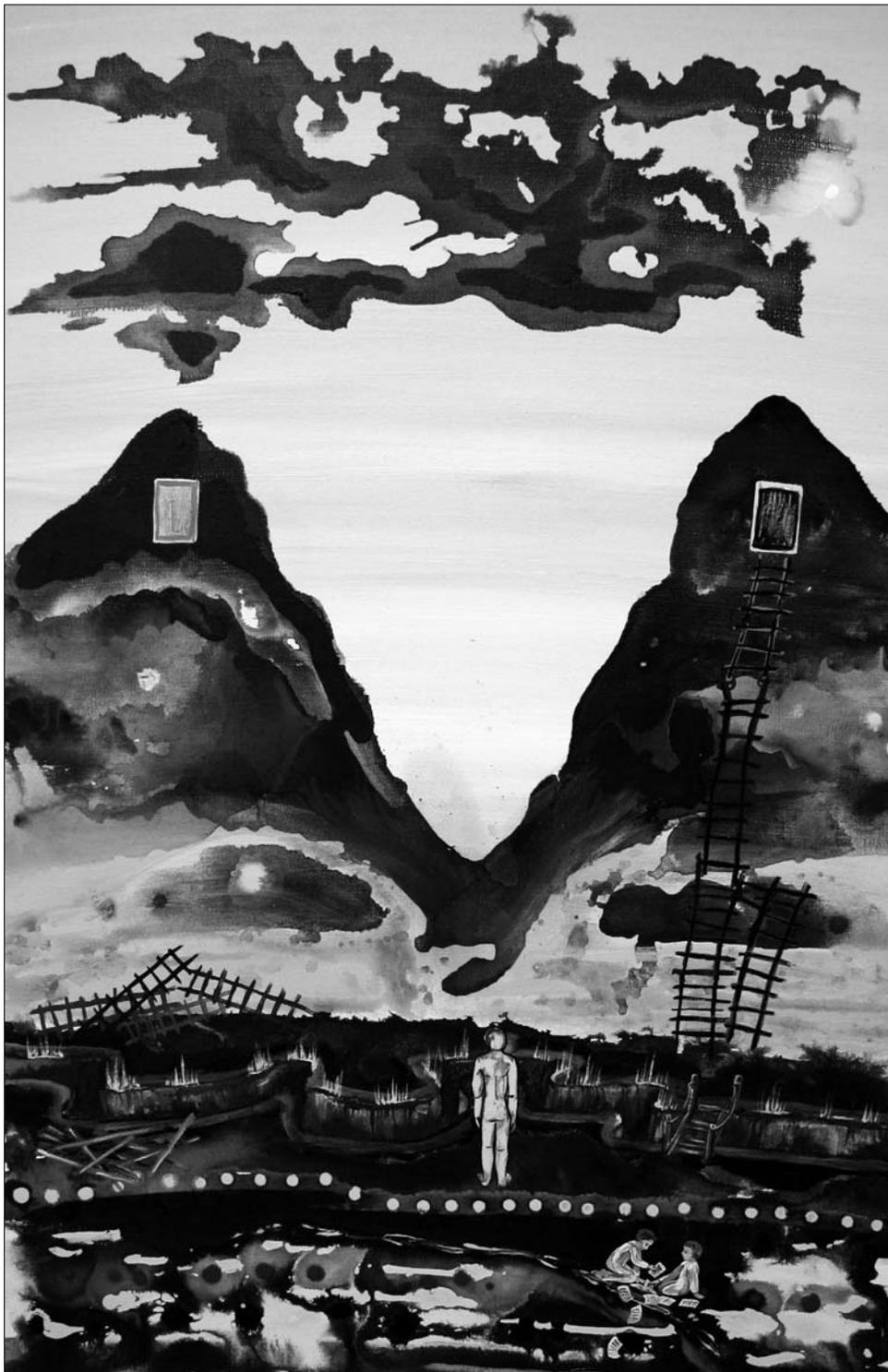
So, I take my journeys into the canyon, but not alone. I carry my pile of sins along with me.

There is only one way of knowing an essay is finished, and that is when I have wrought something new from the contradictions of my life. When I have dwelt long enough in the shadows of the mountains to see the beauty of both. When I have finally changed enough to collect the used tin foil, the ratty teddy bears, the rusty bicycle frames, the dog-eared magazines, the empty toilet paper rolls of my experience and make something that derives its beauty not from the perfection of its materials, but from the interplay of their imperfections.

The answer I finally gave to my post-Mormon friend was, "If I jumped, what would I have to write about?"

When judgment day comes, the angels will have to find me by following the little monuments I've constructed with each act of repentance. They'll have to track me through canyons and alleys, finding my works in dark, tension-filled places. But why should that be a surprise? God started creation with the firmament: undefined, chaotic, and bellicose.

So, when I say that writing is repentance, I mean that repentance is best defined as creation. I mean that the sins I carry on my back are not junk; they are my tools. I mean that the unexplored canyon between those two domineering mountains—dark and frightening though it often is—is the only place I can work out my salvation.



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