

SUNSTONE

MORMON EXPERIENCE, SCHOLARSHIP, ISSUES, AND ART

TRIBUTARIES OF FAITH by Jana Riess (p.20)

THE CALLING, England essay contest winner by **Stephen Carter** (p.27)

CLOTHING ESTHER Brown fiction contest winner by **Lisa Torcasso Downing** (p.58)

Les Gripkey describes his faith journey **AMONG THE MORMONS** (p.52)

Hugo Olaiz offers a **REQUIEM FOR THE LAMANITES** (p.68)

UPDATE
New LDS leaders called; Controversy erupts over conference talk; Hooray for Mormon studies!; Mitt news; and more! (p. 71)

December 2007—\$7.50



The Making of *THE MORMONS*
by Helen Whitney



Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest Call for Entries

THE SUNSTONE EDUCATION FOUNDATION invites writers to enter the 2008 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest, made possible by the Eugene and Charlotte England Education Fund. In the spirit of Gene's writings, entries should relate to Latter-day Saint experience, theology, or worldview. Essays, without author identification, will be judged by noted Mormon authors and professors of writing. The winner(s) will be announced in SUNSTONE and at the 2008 Association for Mormon Letters conference. Only the winners will be notified of the results. After the judging is complete, all non-winning entrants will be free to submit their essays elsewhere.

PRIZES: A total of \$450 will be shared among the winning entries.

RULES: 1. Up to *three entries* may be submitted by a single author. *Five copies* of each entry must be delivered (or post-

marked) to Sunstone by **15 FEBRUARY 2008**. Entries will not be returned. A \$5 fee must accompany *each* entry.

2. Each essay must be typed, double-spaced, on one side of white paper and be stapled in the upper left corner. All essays must be 3500 words or fewer. The author's name should not appear on any page of the essay.

3. Each entry must be accompanied by a cover letter that states the essay's title and the author's name, mailing address, email address, and telephone number. Each cover letter must be signed and attest that the entry is the author's work, that it has not been previously published, that it is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere, will not be submitted to other forums until after the contest, and that, if the entry wins, SUNSTONE magazine has one-time, first-publication rights.



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SUNSTONE INVITES YOU TO PARTICIPATE IN A SYMPOSIUM NEAR YOU

SUNSTONE seeks to celebrate and explore Mormon experience, issues, and art through diverse approaches and from many perspectives. From scholarly paper to artistic expression, we strive for excellence in thought and quality in presentation.

We welcome proposals on all Mormon-related topics, but we are planning discussions in future magazine issues on topics such as the Mormon soldier experience, addiction and recovery, Mormons and the body (issues such as body image,

fitness, obesity, plastic surgery, theology about the body), how technology affects Mormon life and experience, and LDS theology and practices regarding disability. Hence, we'd especially welcome symposium presentations on any of these topics.

- *14-15 March Claremont, California*
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- *11-12 April Independence, Missouri*
(co-sponsored by the John Whitmer Historical Association and Community of Christ Seminary)

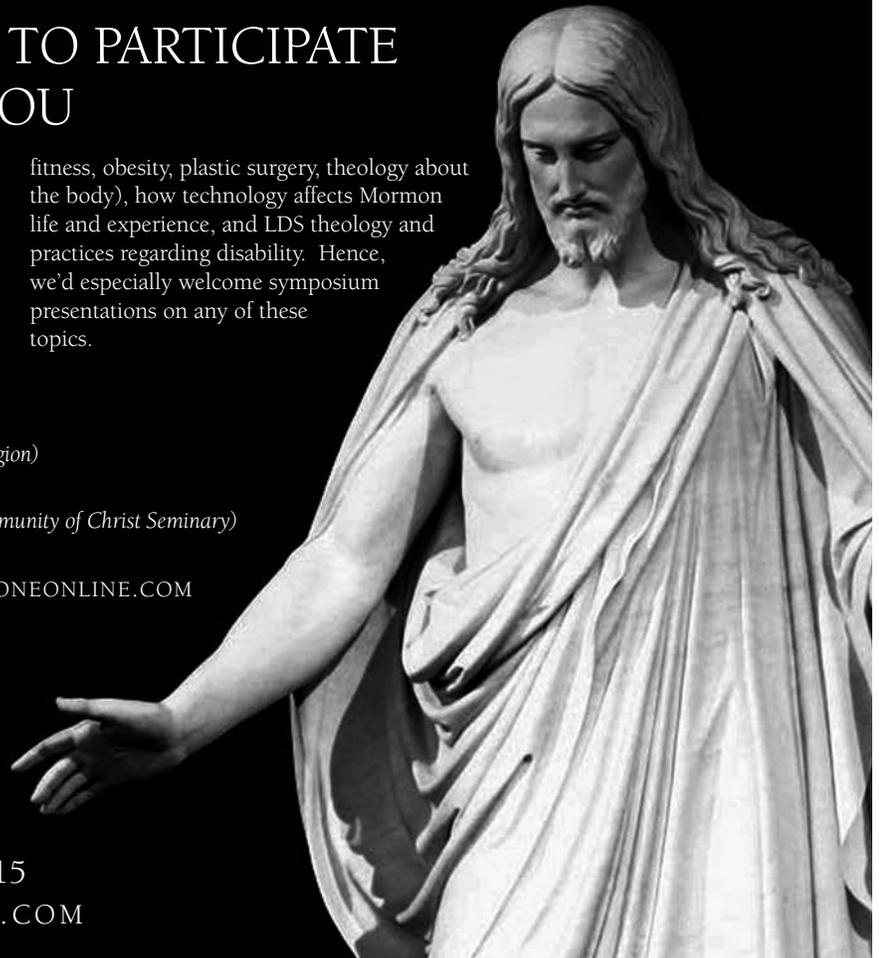
To stay informed about these symposiums, visit WWW.SUNSTONEONLINE.COM

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SUNSTONE

MORMON EXPERIENCE, SCHOLARSHIP, ISSUES, & ART

DECEMBER 2007

Issue 148



SUNSTONE (ISSN 0363-1370) is published by The Sunstone Education Foundation, Inc., a non-profit corporation with no official ties to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Articles represent the opinions of the writers only.

SUNSTONE is indexed in the *Index to Book Reviews in Religion and Religion Indexes: RIO/RIT/IBBR 1975—on CD-ROM*.

Submissions may be on IBM-PC compatible computer discs (MS Word or WordPerfect format), or by e-mail attachment. Submissions should not exceed 8,000 words and must be accompanied by a signed letter giving permission for the manuscript to be filed in the Sunstone Collection at the University of Utah Marriott Library (all literary rights are retained by authors). Manuscripts will not be returned; authors will be notified concerning acceptance within ninety days.

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United States subscriptions to SUNSTONE are \$45 for 6 issues, \$76 for 12 issues, and \$106 for 18 issues. International subscriptions are \$58 for 6 issues; \$100 for 12 issues; \$138 for 18 issues. All payments must be in U.S. funds drawn on a U.S. bank. All international subscriptions will be sent via surface mail. Bona fide student and missionary subscriptions are \$10 less than the above rates. A \$10 service charge will be deducted from refund amount on cancellations. All subscription prices subject to change without notice.



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UPDATE

- 71 OCTOBER 2007 GENERAL CONFERENCE REPORT:
New leaders called; Speakers emphasize Mormon
Christianity; Sermon on mothers' roles creates
controversy. OTHER NEWS: Church revises Book
of Mormon introduction regarding Lamanites;
Church praises establishment of Mormon studies
programs; Mitt Romney campaign continues to
bring attention to Mormonism—both positive and
negative; and more!

Cover: Helen Whitney with cameraman Tom Hurwitz on the set of *Richard Avedon: Darkness and Light* (1996). Cover photo: Karen Bernstein.

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The mission of The Sunstone Education Foundation is to sponsor open forums of Mormon thought and experience. Under the motto, "Faith Seeking Understanding," we examine and express the rich spiritual, intellectual, social, and artistic qualities of Mormon history and contemporary life. We encourage humanitarian service, honest inquiry, and responsible interchange of ideas that is respectful of all people and what they hold sacred.

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CORRECTION



In our October 2007 SUNSTONE issue, we incorrectly attributed the short reflection "Worshiping Together and Other Fantasies" (page 39) to blogger Courtney K. at Segullah. The real author of that piece was blogger "MADHOUSEWIFE" who posted it 21 June 2007 on Feminist Mormon Housewives. We are very sorry for this error.

BLOOMING VITALITY

CONGRATULATIONS TO SUNSTONE for providing such an interesting array of feminine voices in your October 2007 issue. It was a pleasure to read such informed, intelligent, vibrant, humorous, and important expressions of what it means to be Mormon and woman at the beginning of the twenty-first century! These voices remind us of how much women contribute to our common religious conversation when given a chance to speak, and how much poorer we are when those voices are silenced or not given adequate opportunity for expression. And Michael Farnworth's "The Heroine's Journey" and D. Jeff Burton's imaginative story in his "Braving the Borderlands" column added important male perspectives.

Given limited space, I can't comment on every important expression; nevertheless, I single out the essay by Community of Christ apostle, Susan Skoor, both for what it says and for the photograph of her participating in the ordination of a member of the Community of Christ First Presidency. That image seems somehow similar to pictures in my imagination of what we Latter-day Saints might wish for in an ideal church. There may be reasons why such a scene would never happen in the Mormon Church (and I can anticipate the voices of disapproval for even wishing it), but it is impossible for me not to imagine my own wife and daughters and the many good Mormon women I respect and admire in a similar circumstance. I am touched by Apostle Skoor's testimony that God's grace and peace "will always be with each of us, healing our brokenness, using our

weaknesses, continuing to call us into discipleship and sending us into the world to build the peaceable kingdom that includes all persons."

There is a vitality in this collection of personal women's voices that is essential to our full flowering as a people. I say, let a thousand feminine voices bloom in our sometimes arid and male-dominated landscape! The colorful photographs on the cover also reveal how essential feminine beauty is to our spiritual life. My guess is that *Dialogue*, *SUNSTONE*, and *Exponent II* have been among the most important avenues of expression for feminine voices among the Mormons for the past forty plus years, and that in being so, they have influenced the official organs of the Church to include more women.

It is significant that this special issue followed the issue featuring Margaret Merrill Toscano's cover article, "Are Boys More Important than Girls? The Continuing Conflict of Gender Difference and Equality in Mormonism." As the father of two boys and two girls raised in the Church, and as someone who has held many ecclesiastical positions over the years, I know that the answer to that question is a resounding "Yes." When I was Young Men's president in the Westwood Ward's combined YM and YW program, I was aware that boys had more privilege, more authority, more responsibility, more recognition, and more fun than girls did—and to a large extent, the girls knew it, too. As bishop of a large singles' ward in Los Angeles, I saw the effects of diminished self-esteem among many young Mormon women. Many more women than men in my ward doubted God's love for them. Far fewer had a clear sense of their mission in life, especially if they were unable to find a priesthood partner.

After reading Toscano's thoughtful, enlightened article, I was disappointed to see David Richardson's response in the October 2007 letters section. If Richardson was unable to find anything of faith or understanding in Toscano's article, it seems to me that it must be because he is blinded by his own prejudice against the subject or the author. He seems to consider Toscano's reasoned challenge of certain statements, practices, and policies as inappropriate because they include statements by President Gordon B. Hinckley, and yet her commentary on these texts and their symbolic meaning is absolutely germane to her subject. What more important source could one cite than the offi-

cial statements of the prophet? It is clear from Toscano's text that while she challenges aspects of President Hinckley's teachings, she both values and appreciates his desire to create a more equitable church.

Richardson also questions SUNSTONE's decision to give its cover spotlight to this article because of its author's excommunicated status. It seems he would have her excommunicated not only ecclesiastically but intellectually as well. Richardson must be aware that, at one time, several members of the original nineteenth-century Quorum of the Twelve were excommunicated, and that some excommunications are unfair and unwarranted. He surely also knows that history is replete with good people (e.g., Martin Luther, Cervantes, Queen Elizabeth, and the entire population of Venice!) who were excommunicated for saying and doing things that earned the disapproval of established ecclesiastical authorities. The issue isn't Toscano's ecclesiastical status but the soundness of her argument, the objectivity with which she states her case, and the tone of her language. In all of these, I contend, she comports herself well, meeting expected standards of academic discourse, and SUNSTONE should be commended for giving her article the attention it did.

Richardson complains that Toscano's article provides neither faith nor understanding, but I for one feel that over the years Margaret Toscano's writing and speaking have strengthened my faith and enlarged my understanding. Most of all, she causes me to think, to challenge my own axiomatic truths, and to be open to new understanding. Her article on gender equality is only her latest valuable contribution to the life of the mind and the spirit among the Mormons.

ROBERT A. REES
Brookdale, California

FAR FROM VOICELESS

I WAS A BIT NERVOUS to read Holly Welker's "Clean Shaven: No More Beards: Straight Women, Gay Men, and Mormonism" in the October 2007 SUNSTONE. I fully expected Welker to set me up as a con-

venient straw man for her arguments as she had done in other forums. I was happy to find, however, that not only did Welker avoid misrepresenting me (misinterpretation is not the same as misrepresentation), but she wrote a fascinating, insightful article.

Although I believe Welker's argument falls short due to its reliance on a simplistic and self-congratulatory characterization of Mormon women as "naively and earnestly hopeful," she does raise many valid and important questions about marriage relationships in general and specifically those of straight women married to gay men. Ultimately, Welker advocates causes I wholeheartedly support: gender equality and the legal right of consenting adults "to marry any other consenting adult who wants to marry them."

Lest anyone think that Mormon women married to gay men are so subjugated and voiceless that they need someone like Welker to speak for them, though, I'd like to direct SUNSTONE readers to a few venues where these women act not as the objects of Welker's narrative but as the subjects of their own. My wife, Jessie, blogs at FOXJ.BLOGSPOT.COM, where the relative importance of her husband's sexual orientation in her day-to-day life is reflected in how infrequently it's the topic of her posts. A friend who goes by the name "Leslie" blogs about her relationship

with her gay husband at WIFEOFAGAYMORMON.BLOGSPOT.COM. Both Jessie and Leslie, as well as others married to gay men, post on LDSLIGHTS.ORG alongside a handful of faithful gay Mormons. And, representing the straight men married to gay women to whom Welker alludes in a footnote, the pseudonymous Darrin Stevens blogs at MORTAL-REALM.BLOGSPOT.COM.

I applaud Holly Welker for her concern for the well-being of straight Mormon women married to gay men; the person I care for more than any other happens to fall into that category. Amid all the rhetoric of protecting women from the evils of patriarchy, though, let's not ignore the voices of those women (and men) who agree with Welker's premise that satisfying sexual relationships require "great generosity and sensitivity on the part of everyone involved," and have found those qualities in their relationships with their gay spouses.

BEN CHRISTENSEN
Seattle, Washington

INTERESTING EXCHANGE

AFTER READING HAROLD BLOOM'S perspective on the difference between the theology of Joseph Smith and the theology of his contemporary successor, Gordon B. Hinckley, in the March 2007 SUNSTONE, I



"It's my own concoction. . . . A little bit of blacks and the priesthood, a healthy dose of polygamy—both Joseph Smith and post-manifesto—and a dash of hats and peepstones."

JEANNETTE ATWOOD

wish to enter into the historical record an intriguing response in 2000 by Professor Bloom to an invitation to speak at Brigham Young University.

On 14 September 2000, I wrote to invite Bloom to speak at a BYU forum (and to other possible audiences) sometime the following semester. Writing in behalf of the BYU administration and as director of BYU's Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature, I was able to offer expenses, plus a generous honorarium and other inducements for Bloom to visit BYU. I concluded the invitation, lightly: "I hope that you can come out to BYU, where you'll find a goodly bunch of what Joseph Smith taught us are members of the Tribe of Ephraim waiting to be instructed (and delighted) by Harold Bloom, a fellow Israelite."

On 20 September 2000, Professor Bloom sent a gracious decline of the invitation, handwritten on Yale University, English Department letterhead. The letter's intriguing final sentence reveals Bloom's identification with and embrace of Mormonism as the institutional embodiment of Joseph Smith's astounding restoration of authentic Pre-Hebraic theology—a thesis he argues for ex-

tensively in his book *The American Religion*.

Dear Professor Cracroft:

I am honored by the invitation, but—with authentic sorrow—must decline. I have turned seventy, continue to teach full-time at Yale, part-time at NYU, and to write and edit non-stop. Survival depends upon staying away from all other institutions, until and unless I ever retire. But I regret saying 'no' because I have a high regard for you, and if not Jewish would be among you.

With high regard,
Harold Bloom

Bloom's SUNSTONE essay, which contains the question, "How much of Joseph abides in contemporary Salt Lake City?" suggests that in ensuing years, Bloom has revised his perspective somewhat, seeing modern Mormonism as a diminished "routinization" of Joseph's theology. It may be that such change is inevitable in institutionalizing Joseph's startling doctrines. I prefer to see the contemporary Church as Joseph Smith's lengthened shadow.

RICHARD H. CRACROFT
Orem, Utah

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SUNSTONE

is excited to announce the formal launch of the

Mapping Mormon Issues PROJECT



MAPPING MORMON ISSUES IS A NEW SUNSTONE INITIATIVE. Our goal is to commission “framing articles” on topics that challenge serious students of Mormonism. These articles will deliver reliable information about these difficult aspects of LDS history, theology, and Church administration in a fair, balanced way. The Mapping Mormon Issues initiative will also make these articles and supporting materials available in multiple formats.

Over a period of more than thirty years, independent Mormon studies journals, SUNSTONE included, have published a wealth of scholarship on issues such as polygamy, blacks and the priesthood, folk magic, the translation of the Pearl of Great Price, and the relationship between Mormonism and Freemasonry—issues that often trouble Latter-day Saints who encounter them. One problem with the current state of discourse on these and other difficult subjects is that in most cases, the scholarship has been presented in bits and pieces. It is therefore hard for someone coming to the issues for the first time to get an easy yet substantive orientation to the discussion—its history, major findings, and arguments. As the discussions have unfolded, the main groups currently engaged in discussing these issues are either anti-Mormon organizations or LDS apologetic foundations, which results in presentations shaped by the group’s overarching agenda to lead people out of Mormonism or keep them safely within the fold.

Sunstone feels that it is uniquely positioned to fill the void left by these competing agendas by providing fair, reliable, and comprehensive windows into these issues. As a well-established, independent organization whose mission is to sponsor open forums about all aspects of Mormonism and foster an environment of free and respectful inquiry, Sunstone can use its magazine, symposia, podcasts, blogs, and other forms of outreach to frame challenging issues in ways that will be helpful to thoughtful Latter-day Saints who encounter them, but without pushing inquirers toward a particular outcome regarding their faith journey.

THE MAPPING MORMON ISSUES (MMI) project will commission articles that can orient students within the ongoing discourse about various difficult issues. These articles will strive to be dispassionate summaries of the issues—how the debates have unfolded over time, what the main arguments are for this position over that one—instead of actually weighing in on the debates themselves. Each completed article will be published in SUNSTONE magazine and online through the Sunstone website, a new version of which is just weeks away from launch. In addition to written text, MMI will offer interviews with experts and key players in the discussions of each topic, as well as other audio and visual helps to students of the issue. The project will also offer links to free versions of past and current Sunstone symposium discussions about each topic and will actively seek permission to provide links to the best scholarship in other journals and forums.

To be successful, the Mapping Mormon Issues project will require considerable commitments of time, effort, and money. MMI will be administered by a group of people consisting of the SUNSTONE editor, two Sunstone board members, and several people outside the formal Sunstone organizational structure who are committed to the serious study of Mormon issues and the project’s success.

WE ARE THRILLED to announce that the fundraising campaign has begun with a bang as long-time Sunstone friends MIKE AND RONDA CALLISTER have pledged to match up to \$5,000 in donations others send to the Mapping Mormon Issues project. *They invite you to join them! Will you pledge your support today?*

TO DONATE or learn more about the Mapping Mormon Issues project, please visit WWW.SUNSTONEMAGAZINE.COM, contact Sunstone by phone at 801.355.5926, or email us at MMI@SUNSTONEMAGAZINE.COM.

We look forward to partnering with you in providing this window into vital discussions for those seeking to better understand Mormonism’s past and present.



TOUCHSTONES

FAMILY DINNER

TURNING THE TABLE

WHEN MY PARENTS first offered us the table, we weren't sure we wanted it. For one thing, it is dark brown, similar to the 1970s wood paneling in our upstairs family room adjacent to our dining area. My wife and I had been planning to eventually cover or remove this dated paneling, not acquire a big dining table to stylistically extend the theme.

Further, this dark, hulking table and its matching chairs are coated with calcified—nearly fossilized—grime and goo from thirty years of heavy use. This is the table at which, as the oldest of ten children, I grew up eating meals. My main memory of those meals is wolfing down food while eyeing pots and bowls and worrying about whether I'd get seconds. We were such a large group that most conversation was fragmented into groups, with only occasional all-family bulletins shouted across the din. If you sat in the middle of a long side, you did a lot of passing.

At some point, one of my brothers—the one who's now making me look lazy by comparison as he does his neurology residency at Yale—carved his name not so much into the table edge itself but into the layers of culinary history that had formed over the wood. Worse, in recent years, my family used the chairs as painting stools without covering them, so they are all splattered with various colors.

Yet this high-quality furniture is still structurally sound and functional, and my own nuclear family has outgrown our six-person table. So just a month or so ago, my wife and I agreed to accept my childhood table and chairs into our home, and I find that they have captured my imagination. As I watch my eight-year-old slurp spaghetti at the new-old table, I wonder how many times I sat at that same spot and what my inner life was like at each juncture. I try to fathom what a time-lapse film of the table's entire occupied history would look like. I picture all the food ever served upon the table piled into one enormous heap.

Just as my wife has done with the other baggage I've brought into our marriage—a previous marriage with two adopted children, a taste for edgy Mormon culture—she is now making the best of my childhood table and chairs, painstakingly scrubbing them clean, sanding them down, and staining and lacquering them. She hasn't tried sanding off my brother's name yet—if it doesn't come off, he'll soon easily be able to afford a brand-new table for us.

In the same way that the widow who lived in our current house for thirty years before us still haunts it—her perfume lingers deep inside certain upstairs closets, and when we go on vacation this scent reclaims the entire house—I imagine that the spirit of my childhood family will continue infusing this table, hopefully bringing to my own kids the same

overall good karma that it brought us. All ten siblings are alive, healthy, gainfully educated and employed, and active Church members—in fact, nine out of ten served missions.

It turns out that the dark chocolate table and chairs of my youth somehow go unexpectedly well with this house's moss-green carpet. But where will we all sit now for big family dinners up at Grandma and Grandpa's house? Oh, wait—now I get it. Honey, you better buy a whole ham for Christmas!

CHRISTOPHER KIMBALL BIGELOW
Provo, Utah

COMPETING WITH HIS PAST

A MORMON GIRL who couldn't cook. Seems impossible, but when he married me, I had never dealt with raw meat (other than hamburger fried on the stove), I had never followed a recipe without something terrible happening (it is possible to need stitches because the brownies-from-a-mix are too tough to saw through), and I had never cooked for anyone other than myself. (Dessert items, while a personal necessity, do not count.)

My husband was raised by a mother whose meals were, according to him, culinary masterpieces and were the measuring stick by which he judges all food. Her chicken turned up its nose at anything Kentucky-fried, her mashed potatoes were too good to abide lumps, and her casseroles never kept company with the contents of a red-and-white soup can.

His first wife was Italian. Not Italian-American. *Italian*. Lasagna, gnocchi, pasta primavera. The genuine article. The real deal.

I burned chocolate chip cookies, made lumpy mac and cheese from the blue box, and occasionally misread *T* and *t* on the recipe card.

He must have seen something in me, though, that meant more to him than gourmet food. And he told me that I was under no obligation to cook for him. We were partners to complement one another, not square pegs futilely shoving their way into round holes.

But there had to be a way for a square peg to enter a world of well-roundedness.

Our first dinners together were tests of his acting ability: "Thank you for dinner," he would say every time.

But I wanted to earn more than "thank you"; I wanted "that was good." I wanted it said in the same way that he said it when

TOUCHSTONES is a SUNSTONE section that debuted in December 2005. It was inspired by "Readers Write" in The SUN magazine. TOUCHSTONES topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for personal expression. Writing style is not as important as the contributor's thoughtfulness, humor, and sincerity. SUNSTONE reserves the right to edit pieces, but contributors will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication.

To submit a reflection, please send it typed and double-spaced to SUNSTONE, 343 North Third West, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84103. Electronic submissions can be sent via email to TOUCHSTONES editor Allen Hill at: allen@sunstoneonline.com. Submissions should be kept somewhere around 400 words, but we are willing to make exceptions for exceptional pieces. Please submit right away for upcoming topics!

Upcoming Topics: { CROSSROADS
COMING CLEAN



we ate with his mother or when he reminisced about the food he ate on his mission in Italy.

I didn't learn to cook because that's what good Mormon wives do. No, I learned to cook because the gauntlet had been laid in front of me, and my competitive side—the side that had led to a master's degree and my teaching college students not much younger than I—simmered like boiling water waiting for the ingredients.

Funny thing, I can't remember when he first said it—was it for the chicken and broccoli stir fry or the marinated salmon?—but he has told me “it was good” a number of times. I guess memory fades when there are four cooking magazines to read each month, new recipes to experiment with, and exotic ingredients to hunt down in Utah Valley grocery stores.

I don't want “that was good” any more. I'm aiming for “MMMmmmm, wow!”

MARY ELLEN GREENWOOD
American Fork, Utah

SILENCE AROUND THE HAM

MY MOM WAS raised on a small southern Idaho farm during the Depression. Money was scarce, but food was plentiful. The problem with the food was not volume but variety. The family enjoyed occa-

sional roasts and vegetables and plenty of potatoes, but bread and milk were still the foundation of Mom's diet during those lean, formative years. And with dinner consisting of the same basic meal, day after monotonous day, there also wasn't much to talk about at the dinner table. Hence family dinners were generally consumed in silence from the time of the “amen” until the last slurp.

This gastronomical genealogy impacted family meals as I grew up in two ways. First, wasting food was a sin next to murder or taking the sacrament with your left hand. Second, dinner table conversation was regulated with military exactness—a fact that was impressed upon me each time I innocently violated the culinary conversational commandment.

During my growing-up years, while other young men were trading baseball cards, watching *The Lone Ranger* on TV, or building forts, I spent my time transfixed by the wonders of science. My best friend Bruce and I scoured our California neighborhood capturing unlucky lizards and frogs. With cold, scientific precision, we dispatched them to their eternal reward so we could dissect them and identify their delicate inside parts.

My parents encouraged this pursuit. I think secretly my dad hoped that I would learn enough biology on my own that he could avoid the “birds and bees” talk, which I'm sure he had been rehearsing and

dreading since I was born. And of course my Mom was convinced I would be a famous surgeon—which I suppose is still possible should the demand for lizard surgery grow.

So complete was my enthusiasm for scientific exploration that I occasionally disregarded the mealtime code of silence. On one fateful day, I was neatly slicing off a strip of honey-roasted ham when I could hold my tongue no longer.

“Dad, you should have seen it! It was sooooo cool! Bruce and I made an incision the whole length of a lizard's underbelly and peeled back the skin and ribs so we could see his heart. I took my forceps and gently squeezed the heart and it started beating again! We did heart massage on a lizard, Dad!”

Instead of receiving the “atta boy” I had hoped for, my mother leaped from the table as if she'd been shot from a cannon. Napkin pressed urgently against her mouth, she disappeared down the hall and into the bathroom. Minutes later she rejoined the family, looking paler than before but lady-like and perfectly composed.

My “science” phase lasted another two years, during which I occasionally tested various topics and slowly compiled a mental list of things that could never be mentioned at the dinner table. Words like “dead mouse,” “pollywog,” “maggots,” “lizard blood,” and “stagnant water” were taboos. Even “dog hair” and “mold” would cause my mother's

hasty exit from the table. No pre-teen scientist could be expected to keep these words out of normal conversation, so I eventually learned to just keep silent.

Still I wondered why such talk would upset my mother so. The only theory my young mind could come up with took me back to her youth. During those Depression days, in the silence that surrounded her dinners, she must have developed an amazing power of suggestion that allowed her to believe that her meal of bread and milk was actually an expensive steak or a flavorful pork roast. So perfect was her mental manipulation, I reasoned, that she must even now imagine that *any* organic substance mentioned in dinner table conversation was actually clinging to her fork on its way to her waiting mouth.



OVERCAST AFTERNOON

I'm thinking about how the edge
of this hand-hewn cup
reminds me of the waist of solitude.

How the handle rises from the top
& flows down,
shaped like a woman's torso.

Starlings peck at the cold rain
beneath a chestnut tree,

The chestnut's feathered cones
fallen too early
during a false spring.

I am amazed when the young woman
leaves my cup
to gather fallen chestnut burrs
into the lap of her nightgown.

She glances back at me
with eyes of seawater
before turning to step
through a small hole in this poem.

—ALAN BRITT

I tested my hypothesis once at a Thanksgiving dinner. With my mother's relatives firmly packed around the table, I stood and, in a loud voice, said, "Please pass the smelly frog guts and squirming maggots." The resulting stampede of aunts and uncles was confirmation enough. I ate my remaining Thanksgiving dinner alone, banished to an adjoining room. But I wasn't bothered. Weren't all great scientists called to suffer in the cause of truth?

J. CRAIG MECHAM
Spokane, Washington

AN UNEXPECTED PARTY

"Hello?"

"Hello?"

Gabe was there. Acid welled up in Nettie's heart. She tried to keep it from infecting her voice, tried to remember that she had a reason for calling. Casual "how are you's." Wondering if he would be leaving soon, wondering what time she should have dinner ready.

He was apologetic, but it was a laid-back apology; he knew he should have called, but of course it wasn't a big deal that he hadn't thought of calling. Was it?

Behind her, the clock fell off of the kitchen wall and smashed. Of course it wasn't a big deal. Of course, he had eaten at school and needed to get a few things done for the dean, run a few errands.

Nettie hung up and looked hard at the floor. Not only was she a sentimentalist, she was a clumsy sentimentalist. If she could languish, be willowy and pale, that would be something. But when she gets mad, she usually throws things, and then she cries and her eyes go purplish and puffy, and her nose turns red and her freckles stand out. No, she wasn't going to go through all that this time.

Ross howled, not the full-blown howl of hunger, but the warning signal that told her he was awake, she was not there, and he wasn't going to let her get away with that kind of neglect. Nettie toyed with the idea of ignoring him. The cry rose half an octave. There was nothing else to do but get up.

Then the doorbell chimed. Nettie groaned, hoisted Ross to her shoulder, clambered down the stairs, opened the door.

Katy, her sister, still wearing the royal blue Martmart vest. Nettie's face became a mask of unconcerned "pleased to see you," but inside her organs heaved a unified sigh that would have liked to be a sob. "Take your kids and go," she shouted inside. "It's nice to see you, but take them and go!"

Katy was holding a Martmart bag. "I was

straightening clothes in the kids' section and I found something for Hyrum." She pulled out some baggy shorts that were exactly right for Hyrum's size and style. "They were on clearance, 50 cents each. I got some really cute stuff for the girls, too. I know I'm late, but I had to fill out some extra employment papers. I should be earlier in general."

Of course, Katy would have an excuse for being late on the first day Nettie had cared for her children. Of course she would be super nice about everything.

Six elephants, three hippos, eight or ten zebras, and a mass of ostriches clambered down the stairs and charged into the hallway. The two women's collective offspring had descended. The next few minutes sounded like a thousand starlings at sunset.

"Looks like they had a good day," was all her sister said.

The quiche should be perfect exactly now.

"Would you like to have dinner?" Nettie blurted, but then wondered if she really wanted them to stay or if she just wanted to be able to tell Gabe that there was no dinner for him because someone else had come when it was hot.

Nettie set the table quickly. Sitting in the chairs, the same chairs the two women had sat on as girls, exactly the same thick resin that their father had put on when he was young enough to bother refinishing an old table rather than buy a new one. Except for a small addition of glue in this or that joint, everything was exactly as it had been for the last twenty years. Nettie still wanted them to leave, but she wanted more for them to stay.

The quiche had cooled so that the pie was firm enough to withstand cutting, soft enough for teeth to dissolve through the crust and into a rich blend of eggs, butter, and cheese, their flavor brought to the heights of sensation by the touch of ham and green onion. Katy ate two pieces, three. The children sat to eat, quiche filling the void of their mouths. Jell-O, with the extra lure of miniature marshmallows, stilled all need for further entertainment.

Nettie looked up and studied her sister. Katy's eyes didn't seem preoccupied. Her smile didn't seem to be thinking of something else. Nettie saw that Katy was here only because she wanted to be, and knowing that someone wanted to be here was as warm, smooth, and rich as fresh quiche.

Nettie lifted the fork to her lips without thinking of yolks or butter or the crust. She felt the bite spread in her mouth, filling it with a taste that promised to last.

NOELLE CARTER
Lyman, Wyoming

FROM THE EDITOR

MINDING THE GAP

By Dan Wotherspoon

FALL 2007 SYMPOSIUMS!

OUR GREAT THANKS to all who attended, spoke or performed at, or helped organize our two Fall 2007 regional symposiums!

SUNSTONE NORTHWEST was held 12–13 October. It opened on Friday night with a dynamic workshop, “Staying in the Church after a Crisis of Faith,” led by Sunstone executive director John Dehlin at the home of MOLLY AND ROY BENNION that more than sixty people attended. Saturday sessions, held in the Lake Washington Rowing Club building, featured panels and reflections on everything from how the “Bloggernacle” is affecting Mormon studies, to fresh perspectives on Noah’s Flood, to the Church’s new pamphlet about homosexuality, to the Middle East and becoming peacemakers in our own lives, to the sharing of personal statements of faith and commitment. Once again, Molly Bennion served as our cheerful organizing partner and as gracious host to eighty-plus attendees.



Sunstone Northwest attendees listen to Ron Schow speak on the Church’s new homosexuality pamphlet

SUNSTONE NORTHEAST, Sunstone’s first official gathering in New England in more than a decade, was held on 2–3 November. More than sixty souls braved a raging Nor’easter storm to attend one or more of the events held on the Harvard Divinity School campus. Attendees were treated to wonderful plenary addresses by Judith Dushku and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, as well as papers on topics ranging from kingdom-building through international justice networking, to Mormonism’s relationship with Asian peoples, to the Book of Mormon as an Amerindian apocalyptic text, to music as a worship element, to James E. Talmage’s experiences writing of *Jesus the Christ*, to fascinating research into black Mormon converts in early Massachusetts, to autobiographical musings by a celebrated historian. The symposium also featured a panel of LDS undergraduate students at eastern colleges and universities discussing how their Mormonism is engaged through their educational experiences, a panel of Latter-day Saints who are currently studying at Harvard Divinity School, and a Reader’s theatre performance of memories collected during a Boston/Cambridge Mormon history project. The symposium was organized through the instrumentality of John Dehlin, who enlisted as a partner the incredible KRISTINE HAGLUND. But it all finally came together only through the energy and great connections of TAYLOR PETREY, president of the Harvard Divinity School LDS Association.



Jared Hickman



Taylor Petrey



LDS undergrads panel

Digital audio recordings of these symposiums can be ordered by visiting WWW.SUNSTONEONLINE.COM or calling the Sunstone office at (801) 355-5926.

LAST SPRING, LIKE many tourists on their first trip to London, my wife Lorri and I enjoyed learning to get from place to place on the city’s underground transport system, “The Tube.” We also got the chance to encounter firsthand the ubiquitous reminder, “Mind the gap,” which plays on the P.A. system as trains pull into stations and passengers prepare to board and exit. The phrase, a caution to watch your step as you transverse the small open space between the platform and train, has become a London trademark, a slogan one can find on practically every imaginable kind of souvenir.

Though they vary in distance from station to station, it’s pretty easy to handle the gaps one encounters in London’s rapid transit system. As we all know, however, there are many other types of gaps that are much harder to negotiate.

Psychological research into the root causes of personal happiness or anguish, as well as my own personal experience, shows that the “gaps” that cause human beings the most stress fit under the general heading of discrepancies between the “ideal” and the “real”—what we think would be the ideal thing to happen versus what ultimately takes place, what we would ideally say and do versus how we actually speak and act.¹ Add to these similar mismatches between anticipation and gratification, our expectations and what finally appears, and it’s no wonder we find ourselves so often depressed, disappointed, and sometimes even angry about the presence of this gap.

At this point, we might helpfully recall the first word of the injunction, “Mind the gap,” for when we look at what’s going on in this “ideal versus actual” dynamic, we can see that these terms are primarily phenomena of mind rather than matter, labels not substances, mental constructions rather than physical facts. Our minds are responsible for what we imagine as the ideal; our minds are responsible for what we decide is the real: “Is the glass half-empty or half-full?” John Hatch’s essay in this issue on the “PostSecret” phenomenon shows vividly how people can view the exact same object differently depending on the mind they bring to the encounter with it.

Anyone familiar with the basic premises of postmodernism or Eastern epistemology knows that I’m not exploring new territory here. We know this stuff. We know that our minds (with input from our sense organs, of course) are the major contributor to what we experience as reality. If this is the case, why don’t we “mind” this fact better? Why don’t we more often “mind” (forefront in our

awareness) the fact that we're the creators of the very gap that causes our own dis-ease and do something to mitigate the negative effects?

Over the past few years, meditation instructor Phil McLemore (who has a fun, short piece in this issue about his experience being interviewed for the Helen Whitney documentary and is also mentioned in the essay by Les Gripkey) has both spoken and written for Sunstone about the nature of our minds and tools for training ourselves to become more centered in the deepest realities of the universe.² I recommend his insights and prescriptions.

Can we learn about minding the "ideal versus real" gap from other fields as well? I think so. In what follows, I introduce an idea by historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith about the way repeated performances of certain rituals can help reduce, in a healthy way, the tensions created by this gap. Smith's insights emerge in conversation with rituals in hunter-gatherer societies, but I promise I will bring them into dialogue with Mormon experience.

LET me begin with one of Smith's conclusions. Referencing the disparity between a group's sense of what it "ought" to be doing and what it actually does in practice, Smith writes in his essay, "The Bare Facts of Ritual,"

It is . . . as they face the gap, that any society's genius and creativity, as well as its ordinary and understandable humanity, is to be located.³

Smith's words immediately help us "mind" one of the most troubling aspects of the tension between the ideal (our sense of "ought") and the real (our actual behavior) by acknowledging that the tension is a basic characteristic of the human condition. Feeling the disconnect is nothing to beat ourselves up about.

Smith also speaks about a group's "genius and creativity" as being found in how, through its rituals, it minds the "ideal versus real" gap. Smith argues that one can grasp this genius through the creative way a community ritually affirms its ideals even as that group knows that these ideals are impossible to meet, given the messiness of life as it actually unfolds.

To illustrate his thesis, Smith examines the tensions at play in elephant-hunting rituals of the pygmies of equatorial Africa and rites surrounding the hunting of bears in Northern European and Asian tribes. All the societies Smith looks at share the same basic worldview regarding the relationship between themselves and the animals they depend on for their survival. In these groups' understanding, the "Master of the Animals," a deity who is in charge of animal spirits, gives to the tribe for their use a certain number of animals each year. In return for this largess, this "Supernatural Owner of the Game" requires of the tribe that they honor the animals by killing them only in prescribed ways and then treating the corpse with respect, including dividing, distributing, and eating it according to set rules. The tribe members must also perform spe-

cific rituals in order to return the soul of the animal back to the Master's care.

In the tribes' hunting mythology, the animal chooses to give itself to the hunter, who kills it only in face-to-face confrontation, strikes only certain spots on the animal's body, and creates a bloodless wound. When everything happens properly (including the performance of other pre- and post-hunt rites), the spirit of the slain animal is then understood to return to its homeland to begin a better life.

Now, as Smith points out, anyone who has ever gone hunting knows that it's impossible to come even close to meeting these ideals in a real hunt. Rarely does an animal seem to desire to offer its life to the hunter or face him as it's being killed. As far as the hunter's end of the encounter goes (especially in the societies under discussion, which hunt with arrows and spears not rifles), it's very difficult to strike the animal in an exact spot or wound it bloodlessly.

These societies are also perfectly aware of these impossibilities, yet each group still performs carefully constructed rituals that depict the perfect hunt, an encounter with an elephant or bear that proceeds exactly according to the idealized script. Some of these rituals take place before the hunt begins. Others—and here's what's fascinating—are performed immediately after the hunt is complete, within moments of the far-from-bloodless kill of a far-from-submissive animal.

In a powerful passage in the essay, Smith describes the way the pygmy tribesmen kill an elephant—"after shooting it with poisoned arrows, an individual . . . runs under the elephant . . . and stabs upward with a poisoned spear"—and then sing to it:

1. Our spear has gone astray,
O Father Elephant.
We did not wish to kill you. . . .
2. It is not the warrior who has
taken away your life—
Your hour had come. . . .
3. Do not make us fear your wrath.
Henceforth your life will be
better.
You go to the country of the
spirits.

After proclaiming in this way how it was really the elephant's initiative that led it to be killed in order that it might go on to a better world, the warrior exclaims:

- O honor to you, my spear!
My spear of sharpened iron,
O honor to you!

Smith summarizes this sequence as follows:

The progression is clear. (1) We did not mean to kill you; it was an acci-

HONEST JON by Jonathan David Clark



dent. (2) We did not kill you; you died a natural death. (3) We killed you in your own best interests. You may now return to your ancestral world to begin a better life. The final ejaculation may be paraphrased: “Never mind all of that. Wow! I did it!” (62)

What’s going on here? How can the ritual’s completely irreconcilable claims about what just took place be reconciled? Earlier in the essay, Smith poses a series of questions such as: “Can we believe that a group that depends on hunting for its food would kill an animal only if it is in a certain posture?” and “Is it humanly plausible that a hunter who has killed by skill and stealth views his act solely as an unfortunate accident and will not boast of his prowess?” Smith asserts that, of course, the answer is no. And he suggests that if we don’t want to consider the hunter in these societies to be “some other sort of mind, some other sort of human being” than what we are, we must understand that the members of these societies also know exactly how disconnected their hunting rituals and ceremonial addresses are from the “ideals” they hold about the hunter and hunted. (61) In sum, “the hunter does not hunt as he says he hunts; he does not think about his hunting as he says he thinks”—and the members of these societies are fully aware of this fact. (63)

So what’s the purpose of the rituals? Why would Smith suggest that there’s genuinely healthy and creative genius in such rites and incantations? And how in the heck can this apply to Mormonism?

FIRST, Smith’s theory of ritual. Smith argues that through their rites—and I’ve touched only on a few elements and rituals Smith examines in his essay—these hunter societies display a keen awareness of the gap between the ideal and the real and do it in a way that affirms the presence of the ideal even as they are actors in a world that make it impossible to live up to that ideal. Smith writes:

I would suggest that, among other things, *ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.*

I’m calling on myself to respect the important role that idealized scripts play in Mormon life and the reasons for their presence in our Sunday discourse.

He adds:

[B]y the fact that it is ritual action rather than everyday action, it demonstrates that we know “what is the case.” Ritual provides an occasion for reflection and rationalization on the fact that what ought to have been done was not done, what ought to have taken place did not occur. (63)

In short, Smith argues that the ritual enactments of a group’s vision of the ideal—the proper way things would be were it not for all the unpredictables that affect the way things really unfold—lift up an important dimension of life in such a way that it “can be thought about and remembered” even while everyday life moves on in its unscripted, impossible-to-fully-manage way. (65) Rituals help us “mind the gap” between clean, clear ideals and uncontrollable, messy reals.

FIRST encountered these ideas of Smith’s many years ago, but I started thinking about them again as I’ve begun to engage the 2008 Sunday School and Relief Society/priesthood curriculum. Because of our awareness of complicating factors both in the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and within the text itself, I suspect that for many SUNSTONE readers, the Book of Mormon year, along with the year in which we study the Doctrine and Covenants and Church history, occasions more uncomfortable moments than the other years in the Sunday School study cycle. When we add the fact that 2008 also begins a two-year study of the teachings of Joseph Smith in Relief Society and priesthood meetings, I sense bumpy days ahead for many of us.

One of the main reasons for this discomfort, I believe, is that the presentations in the lesson manuals—and, indeed, in the Book of Mormon text itself—are deliberately crafted to present the various stories, personalities, and doctrines in their cleanest, most ideal form. Complexities are downplayed, and discussions of inconsistencies in the stories or in the behavior of the individuals being studied are discouraged, both formally in instructions to teachers as well as informally by furrowed brows and sideways looks as they are occasionally raised in class discussion.⁴

Is it a stretch to see a connection between ritual scripts dealing with the hunting of wild

animals and those of a twenty-first century people dealing with their most sacred stories? I think the connection is there and can be helpfully applied.⁴ Just as hunting societies depend on game for their very existence, we Latter-day Saints rely for our cohesion as a group, as well as for much of our own personal sense of life’s purposes, on the claim that, in some meaningful way, God broke through in touching Joseph Smith as a translator and a teacher of vital truths. I know there are many, many ways to coherently and empoweringly honor that basic claim, and I’d love to see our community expand its field of vision in this area. And in many ways, that is what Sunstone is all about.

I’m calling on myself this year to be more aware of and respect the important role idealized scripts play in Mormon life and the reasons for their presence in our community’s gatherings, especially Sunday discourse. I’m sure that as I engage these scripts, I’ll meet certain presentations of the ideal that I will not be able to relate well to at all. If the moment is right and I can share in a way that still respects worship and the overall purposes of the Sunday classroom, I’ll speak up. If not, I’ll spend the rest of the class period with my ears disengaged and my nose in the book I always carry to meetings for such potentialities. But I will come back again the next week, and if it happens again, the next.

My life is messy. There’s not really very much I can or do control. Although ritual repetitions are often tedious, often frustrating, ultimately I’m thankful for the way they reinforce ideals in a way that I can recall them even when life goes off script—which is to say, all the time. ☺

NOTES

1. A thorough and thoroughly enjoyable study of these issues is Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

2. See 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.

3. Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 62.

4. I believe Smith’s theories can be helpfully applied in relation to the highly formalized discourse that takes place during LDS general conference, as well as to the depiction of the idealized journey through life’s obstacles that comprises the narrative portion of the temple endowment ceremony.

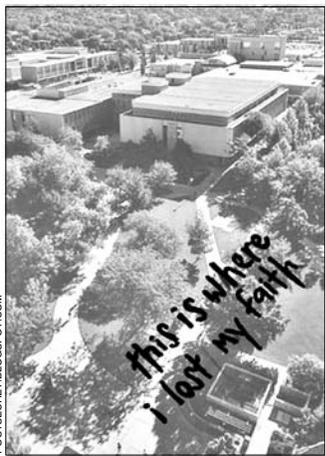
IN THE WORLD

MY OTHER “RELIGION”

By John P. Hatch

HERE IS SOMETHING curiously religious about PostSecret, an online community art project that *New York Magazine* identifies as one of the top three most popular blogs on the Internet.¹ It's updated with new offerings every Sunday. Almost all news coverage since its January 2005 debut includes terms such as “confessional” and “sins” in describing the site's contents. Many of the postcards it features contain overtly religious secrets. And the project's creator, Frank Warren, calls sharing secrets “a search for grace.”²

PostSecret encourages readers to create a small piece of art on a 4x6 postcard that contains a secret they've never shared or are afraid to share and then mail it to Warren, knowing that it may end up being posted on the website or included in a book for all the world to see. The project had its genesis when Warren handed out 3,000 blank postcards with his Germantown, Maryland, address already filled in. All the recipients of the cards had to do was write a secret and drop it in the nearest mailbox. Warren then paid a \$60 exhibition fee and displayed the secrets at a four-week-long art show called *Artomatic* in Washington, D.C., with Warren continually updating his exhibit as more and more cards came in. Long after the show was over, however, the cards just kept coming in. Then, three years ago on New Year's Day, Warren launched his blogsite, which now generates several million hits a year.³ Each Sunday, week after week, a new batch of secrets appears on the site, replacing the previous week's postcards, which, unless they find their way into one of the PostSecret books,



POSTSECRET.BLOGSPOT.COM

are never seen again (at least so far).⁴ Every thriving “church” provides an incentive for weekly attendance, and this one is no different. PostSecret's parishioners know that if they miss a week, they will most likely never have a chance to read that week's sermons.

The secrets people share vary wildly, running the gamut from the funny, to the random, to

the inexplicable, to the gut-wrenching. One recent card says, “When I house-sit for you, I go through all your stuff.” Another shows a picture of a man with the caption: “This is my son's teacher. I think of him when I make love to my husband.” One that I won't soon forget shows military humvees driving down an Iraqi street and has the words, “Please God, don't let me die here,” scribbled across the middle, and in the corner, “Save Our Souls”—an entirely different cry of S.O.S.

PostSecret has allowed readers to bare all on just about any topic. Some discuss bathroom habits (one submitter proudly proclaims that he never washes his hands after using the restroom), while others talk about their sexual lives. One common theme is children, now grown, struggling to cope with their often strained relationship with parents. Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day are rare “theme weeks,” with all the postcards focusing on mothers or fathers, respectively. Some are simple expressions of fear about displeasing parents while others delve into graphic physical or sexual abuse. One I will never forget showed a married couple with the caption, “My mom killed my dad long before he killed himself.”

Naturally, God, faith, religion, and death are other common themes. Some postcards

are confessional: religious people admitting they no longer believe. Others are from atheists who say they wish they could believe or that they secretly do. Religious clerics might write in, sharing their own fears and dreams. One featured a close-up of a pastor's white collar on which was written, “Some days, it feels more like a noose!”

AS PostSecret grew in popularity, it was inevitable that Latter-day Saints would begin to share their secrets. Like every culture, Mormonism has its own set of social mores and taboos. While these often mirror those of the larger American culture, Mormonism often brings its own twists to these taboos. For instance, one's lack of belief or loss of faith is an inappropriate topic of discussion in LDS settings, and when it is addressed, blame is almost invariably assigned to the individual for succumbing to sin or failing to follow inspired counsel. Very little, if any, focus is placed on possible failings of the institution or the perhaps blameworthy attitudes of “faithful members” of the culture and community. Hence with very few outlets for free expression available to struggling Mormons, I was not surprised to find a PostSecret card featuring a view of the BYU campus with, “This is where I lost my faith,” scrawled across it.

Another heartwrenching card features a photograph of the Salt Lake Temple with a label glued across it that says, “I hate my parents for raising me in a religion that taught me to hate myself.” For me, this card represents one of the great appeals of PostSecret—the openness most cards have to many different interpretations. In this case, is the sharer's secret only that they hate their parents, or is it that they still hate themselves, or that they despise their Mormon heritage—or all three? After loyally visiting the PostSecret site that morning, does this person then go sit in the pews every Sunday with the faithful? Or is this a former-Mormon who tells his or her perceived slights to anyone willing to stand still long enough to listen? Like Mormonism itself, we are left to get our of the card what we decide to see. Do we see members as trapped, secretly wanting to spill their guts about how they loathe Mormonism and what it's done to them? If so, this postcard will serve to validate that version of what goes on in Latter-day Saint minds. Or is the writer of a card like this foreign to us? Because Mormonism has brought us peace and joy, do we feel sorry for this soul who has sadly gotten only pain out of what brings us happiness? Again, the postcard will validate our sense of what Mormonism is, will



JOHN P. HATCH and his wife Emily are loyal PostSecret congregants. John is also the editor of *Danish Apostle: The Diaries of Anthon H. Lund* (Signature Books, 2006).

strengthen us in our sense of how important it is to maintain faith.

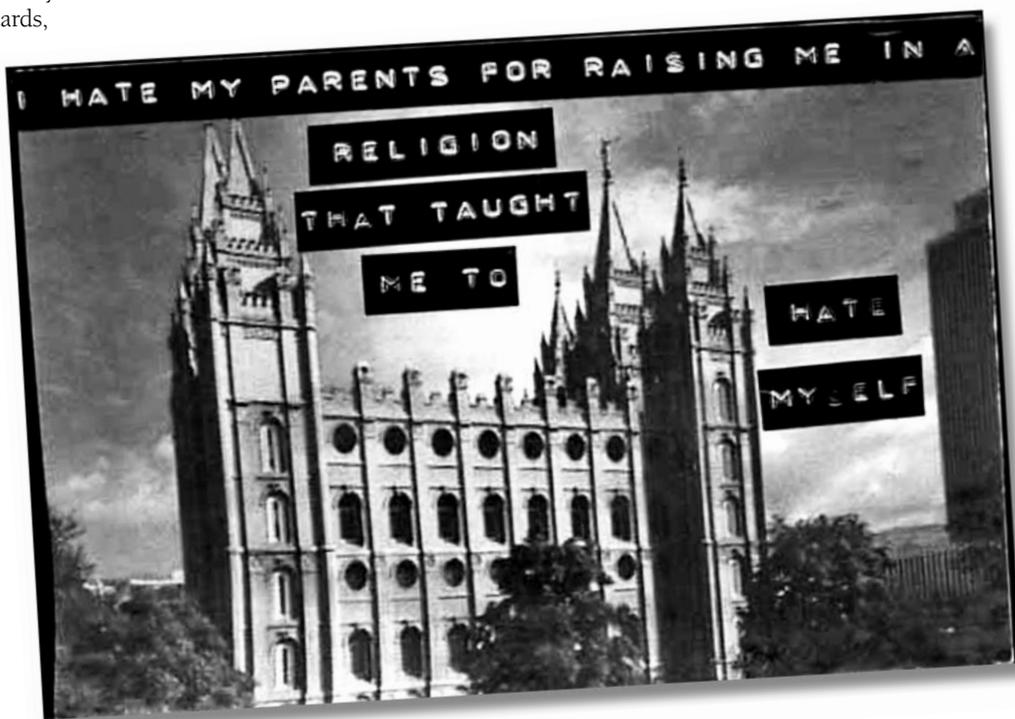
Another postcard most likely sent in by a Mormon shows LDS artist Del Parson's red-robed Christ with a mustache colored in black ink across the Savior's face. Letters forming an arch around the picture spell out the phrase, "I wonder if it's because of my religion that I can only get turned on by breaking all the rules."⁵ Like other cards, this secret begs us to ask more. At first glance, it seems like this person enjoys being a rebel. But further reflection might cause us to wonder if perhaps the writer is resentful that he or she can be aroused by only "sinning." Is sending in this card—as can be asked of most PostSecret cards—this person's first step to self-discovery and peace, or is it an act of desperation, after which the confessor hopes to be able to breathe a sigh of relief that he or she has found a release valve for the pressure their secret has caused?

A few commentators have theorized that for some PostSecreters, the card may not be the purely confessional, "unburdening of one's soul" catharsis that it might appear at first glance. "The secret sharers . . . don't want to get rid of their secrets. They love them. They arrange them. They tend them. They turn them into fetishes," writes *New York Times* columnist Sarah Boxer.⁶ Perhaps some Mormon submitters cling to their secrets as a way to stay relevant and unique in a culture that they might feel demands conformity.

Another postcard that I suspect came from a Latter-day Saint draws laughs. On the left, it shows the Harry Anderson painting one finds in nearly every LDS wardhouse that shows the triumphant return of Jesus coming down through the clouds, trumpet-blowing angels on his left and right. On the right side of the card are the covers of the first six *Harry Potter* books along with a blank square. At the bottom are the words, "One of my fears is that Jesus will come back before I get a chance to read the last *Harry Potter* book." This is a curiously telling secret: this person doesn't fear hell or death but the loss of worldly pleasures and comforts. It's almost as if the Second Coming can't compete with the excitement of *Harry Potter*.

LIKE any religion, PostSecret has gone through its honeymoon swoon and pentecostal purity and now faces

growing pains. Of the thousands of cards posted over the years, some are bound to be hoaxes. Someone might just try to cook up something outlandish or creative enough to get it posted on the now-famous site; whether the confession is true or not isn't a consideration. PostSecret has also already spawned schisms—other sites, some of which have also featured LDS secrets.



POSTSECRET.BLOGSPOT.COM

How I wish LDS
Sunday meetings
could hold my
attention so fully!

At "Not My Secret," a site that allows readers to send in secrets they know about others, appears a card with the Salt Lake Temple and a wedding cake bride and groom figurine against a colorful rainbow background and the words, "You're right. He's gay."⁷

The biggest growing pain came in July 2007 when PostSecret, previously as reliable as Old Faithful, didn't update for a solid, terrifying (for us parishioners, anyway) week. The next Sunday, Warren posted a message explaining that after two and a half years, he had finally taken a break. It was well earned. Then just a few weeks ago, instead of the regular Sunday update, visitors found a note encouraging readers to donate to a cause that Warren has long championed—Hopeline, a suicide hotline. The note also added that the update would take place Wednesday. A friend and I found ourselves lamenting that we had to wait *three whole days* for the new batch of confessions! How I wish LDS Sunday meetings could hold my attention so fully!

NOTES

1. Stuart Luman, "Linkology," *New York Magazine*, 20 February 2006. The PostSecret web address is <http://postsecret.blogspot.com>.

2. Scott Semegran, "20 Questions with Frank Warren," <http://www.quirkee.com/interviews/20-questions/20-questions-with-frank-warren.html> (accessed 22 May 2007).

3. Interview with Frank Warren, "Secrets," Love and Radio, at <http://www.loveandradio.org/2006/08/episode-010-secrets.html> (accessed 23 May 2007).

4. There are currently four PostSecret collections: *PostSecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives* (New York: William Morrow, 2005); *My Secret: A PostSecret Book* (New York: William Morrow, 2006); *The Secret Lives of Men and Women: A PostSecret Book* (New York: William Morrow, 2007); *A Lifetime of Secrets* (New York: William Morrow, 2007).

5. I've been unable to locate an image of this card in my files, and without a web archive at PostSecret.com, I haven't been able to verify the exact wording. I believe the phrase I've written here is very close to the original.

6. Sarah Boxer, "Bless Me, Blog, for I've Sinned," *The New York Times*, 31 May 2005.

7. This secret is available at <http://notmysecrets.com/2006/11/30/brigham-young-university>.



CORNUCOPIA

SUNSTONE invites short musings: chatty reports, cultural trend sightings, theological meditations. All lovely things of good report, please share them. Send to: <editor@sunstoneonline.com>

Destroying Angel

SLEDGEHAMMER

THERE IS NOTHING QUITE AS MASCULINE OR primal as a ten-pound sledgehammer. Some of the best days I can remember involved wielding a sledge. It isn't just about mindlessly exerting energy, swinging a measure of steel. With time, one can acquire a grace that allows the tool to unleash its full destructive force.

When I was young, I was able to hone this skill while working at a government post in Pine Gap, Australia. There, I was occasionally tasked with removing memory disks from outdated computer hard drives so they could be sent to the incinerator. Large casings the size of my torso held platter-sized memory disks which contained a measly ten megs. It was possible to take the casings apart with tools. But a ten-pound sledge made for faster extraction and was, frankly, more satisfying. Years later, as I watched the opening scene to the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* in which a chain gang sings as they swing picks and sledgehammers, turning big rocks into smaller ones, I caught myself audibly exclaiming, "Lucky bastards!" Working a sledge has switched on something in me that is so basic, so elemental, that I'm certain by now it's somehow encoded in my DNA.

For the better part of a decade, my own sledge has been serving as a doorstop for our wooden backyard shed. While I busy myself with less worthy matters, it rests patiently, hardened steel rusting, staining the wood and concrete. The stout polymer handle, once a dark red, has sun-faded to a light shade of purple. (I like to think that my sledge is a great unchangeable in my life; hence I'm uncomfortable calling the handle "pink.") But that changes nothing. The sledge's hold on me is deeper than its color.

A year or so ago, as I drove my children to their soccer games, I noticed my bishop working to break up a large concrete slab in his yard up the street. He was drilling on it as another neighbor hacked at it with an oversized hammer. When I returned an hour later, they had made little progress. Leaving my children to fend for themselves, I made my way back to the shed. As I then strode up the street, sledge in hand, I felt like the leader of a neighboring Scottish clan who had come to join

the rebellion. Mimicking the dialect, I exclaimed, "You prima donnas think you can have your fun without me?" Within minutes, I had the slab in manageable chunks. As the two men witnessed the exultation of wielding such an elegant tool, they insisted on taking turns. When nothing was left to be pummeled, I saw them glance around, their demeanor speaking volumes—surely there is something else!

As I grow older, I find that somewhere in the recesses of my being, there is something that works as a keel, continually bringing balance to my restless soul. In my effort to fully grasp what this something is, I have spent a great deal of time meditating and conversing with mentors, carefully peeling away the probable suspects. Is it my dead father, my children, my spouse, my deliberately crafted library, God himself? Then again, maybe this something is simply the fact that I'm a man who owns a ten-pound sledge.

TOM KIMBALL
American Fork, Utah

Blogwatch

MAKE HASTE TOWARDS PRAYER

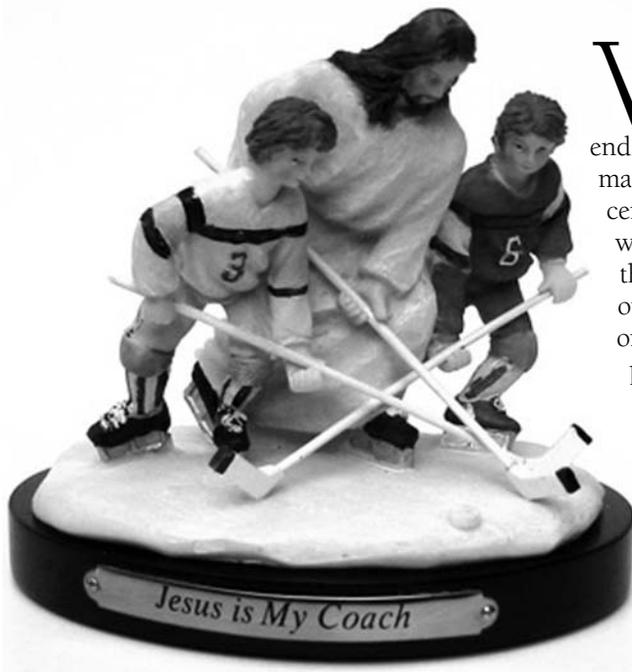
The following is a reflection by Melissa De Leon Mason posted 5 September 2007 at the blog By Common Consent (BYCOMMON-CONSENT.COM) and reprinted here with her permission.

MINARETS OVER CAIRO. SEVERAL TIMES A DAY, I open our windows and listen as voices begin floating over the city. I look over the tops of apartment blocks and dusty buildings, over the many minarets and palm trees, and I visualize the calls to prayer. I imagine the voices as drops of water sprinkling over the city, spreading in little circles until they meet each other with soft bumps and then continue on, blending and flowing. The song sounds mystical to me, all words I don't understand sung in dozens of different voices, different tones, different distances from me. Each of them from a single man in one of the graceful spires that shoot up across the skyline, claiming that part of the city for its own.

I have been in Cairo for two weeks now, and despite the dire warnings of friends who had toured the city on brief vacations, there is a lot of beauty here. The city has been hard to get used to, with its heat, its dust, its crazy dogs that roam around, its honking cars and unstable drivers. I spent a good part of the first day here panicking and crying, unsure of what I had com-

All-seeing Eye

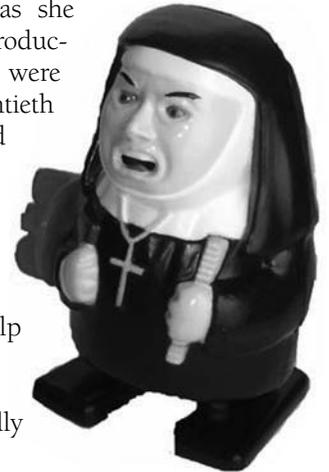
WHAT A TREND WE HAVE IN JESUS



WHERE DOES THE earnest marketing of Christian kitsch end and the spoofing of such marketing begin? Having recently visited MISSPOPPY.COM, we can no longer tell. From the slightly peculiar to the outright profane, MissPoppy's online store both sells genuine Christian kitsch and spoofs such products—all with humorous intent.



Thus you may find an apparently sincere "Jesus Is My Coach" sculpture, depicting Jesus skiing or playing hockey with children, but also "Nunzilla," a ferocious teacher-nun who breathes fiery sparks as she walks. You can find genuine reproductions of Christian notecards that were popular at the dawn of the twentieth century but also a Lock 'n' Load Jesus postcard that depicts the Master brandishing an automatic weapon.



Any products of potential interest for the LDS shopper? Absolutely! The "Jesus Hates It When You Smoke" ashtray (\$10.95) has precisely that message engraved on its face, which will make it hard for anyone in your home to break the Word of Wisdom without feeling guilty. The "Art of Kissing" handbook (\$4.95) and "The Art of Frenching" chewing gum (\$.99) will help initiate the virgin lips of any BYU student into the blissful world of smooching. And if you, like most Mormons, are not expecting Jesus to rapture you out of your tennis shoes or a falling plane before his Second Coming, we suggest a box of "After the Rapture" mints (\$2.95), especially designed "for those of us who aren't going anywhere."

mitted myself to. I quickly adapted and let myself fall into the natural rhythm of one who is uprooted and replanted in strange soil. Anxiety gave way to starry-eyed romantic notions of souk markets and an ancient land. The stars dimmed, and a sense of optimistic reality has set in, occasionally interrupted by brief bouts of panic as small inconveniences pop up that I realize I will have to deal with for years.

Through this tumultuous experience, whether I am thrilled by what I have discovered at the market that morning or angry at feeling helpless in a foreign land, I have found an island of peace. Several times a day I hear those voices floating through the thick Cairo air, and I open my window and sit. The peacefulness of prayer is a universal comfort, be it in my language or yours, in my faith or theirs.

The muezzin in the minaret calls the faithful to prayer by singing out eight repeated phrases that affirm faith, extoll prayer and welfare, and praise God. All the muezzins are singing the same phrases in the same order but each with his own intonations, the peaks and valleys of his words flowing

like a river, crashing into and buoying up the songs of the other calls like a symphony in the sky.

Having been around Notre Dame for so long a time, I had heard many a bright-eyed Utahn or fresh Indiana missionary make a snide remark about vain repetitions and memorized prayer. True, I feel closer to my Lord when I speak to him in my words. But I believe the Spirit is found not always in what is being said (memorized or not) or, indeed, in the quantity of times it is repeated, but often in the meditation and peace that is felt when the mind focuses solely on becoming close to God.

Prayer is pervasive in everyday life here. I shop in the market and pass merchants who politely excuse themselves, unroll their green carpets, and kneel outside their shops. I meet men who have bruises on their foreheads from the frequency of touching their brow to the ground in humble prayer. While I ride in taxis during prayer time, the drivers have the radio tuned to the local muezzin's voice. And even in the air-conditioned cocoon of my apartment, the call to prayer ignores the window panes between us and fills my home with peace.

Mormon Media Watch

A MORMON ROCKS THE HOUSE



*Dr. House (Hugh Laurie) and Dr. Cole (Edi Gathegi)
in a typically confrontational moment*

THE FOX TELEVISION SERIES *HOUSE* IS KNOWN for interesting characters—especially its main protagonist, Dr. Gregory House (played by Hugh Laurie), a diagnostician whose brilliance is matched only by his acerbic tongue and non-stop goading of everyone around him. This past fall, one of his favorite targets was a Mormon character, Dr. Jeffery Cole (played by Kenyan-born actor Edi Gathegi), who was competing for a fellowship as part of House’s diagnostic team.

The seven-episode story arc involving Dr. Cole was fascinating on several levels. It allowed House the chance to gleefully mock easy Mormon targets such as polygamy (instead of referring to Cole by name, House nicknamed him “Big Love”), Joseph Smith, and temple garments (“So tell me about the magic underwear.”). But it also provided something we don’t often get to see: a quite fully realized and atypical Latter-day Saint character on broadcast television. Cole is a black BYU graduate and a single father who at times refuses to play along with House’s requests because of commitments involving his son. Cole is portrayed as bright and articulate,

and he handles House’s barbs and cheap shots with wit and intelligence. After House bets another doctor that no matter how hard he provokes him, Cole won’t fight back, Cole proves that there’s a limit to his patience: after one too many outrageous remarks about Joseph Smith, he punches House in the face.

Dr. Cole’s time on the series finally came to an end, however, in what might be interpreted as his evidencing a more typical Mormon character trait: pragmatism. In an attempt to win a challenge which would assure him a spot on House’s staff, Cole strikes a secret deal with the hospital’s chief of medicine. Once House figures this out, he sends Cole packing. No one who plays up to authority figures is allowed on the team.

Margin NotesWHY WON’T AN ANGEL VISIT
MY WAYWARD CHILD?

Behold, the Lord hath heard the prayers of his people, and also the prayers of his servant, Alma, who is thy father; for he has prayed with much faith concerning thee that thou mightest be brought to the knowledge of the truth; therefore, for this purpose have I come to convince thee of the power and authority of God, that the prayers of his servants might be answered according to their faith.

—MOSIAH 27:14

WHILE READING THE BOOK OF MORMON recently, I was struck by Alma’s prayer for his son, who, along with the four sons of Mosiah, was “rebellious against God.” In response to Alma’s petition, the young men were visited by an angel, and they subsequently converted and became mighty missionaries. Perhaps the reason this story caught my attention is that I have a child who has decided not

to participate in the Church any longer—a decision which, naturally, causes me a great deal of anguish, similar, I imagine, to the pain Alma and Mosiah felt for their sons. So, as I’ve reflected lately, I’ve wondered: what kind of prayer does it take to invoke a heavenly visitation for an inactive child?

Quite a lot, I suppose. When I consider the example of Spencer W. Kimball—one of whose children was an inactive member—I have to suppose that President Kimball exerted great faith and prayer on behalf of his son, apparently to little result, at least during his lifetime. It is more than a little discouraging to me to think that if the President of the Church had so little success, what hope do I have?

With this in mind, I went back and re-read the stories of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, and also the accounts of Paul, who as Saul persecuted the early Church. As I did, I realized something that I probably should have seen before: In each case, during their heavenly visitations, they were *not* called to repentance—the Lord does not require them to begin praying, believing, or attending worship services. Instead, each of them is told to stop trying to destroy the Church. “Alma, go thy way and seek to destroy the church no more . . . even if thou wilt of thyself be cast off” (Mosiah 27:16).

This, then, may be the crucial factor that merits heavenly visitations. As much as we might like to have an angel visit our wayward children and tell them to engage with the gospel again, that doesn't seem to be how heaven does things. Heavenly messengering seems to be reserved for attempts to stop those who persecute the Church, not to convert them.

So the next time I wonder about how much prayer and faith is needed for angelic intervention, I hope I remember that simply rejecting the gospel isn't enough for the heavens to go to the extreme of sending an angel. When I reflect on this point, I find the aspect of free choice inherent in that fact to be deeply reassuring—even if it means I have to continue to parent my children without angelic aid.

MICHAEL VINSON
Star Valley, Wyoming

NOTE: *The purpose of Margin Notes is to invite brief commentaries on passages from scripture or some other religious text. As the title indicates, authors could use their literal margin notes as a springboard toward a discussion of their experience or views on the passage. Please submit reflections to Margin Notes editor Alison Takenaka at: ALISONTAKENAKA@HOTMAIL.COM.*

Twenty Years Ago in Sunstone

The following is excerpted from an interview in the January 1998 SUNSTONE with Mike Yaconelli, who was then the editor of The Wittenburg Door, the leading Christian satire magazine since 1971. It's still going strong; you can explore the magazine at WWW.WITTENBURGDOOR.COM.

SATIRE AND THE GOOD NEWS

WHAT PRODUCES GOOD RELIGIOUS SATIRE?

First, the ability to laugh at something when you really feel like crying. Some of us just naturally laugh instead of cry when we see something bad. But it's not really laughter. It's really crying inside. We make fun of it because it hurts so much that we figure if we laugh about it, maybe that will make it okay...

CAN YOU ALWAYS LAUGH? DON'T YOU SOMETIMES FEEL OUTRAGE?

There are some things that the church does which make me angry. I wish I didn't get angry, but I can't help it. You know why I can't help it? Because we *should* get angry. We have every right to get angry. When what is happening is absolutely contradictory to everything we believe, we have to speak out somehow. If we didn't, the stones would speak out. . . .

WON'T YOU HINDER GOD'S WORK BY THROWING STONES AT THE PEOPLE WHO ARE TRYING TO LEAD ACCORDING TO HIS WILL?

Good satire militates against what people *do*, not against the people themselves. . . . Bishop Steven Neal (I have no idea what he was bishop of, but it sounds really good) once said, "Criticism is the manure in which the servants of the Lord grow best." Satire is not an argument; it is a mirror. You don't try to argue through satire. You simply try to reflect what's happening, and you hope that people will see what the problem is and take a look at themselves and others. That is the purpose of satire. It always slips in a little pin that pops the balloon. . . .

HOW CAN YOU SATIRIZE WITHOUT BEING DISLOYAL?

Effective satire must come from within, not from without. Those who criticize effectively must also love what they criticize. As a Mormon, you may feel unhappy about a lot of things involving the Church. Because of those feelings, you are told, "You're not really a Mormon. You're not really part of the Church. You're on the fringe. You're a troublemaker. You're disruptive. There's something wrong with you." Deep in your heart, you're saying, "What are you talking about? I love this church. I love these people. That's why I'm criticizing it. It's me that I'm criticizing. I'm not standing outside looking in. I'm inside looking around and saying, 'Hey! There are some things here we've got to deal with because we care about them.'" And that's the tough part, because after sitting in the same churches and the same meetings, you walk away thinking, "What?!" while all your friends are saying, "Wasn't that wonderful!" . . .

WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE?

There's always the risk that you're going too far. That is the risk of satire. Conversely, the risk of being positive all the time is that you never address any problems. You just kind of let things flow. Yes, we screw up. On the other hand, so do the other people who are running around being positive all the time and saying, "Let's just say we're saying the same thing, and let's not get anyone upset; let's just keep everything going." Well, that's malarkey. Problems need to be addressed, but it shouldn't be a personal attack.

Neither do I think you satirize God. I think that's off limits.



We've been accused of blasphemy, and I want to listen to that criticism because I don't think everything is up for grabs. . . .

DOES THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH REALLY NEED SATIRE?

The reason we have satirists, and the reason we do satire, is because the world out here is going to hell on a roller skate. People are struggling and lonely and looking for something that will give their life meaning and significance, and the church is running around talking and philosophizing—intellectualizing when in fact, people have desperate needs that aren't being met. That's why I do satire. I do it because I care about people and their needs, and the loneliness and the desperation that goes on in our culture today.

My guess is that most of SUNSTONE's authors raise issues about your church *not* because they want to make their point, and show how smart they are, but rather because they are trying to say to the Church: "Would you please listen to the real world out there? Would you get out of your ivory tower, go out there where people really live and hear what it is that they are struggling with and dealing with and understand that? . . . Let's see if we can try to communicate to this world, to the people we're living with." I think the Mormon church would triple its evangelistic effort if it would shut up long enough to listen to people. Forget the doctrine; forget all the rest of it. Imagine two guys riding up to your door on their bikes. Knock, knock, knock. "Yes, hello."

"Hi, we just wanted to come in and listen."

"What? No books, no tapes, no slide projector?"

"No, we just want to listen to you. We just want to hear what it is you're feeling."

Nobody listens to us anymore. Everybody is preaching. Aren't you sick of it? I'm sick of TV specials. I'm sick of cassettes. I'm sick of seminars. Everybody running around with "Eight Ways to Overcome Depression," "Nine Ways to Have a Happy Marriage," "Six Ways to Know the Will of God."

They didn't read the New Testament, did they? Jesus would get up there and say, "Blessed are the poor," and when he finished, they'd go, "Huh?" And he'd say, "Let me explain what I mean. One time there was a guy. And the rains came. And he had built his house on the sand. . . ." And Jesus would get done, and they'd go, "What?" And he'd say, "Goodnight, guys. I'll see you." And they'd go, "What the heck was that?" He didn't explain anything. He just left them there struggling with the thing. I honestly think that people today are sick and tired of sermons. They just would like somebody to shut up long enough to listen to them. . . .

I believe that the message of the church should not be, "You're acceptable only if you do this and this." The message of the church needs to be, "God loves you. The doors are open. He loves you with everything. You have nothing to be afraid of. God is your papa, your daddy." That's what it means in Romans 8:15, "Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba." We're the apple of his eye. He loves us with everything. And when we communicate that to this world, they are no longer afraid of God. They embrace him. They throw their arms around him and say, "Oh thank you for the good news."

A Place for Every Truth

EAGER TO SERVE

This regular Cornucopia column features incidents from and glimpses into the life and ministry of Elder James E. Talmage as compiled by James P. Harris, who is currently working on a full-length biography of this fascinating Mormon apostle. The column title is adopted from the statement inscribed on Elder Talmage's tombstone: "Within the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is room and place for every truth thus far learned by man or yet to be made known."

DINNER TIME IN THE TALMAGE HOUSEHOLD WAS like that in other families. However, since in 1917 radio broadcasts were still a few years off, the primary source of information was the daily newspaper.

In 1917, the main topic of conversation around the Talmage dinner table was the war, at that time called by President Woodrow Wilson "the war to end all wars," only later known as World War I. The family's conversations were naturally about America's involvement in the war, patriotism, and service to country. Around this time, Elder Talmage traveled, giving a popular talk titled "Mormonism and the War" to various audiences.

Listening to the family discussions, six-year-old John Russell Talmage felt a duty to serve his country. In his journal dated 31 March 1917, Elder Talmage relates the following:

This morning's *Tribune* contains an interesting mention of a somewhat precocious undertaking on the part of our son John Russell. He is very desirous of serving his country in the threatened war, and in every incident of the proceedings he takes an unusual interest. Yesterday he had his mother's consent to go down town with the good sister who helps us in housework, and he seized the opportunity to present himself for enlistment. On an earlier occasion, when a call was made for the Utah National Guard to go to the Mexican border, John felt so confident as to his eligibility that I had to take him to the Recruiting Office, with the promise that if he was acceptable to the officers he could enlist. In response to instructions to report later he presented himself yesterday as ready for service.

John later related how the recruiters put him through drills and made him stand at attention and perform other basic military honors. However, his young heart was broken as he was then told that he was too young to serve. Later that evening, Lieutenant Albert Meyers called the family and asked for permission to have the story printed in the paper.

Some years later, John Russell Talmage joined the U.S. Navy and provided distinguished service during World War II. One of his notable accomplishments during his time in the service was his leadership in creating the manual for Reciprocal Aid between allies. His work and findings helped save the government and taxpayers a significant amount of money.



The Sugar Beet

“All the Mormon News That’s Fit to Print”

In a recent interview, Mitt Romney was quoted as saying: “There are times on the campaign trail when enthusiasm erodes, when dreams dim, when the spirit suffers. During these times of tribulation, I turn to a book that has often buoyed my spirits and brought a smile to my lips.

That book is *The Mormon Tabernacle Enquirer*, a collection of the Sugar Beet’s funniest articles, and conveniently available through AMAZON.COM. It was recommended to me by Harry Reid. Oh, wait. He’s a Democrat. I deny having any personal contact with Senator Reid.”

THE WRITER’S GUILD OF AMERICA STRIKE HAS not only crippled late-night television shows but has also dealt a small blow to tithing revenues from LDS writers. Even though our good brother David Letterman has worked out a side deal with the union to allow his writers to work during the strike, *Sugar Beet* contributor MIKE BINGHAM offers the following two “Top Ten Lists” free of charge as an encouragement to all his fellow Mormon writers to get back on the stick.

THE TEN LEAST-KNOWN BIBLICAL MIRACLES

10. Malachi calms a jittery squirrel
9. Moses parts his hair
8. Peter heals a man with a scaly patch on the back of his hand
7. Paul causes a lame man to roll over
6. Aaron strikes his staff on a rock and gets free cable
5. Isaiah drops his toast, and it lands with the buttered side up
4. Elijah gives the wicked priests of Baal the hiccups
3. Evil spirits are cast into a herd of swine, which then stampedes into a neighbor’s spa
2. Children of Israel walk to the Promised Land under a cloud by day and a lava lamp by night
1. Joseph interprets the king’s really cool tattoo

THE TEN BEST THINGS ABOUT THE TELESTIAL KINGDOM

10. Less talk, more rock
9. Tickets always available for *Testaments: The Musical*

8. *The Mormon Tabernacle Enquirer* eternally at the head of the bestseller list.
7. *The Work and the Glory* series available only in CliffsNotes
6. *Chicken Soup* books banned
5. Comedy clubs with open-mike nights for Donny Osmond impersonators
4. Ten Commandments reduced to Three Suggestions, One Hearty Endorsement, and One Really Bitchin’ Idea
3. Calendar divided only into millennia so there’s always time left to do your home teaching
2. Mick Jagger’s Gospel Doctrine lessons
1. *The Celestial Bodies Show* on late-night cable

HONEST JON by Jonathan David Clark



Pillars of My Faith

TRIBUTARIES OF FAITH

By Jana Riess

In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands of you an accounting for the hope that is in you.
—1 PETER 3:15 (NRSV)

I WROTE A SATIRICAL ARTICLE FOR SUNSTONE LAST fall on how *not* to give a talk in sacrament meeting. It must necessarily follow, then, that having once been critical myself of the substandard Mormon talk (which begins with a prolonged discussion of where you were and what you were doing when you received the call to speak, describes your nervous apprehension in excruciating detail, and then utilizes the remaining two minutes to provide a *Webster's* dictionary definition of the assigned topic in question), I have opened myself up to criticism of any talk I will henceforth give in church or other Mormon settings. I believe that part of the repentance process for any satire I write is to then be asked to participate in whatever I've just made fun of.

So, for the record, I was folding laundry on the day this spring when my friend Dan Wotherspoon invited me to give this talk, and I was quite surprised by his request. *I am still in my 30s*, I thought! Surely one should have to be a grandparent before being asked to give a Pillars talk.

Of course, being a good little Mormon, I had to go look up “pillars” in the dictionary. (*Webster's* is canonical for birthright Latter-day Saints, but online versions are acceptable for an outsider-convert-type like me, who can be presumed not to know any better.) And here is what I found:

1. *A slender, freestanding, vertical support; a column.*

Well, now, it was hard to see how definition number 1 might relate to me. I am supportive, sure; freestanding, ab-



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solutely and proudly; vertical most of the time since I joined the LDS Church and became a teetotaler; but not so slender since I joined the LDS Church and became a teetotaler. (One has to make compensations.) Let's try definition number 2.

2. *One who occupies a central or responsible position: a pillar of the state.*

Well, sort of. As a writer and editor, I do have a central and responsible position in the shaping of public opinion. Sometimes, anyway. And as regards my faith, I certainly hope that my faith is strong and centered on the core, Jesus Christ. But in thinking about it, I realized that the image of a pillar is just not the best metaphor for describing my faith.

To me, a pillar may be strong, but it is also inflexible and impossible to move. Pillars do not recognize when they are positioned in the wrong place. They are respected precisely because they are fixed, undeviating, unchanging. My faith, on the other hand, is *unfixed*—centered, but also open to new possibilities. My faith is not, and I hope never will be, made of marble or granite. If it had been remotely pillar-like back when I was an evangelical Christian during and after college, I would never have been open to reading the book that changed my life in my early twenties—a weird, wild, and wonderful volume called the Book of Mormon. And if it were pillar-like now that I *am* a Mormon, I think I'd be an insufferably self-righteous git. So, if a pillar doesn't work as a metaphor for my faith, what might fit better?

I have settled on the image of flowing water, and I am here to speak about five tributaries of my faith. I'm drawing on Richard Foster's book *Streams of Living Water*¹—I recommend the writings of Richard Foster pretty much wherever I go—who in turn is riffing on a line from the Gospel of John, where we learn that out of a believer's heart should flow streams of living water (John 7:38).

Tributaries of faith are those moving waters that lead to the community, which is the river of all of us. A tributary is a small, energetic, and constantly changing flow of water. It's in perpetual motion, but it never loses sight of its end goal, which is to *contribute* to the larger river and keep it flowing. Like the tributary, my faith is in flux, but I believe that is a good and

RESTORATION

healthy thing. My faith is usually moving forward, spilling over such obstacles as it may encounter in its wake. It contributes to the river that is the LDS Church—also constantly in motion—which in turn has something to offer to the wide and salty sea that is the worldwide body of Christ. Like a tributary, my faith does not exist to serve itself, but to contribute something to the river and, I hope, the sea.

Sometimes my faith takes a little detour. With tributaries and rivers, this is a known and expected phenomenon called a *meander*—who knew that was a noun? It's how the water responds when resistant material is present on the banks. I've learned to welcome these meanders and not be afraid, knowing that they are an essential part of the journey. As a convert, I am sometimes saddened by the narrow views many Mormons hold about doubt. Conservative Mormons seem to

I GREW UP in an atheist/agnostic family, where organized religion was regarded with deep suspicion and even derision. Yet even as a small child, I was fascinated by religion. Each year at sleepaway camp, I attended both the Catholic mass on Saturday night *and* the Protestant church service on Sunday morning, just out of intense curiosity. I was a rather strange child.

My first impression of Mormonism was not a super one. Just before seventh grade, I took a summer College for Kids course called "Nauvoo and the Mormons." I didn't know what Mormons were, and I'd never heard of Nauvoo, but the course description came with the magic words "field trip," so I signed up immediately. I was always eager to get out of the small



suggest that doubt is dangerous, that it is something to be feared and avoided, since it could cause someone to lose a testimony. (What kind of weak testimony would that have been in the first place?) But many liberal Mormons have also taken this attitude to heart, so much so that when they begin the organic and perfectly natural process of questioning their religious beliefs, they become terrified and imagine that they are somehow spiritually lacking. Some leave the Church for this reason, including several people I hold dear. I hope that more of us can move away from the model of linear progression for faith—assuming that there is a single, straight-as-an-arrow path to follow—and think about faith as more of a river. If you're *not* meandering and testing and changing, then something is wrong. As Heraclitus taught us, it's impossible to step into the same river twice.

IT WAS HARD narrowing my testimony down to five tributaries. The ones I've chosen to highlight are Restoration, Renewal, Responsibility, Relationship, and Redemption. You'll notice the gimmick that all of these begin with "Re." And you'll notice that some "Re's" aren't here. Republican, for example. And also, surprisingly, Reading, which is pretty much my life—avocation and vocation. And Revelation, which is a huge part of my spiritual journey but will be a topic for another time.

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Midwestern town I grew up in, even if that meant spending a day in an even smaller Midwestern town.

The class lasted for two weeks, during which we were supposed to read parts of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's history and watch a lot of cheesy filmstrips during class. But then on the last day, we drove the eighty miles or so to Nauvoo. We saw the Carthage Jail, had cookies at the Scoville Bakery, and went to both visitors' centers, RLDS and LDS. It was there that I had one of my first impressions of Mormon womanhood. In the LDS Visitors' center, I went into a room that was dedicated to some of the handiwork and achievements of Mormon women—beautiful quilts, letters, old photos, and so forth. In my memory, however, the crowning glory in this room was an enormous portrait of Marie Osmond and her mother, with a caption describing how the Osmond women were very important models of virtue in the LDS world.

I wasn't that impressed (though I had loved the *Donny & Marie* variety show when I was little). And I was even less im-

pressed when I went back to Nauvoo in high school and saw that room again. Marie, fresh from a divorce I had read about in some gossip magazine, was nowhere to be found. For me, a budding feminist, it was a sad commentary about what Mormons seemed to expect: that women had to be above reproach, that there was little forgiveness for wrong choices. It put me off the Mormon Church for years.

Yet I kept returning to Mormon theology. At Wellesley College, I began reading LDS texts because I had a couple of Mormon friends whom I respected very much. They lived for principles I admired although they had bizarre-sounding beliefs I did not share. I did my senior religion thesis on Mormonism. Then, challenged by a cantankerous senior sister missionary in Vermont, where I spent the summer after college, I agreed to read the Book of Mormon and meet with the missionaries. I kept that agreement, but I made no decisions because I was



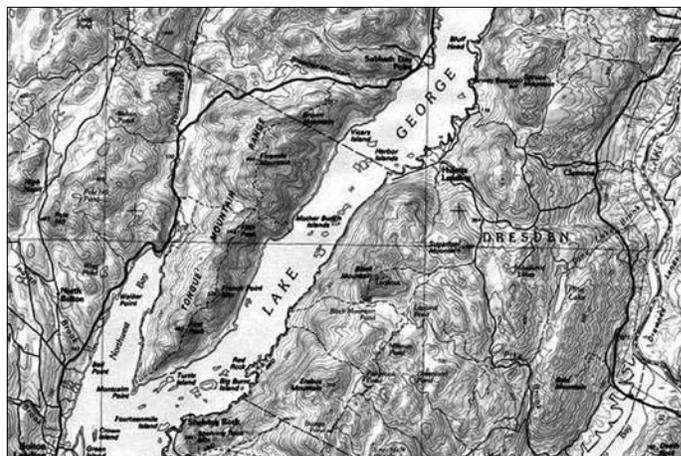
ON THE STEPS OF THE WELLESLEY COLLEGE CHAPEL, 1991

heading on to seminary to become a pastor. At seminary, though, I was still thinking about Mormonism and still writing papers about it for my American religion classes. I read everything I could get my hands on: I would just sit in the stacks at Firestone Library at Princeton University and start pulling things off the shelves: *Dialogue*, *Journal of Discourses*, missionary stories. Gradually I had to admit that I was not interested in this for purely academic reasons. I had fallen in love with the Book of Mormon and, secondarily, with the Mormon people.

It took me a long time to be baptized, though, as I still had many doubts. I read and re-read Alma 32, about faith and doubting, and decided that my faith needed to be more experimental. I needed to *do* something instead of just waiting for something to happen. I started keeping the Word of Wisdom about six months before my baptism, taking literally its notion that it was for the “weakest of all saints.” I figured that statement applied to me. I also went to my first Sunstone symposium in Washington, D.C., and continued reading *SUNSTONE* and *Dialogue* as well as the *Ensign* and some biographies of the prophets. It was critical to me to know beforehand that if I committed to becoming a Latter-day Saint, I would not have to check my brain at the door.

I was finally baptized in the fall of my senior year of seminary. This was late September of 1993, so you can imagine that it was disconcerting to read in the newspapers in those weeks about the high-profile excommunications of feminists and historians whose work I admired. As I headed into the water, however, I remember thinking that even if there was no place for me in the Church as a feminist and budding historian, I was still making the right decision. I knew the Lord was leading me. I would be a pioneer like the ones I had read about in Mormon history.

One lesson from Mormon history, though, is that it kind of sucks to be a pioneer. I was very lonely those first couple of years. I had made a huge change in my life; culturally, it was no small thing for me to consider forever uniting myself with a people for whom a “salad” seemed to require pastel-colored marshmallows, and theologically, I was still trying to work out



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my faith. It was hard for me to talk about my Mormon conversion to other people, especially in the seminary setting. One of the only people I told at that time was a gay friend who had come out to me the year before, hands trembling and voice shaking. So, hands trembling and voice shaking, I revealed my secret religious identity to David in a crowded cafeteria. As he was theologically a fairly conservative Protestant, his initial response was to warn me away from a dangerous cult. His second response was pure compassion: “This woman just came out to me!” He listened to my story and was incredibly supportive. These were words I needed to hear, because apart from my husband, who took my conversion in stride, other friends and family members were confused and did not really understand. I worried that I was letting some people down by my decision, especially my wonderful mom, who had been an ERA activist in the 1970s and was still pretty ticked off at the Mormon Church for its role in defeating the amendment. But

ultimately, I knew I had to be true to myself. Goethe said that when we trust ourselves, then we will know how to live.

My conversion process was fraught with incessant theological questions. To me, one of the greatest attractions about Mormonism was also its most vexing problem: restoration.

I want to think aloud about what we mean when we use the term “restoration.” When I was a kid, my parents took to restoring the 1896 Victorian house we lived in. Apparently this was so much fun for them that they had to buy a *Money Pit*-styled apartment house and do the same thing all over again a few blocks away. So I spent my summer afternoons learning to sand and stain floors, strip wallpaper, plaster, paint walls, and the like. My experience restoring these homes has caused me to think a good deal about what Mormons mean when we throw around the terms “restoration of the gospel” and “the restored church of Jesus Christ.” Clearly, not many of us must have ever actually restored historic houses. The goal in historic restoration—a little distinct from renovation or rehab—is to bring things back to their *original* state. When you restore a home, you don’t tear it down to its very foundations and construct a McMansion on the same spot. You begin with the respectful notion that the building that’s already there is sound and fundamentally worth preserving. You take off the horrid wallpaper from the 1970s—what were they *thinking* with those silver flecks?—and you painstakingly sand the floor down to bare wood before giving it a glossy new veneer. But you don’t destroy the foundations; you assume they are solid and will stand the test of time.

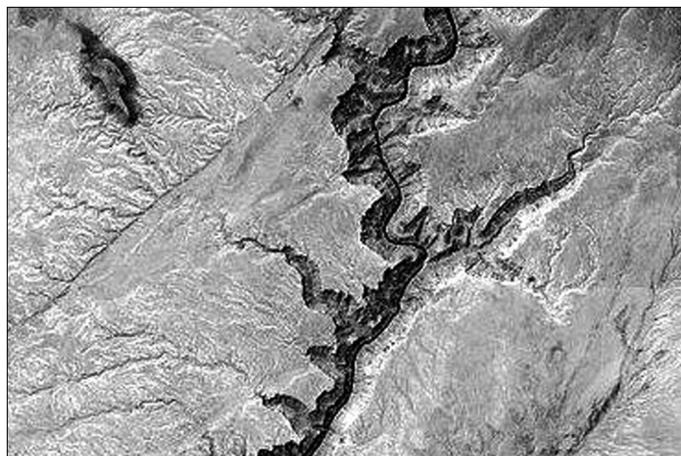
Recently, my husband, who is Episcopalian, came with me to testimony meeting, where a very sweet guy expressed his profound gratitude for being a member of “the only true and living church on the face of the earth.” Phil and I grinned at each other, and I whispered, “Sweetheart! Look at the time. You’d better hurry up or you’re going to miss the 10 o’clock service at your false and dead church.” I’m sure if we asked that nice LDS brother what he meant by asserting his membership in the world’s only “true and living church,” he would soft-pedal, and so he should. I worry that many Mormons have absolutely no inkling of the logical consequences of their words. How do we imagine that such rhetoric is going to be heard outside the Mormon enclave? As we think about Mormonism in the public square, we need to confront this issue: Our radical and exclusive truth claims are off-putting, to say the least. Is there a way to speak authentically about them, about the truth of our gospel’s restoration, without alienating the rest of God’s beloved children?

So, for the record, and also for my daughter, who at age eight is trying to navigate the complexities of a Mormopalian family, I want to bear witness that I believe deeply in the restoration of the gospel. And to be clear, what *I* mean by that is that God has broken into history in an alarming way by aiming to perfect the Christ-story in us—in our institutional church and our individual hearts. I believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God—not in the cheap and triumphant manner of a Church video, but in a hard-won, Old Testament way, where a frustrated God chooses one who is willing to serve despite person-

ality flaws and limited understanding. I believe in a loving but absurdly human Joseph Smith who had the courage to risk everything as God required. I believe that the LDS Church today is poised to contain the fullness of the gospel of Christ, whenever we as individual members of it are prepared to accept his invitation to participate in redeeming the world rather than merely reveling in our comfortable and unearned status as chosen people. Harvard chaplain Peter Gomes sums up my feelings well in his book *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*:

If God is the God of all, and not just a tribal deity, then God has made provision, not necessarily known to us, for the healing and care of all his creation, and not simply our little part of it.²

(Here endeth the restoration sermon. And I promise the other tributaries won’t take as long.)



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RENEWAL

HOW WE COOPERATE in the world’s redemption brings me to the second tributary of my faith, Renewal—spiritual rejuvenation through concrete, regular disciplines. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Sabbath-keeping, and fasting invite us back to God. They give us a rhythm for the days, the weeks, the months, the years. In Mormonism, we have a wonderful tradition of emphasizing the vital importance of the spiritual disciplines. *We want to do it right*. But the flip side of that emphasis is that too often Mormons adopt a legalistic view of spiritual practice—what matters is that you do it correctly, not that it changed you or that you are growing from the practice. We need to guard against dead legalism and rote religion.

We also need to guard against our unstinting activism. Don’t get me wrong; one of the things I find most attractive

about Mormonism is our firm tie to this world and to its people—we are here to serve one another. This is key. But what we lack, and what Christian history can teach us, is the equally important value of contemplation. Holding action and contemplation in a balanced tension is one of the greatest calls of the Christian life. About every year or so, I go on retreat for a few days at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. These times have become a deep well of renewal and invaluable solitude for me. I've discovered that "retreat" is a word that many Mormons simply don't understand; basically, we only know how to "advance." One Relief Society sister asked me what I do for four days on a silent retreat. As I was opening my mouth to answer her, I realized that the truth—which is mostly "just thinking"—would open a whole can of worms, so I told her another truth, which is that I bring several theology books and novels, and my computer, so I can read and write. She also seemed relieved to learn I do a fair bit of hiking while I am there. I've discovered that many lifelong Mormons don't have a frame of reference for understanding a contemplative religious retreat as a valuable thing in and of itself. I would love to see more room in Mormonism for contemplation, solitude, and retreat.

Practicing the spiritual disciplines is a serious leap of faith. Basically, we are telling God that our time will be structured His way, not ours. Our money will be His first, then sort-of kind-of ours. Our bodies will be clothed by Him. The food we eat and the beverages we drink will be the ones that equip us to serve God and care for each other. In the right spirit, the disciplines can be life-giving and life-changing practices, a chance to put faith into action.

RESPONSIBILITY

I COME NOW to the crux of the chiasmus of my five tributaries, which is Responsibility—agency and its twin, accountability. I once sat in a church meeting in which a visiting member of the stake high council declared quite emphatically that obedience was the *first* law of the gospel. I would counter just as emphatically that agency, not obedience, occupies that exalted place as the first law of the gospel. According to the Mormon story, God sacrificed quite a lot so that we could enjoy freedom and choice, as well as their sisters, responsibility and accountability. In no other way could we grow. Through no other method could we become like God—through our screw-ups, our loving moments and our hateful ones. The Mormon God is not looking for automatons who abdicate their own spiritual responsibility to others. In fact, in Mormonism we have scriptures that specifically recount that this kind of picture is actually Satan's plan. God wants us to grow up.

Theologically, I see Mormonism as a religion that blithely passes out car keys to eight-year-olds, and I mean that as a compliment. So much is given to us—belief in divine nature, particularly, and the ultimate claim: that we actually *chose* to come here, to take up this mortal life with all its pain. We Mormons can never say we didn't sign up for this.

And then there's the issue of blame. What child of God hasn't been deeply distressed by the theodicy problem—namely, how suffering and evil can exist so flagrantly in a world that a loving God created and declared to be good? The agency model places the uncomfortable weight of suffering where it belongs, right back on our shoulders—not in the manner of the inane bestseller *The Secret*, where you got cancer because you were afraid and not powerful, but in the interconnected way of social responsibility. I've seen in my own family how disastrous personal choices can bring terrible suffering to ourselves and others. Even suffering that many people would blame squarely on God—take, for example, the 2004 tsunami or the 2005 devastation of Hurricane Katrina—we can see through a Mormon lens. We are learning more and more how human greed and the lust for power are changing our very environment. I don't mean to get too political here, but I do believe that more natural disasters are likely on the way if wealthy nations continue to put our fists in our ears and refuse to see the warning signs that we are chipping away at the world God created.

That's agency on the macro level. On the micro level where most of us live, agency is at work in all our choices and relationships. It's why, for example, I have such a strong testimony of the Word of Wisdom. I have lived with alcoholism and drug abuse in the home, and I am perfectly aware that the great sin of alcohol and drugs is not just what they do to our bodies, which we Mormons teach are temples of God, but what they do to our souls. Anyone who has ever lived with an addict has witnessed the tragic destruction of the soul, as addicts make daily Faustian bargains and trade their spirits for a mess of pottage. It's horribly, horribly sad, and if it makes *me* weep, I can only imagine how it makes God feel—the one who gave up so much that we might have freedom, only to see beloved children exchange that freedom for bondage and slavery. "Wherefore, for this shall the heavens weep . . ." (Moses 7:40).

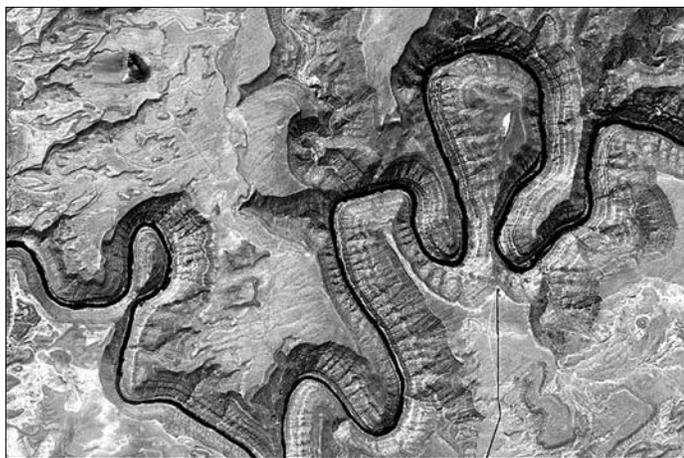
For me, a final aspect of agency that's been critical is in one of our Articles of Faith: we will be punished for our own sins, and not for Adam's transgression. Mormonism has allowed me to radically reinterpret the Fall, since I felt damaged by the Catholic and Protestant misunderstanding of Eve as a temptress and the sole source of human ruin. In the Mormon story, Eve is a courageous inductor of humanity.

But more than doing away with the stain of original sin, the Mormon belief in agency has freed me from a family history that can feel somewhat devastating. It gave me the courage to try having a family of my own when so many of those old scripts in my own family were of desertion, divorce, abuse, and addiction. (Cheery stuff.) I've shared at Sunstone before how this teaching of not being responsible for Adam's transgression came home to me about ten years ago when I discovered that all my husband's people come from the same sparsely populated county in Arkansas where so many of the ill-fated Fancher party got their start. If you think my husband is not somehow related to at least one of those victims of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, then honey, you don't know the

South! Someday, maybe when I am retired, I hope to do research and figure out all the family connections. But for now, my Protestant husband and I are grateful that we both believe in this particular Article of Faith—we will be judged on our own merits and demerits, and not for those who came before us. For freedom, Christ has set us free.

RELATIONSHIP

THIS EMPHASIS ON agency does not mean that Mormonism is encouraging the rugged individualism of solo religion. Which brings me to my fourth tributary, Relationship. We exalt the family to unprecedented theological heights, and we aim for nothing less than uniting the whole dang human race through temple sealings. A bit ambitious. So it's probably no surprise that relationships feature prominently in my own the-



ology, and this is certainly not unique to me or to Mormonism.

I recently read a hilarious and absolutely wonderful book that I've been recommending to everyone I meet. It is called *The Year of Living Biblically*. Basically, author A.J. Jacobs, a secular Jew, decided that in order to better understand the increasingly important role of religion in the world today, he needed to try living the Bible for a whole year. Not just the well-known parts of the Bible, like not coveting (very difficult in 21st-century American culture) and not gossiping, but the really obscure stuff, too. He stopped mixing wool with linen in his clothing, ate chocolate-covered crickets, blew a shofar once a month, and ceased using pagan names for the days of the week or the month. (You can't say you'll meet someone on the first Thursday in January, because you are dishonoring the commandment to never utter the name of false gods, in this case Thor and Janus.) And on and on. It's an incredibly funny book, and also kind of poignant, because the happiest moments of Jacobs's whole utterly weird year are those he spends with other people. Never having known a real religious community, he eats it up: dancing with the scrolls with the Hasids on Simchat Torah; having his twin sons circumcised; visiting with religious people of all stripes. He discovers that a vital part of religion is belonging in community, whether or not we always understand (or agree with) why that community does

what it does. One of the book's most illuminating moments, in fact, comes when Jacobs tries to think like a creationist and realizes that despite its wrong-headed abuses of science, even creationism is at its heart a theology of human relationship.

Mormonism has given me incredible relational experiences, both in and out of the ward. First let me rave about the ward experience, which to me is one of the coolest aspects of being Mormon. In one ward I lived in, where I felt I had very little in common with the people, I learned that we don't just pay lip service to the idea that the ward is a family. A family is composed of people you didn't choose to be with, and you have a whole heck of a lot at stake together. It's not casual in the way being Protestant is casual—you don't get to just up and decide to go to another ward if you feel you don't fit in. (I know this because I tried it, and, thank God, I failed.) A ward is a real community, not an *ad hoc* one. We create our communities



THE "MORMOPALIAN" RIESS-SMITH FAMILY, 2007

"Sweetheart! You'd better hurry up or you're going to miss the service at your false and dead church." I worry that many Mormons have absolutely no inkling of the logical consequences of their words.

where we live rather than seeking out the folks with common interests who are in our precise socioeconomic bracket. It's one of the things I absolutely love about the Mormon experience. It's the only way to create a real community.

And outside of the ward, the Mormons I know make me a better person. There's a purity to many Mormons that is tremendously attractive, a certain light and beauty in their families and communities. There's nothing profound about what I'm saying here, and I'm certainly not declaring that Mormons have a monopoly on loving lives. But we do community exceptionally well. Many of the people who have been instrumental in making me feel a valued part of that community are here tonight, and I just want to recognize a few of them: Ray and Roberta Black, who have been surrogate parents to me and

who open their wonderfully loving home whenever I come to Salt Lake; Chris Bigelow, my wonderful co-author of *Mormonism for Dummies*; and Dave and Ariane Dansie, the best home and visiting teachers I've ever had, who unfortunately for me have just left our ward in Cincinnati and moved back here to Utah. My friends Dan and Tom, and lots of folks from MHA. Curt Bench is also here, and I should say that it was through his beautiful Pillars talk at Sunstone a few years ago that I made up my mind that he and I should be friends. All these people, and many others I don't have time to mention, have opened to me a community based on warmth and caring and inquiry. The most important parts of my Mormon story are those that happen in communion with others.

REDEMPTION

MORMONISM CASTS ALL of life into a holy light by making the audacious claim that every single experience we have here is something we can use in the hereafter. We can, and do, take "it" with us. No other Western religion I've studied makes this claim, though many individual people of other faiths believe it. What we tend to emphasize is that our family relationships will endure beyond the grave. But another, less discussed, aspect of Mormon theology is that every experience we have here, every joy, every sorrow, every new idea we've ever had, will attend us in the life to come. We will begin to understand why we had some experiences and not others, and why we made the choices we did.

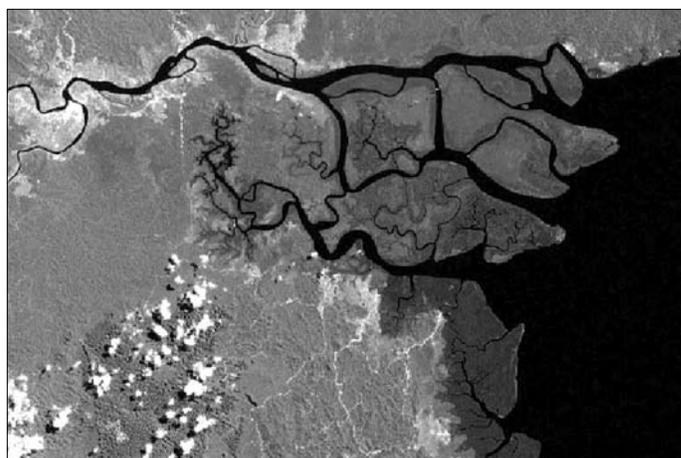
When I was a Protestant, one of the notions that drove me crazy was that an individual was either "saved" or not, and that this single moment of decision was the only thing that mattered in one's eternal fate. As long as the individual had accepted Christ as a personal Savior, emphasis on *personal*, he or she would head merrily off to a Disneyesque Elysium at death. I could never reconcile the idea of God using this one culturally conditioned moment of conversion as the sole factor in such a high-stakes game. What about how we treat people? What about ethics? Considering how much of the Bible is pre-occupied with how human beings behave toward one another, it seemed to me profoundly unbiblical to then claim that this one salvific choice overrode everything else. Mormonism solves this problem nicely by insisting that *both* things matter and, in fact, work in concert—accepting Christ's atonement and responding to that grace by living the commandments.

But Mormonism also redeems the rest of the human story—all those other moments. Those billions of other little decisions we make. Nothing, not one experience, is wasted or lost. This is a perfectly shocking theology. Not one thing we do is irrelevant. It's scary, yes, but I also find it immensely comforting. All the painful experiences I had as a child, including the loss of knowing my grandmother, who was killed when I was little; the loss of my father, who abandoned us when I was fourteen in order to find himself (apparently he is still looking). . . . It's not just that those early losses made me who I am as an adult, but they also helped shape the person I will become throughout eternity. And there are more recent losses,

too: the beloved dog who died in June, the miscarriage I had three weeks ago. (And incidentally, Mormonism has been hugely comforting to me in the wake of that miscarriage, because the Mormon insistence on the sanctity of all human life, no matter how nascent, has given me a theological permission to grieve in a culture that keeps suggesting it was only an embryo, and better luck next time.)

I don't know what pain you have experienced, and it's probably worse than mine. In the spectrum of human history, my own life has been a picnic. I've never been in a war, nor seen a child die of famine or disease. I didn't even have to cross the freakin' plains. But life is still so, so hard, and I sometimes feel broken down by it.

When I feel that way, Mormonism steps in and offers a kaleidoscopic perspective on my pain. I happen to love kaleidoscopes, to witness the patterns and gorgeous colors that can



Nothing, not one experience, is wasted or lost. Not one thing we do is irrelevant. This is a perfectly shocking theology.

be created just by cranking a handle. I find it mesmerizing. But kaleidoscopes exhibit a beauty that is born of pain—those patterns that we see from a distance are actually created from seemingly random shards of broken glass. Just bits and pieces of crushed, broken, colored glass. If every painful (and beautiful) experience I've had is a shard of glass, Mormonism gives me the promise that not one of those shards will be wasted. All the bits and pieces of our broken lives will be used to make something beautiful, to create a pattern of wholeness and grace. That's a belief that keeps me going and enables me to contribute to the river and the sea.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. 

NOTES

1 Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

2 Peter Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 62.

2007 Eugene England Personal Essay Contest First Place Winner

THE CALLING

By Stephen Carter

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did many mighty works among the children of men.

—ACTS 6:8

BUT FOR MY MOTHER'S INSISTENCE, THE ABOVE bit of scripture would have been engraved upon my missionary plaque and hung in our ward building's foyer for all passersby to admire. It seemed appropriate to me. My name is Stephen, after all, and I was going on a mission where, if all went well, I too would be doing mighty works.

I had always been always impressed with the Apostle Stephen; the man had guts. Which, admittedly, were probably spread all over the ground by the time the mob was done with him. His crime? He told them the Messiah had come but that he had brought an olive branch with him instead of an army. This declaration earned him a quick end to his mission courtesy of an audience that decided to cast its vote with stones. I sometimes wonder if Stephen had been surprised at this turn of events.

In a rare nod to humility, I let something less than memorable accompany my plaque's picture and golden map of the Canada Toronto Mission. Still, I was off to a good start. It all began with a mission call signed by none other than the one and only President Ezra Taft Benson. Well, by a signature machine, as I found out later, but that wasn't important. What mattered was that I had been called on my mission by God.

And when God calls, he ain't just whistling Dixie.

IN THE MISSIONARY Training Center, they divided us into districts of about a dozen missionaries. We lived in the same neck of the dorms, went to the same classroom, ate together, prayed together, exercised, and even showered together. I was lucky; there were only three other guys in my dorm room, and we had a nice view of the gym. Unlike the room next door, which was filled to capacity with a bunch of weirdos. The oddest of whom was Elder Corley.

Elder Corley was a head shorter than I. His buzz cut set off his Opie Griffith ears, making him look about fourteen years



STEPHEN CARTER would like to thank Paul Allen for writing the best parts of pretty much every essay Stephen has published in SUNSTONE. Stephen has just finished revising a young adult horror novel and is currently fighting off publishers. Stephen can be reached at sugarbeetnik@yahoo.com.

old, though his youth was offset by a stony look he had probably perfected in boot camp. He had taken a two-year leave from the army to go on a mission, but he had brought the whole army culture right along with him. Thus, in addition to studying his scriptures, fasting, and praying, he also locked his legs around the top bunk to do aerial sit-ups, spit-shined his shoes three times a day, and pressed his shirts every morning. Being nineteen years old, several of us delighted in "accidentally" scuffing his celestial oxfords and saving ourselves from falling by grabbing onto his stern clip-on ties. But despite our best efforts to get him to loosen up, he would just give us a Gollum look and mutter something polysyllabic beneath his breath.

Everyone else was pretty normal—if you consider being a missionary normal. Which we did. I mean, we did normal things like light our farts, get into towel fights, and weep like maniacs over Jesus movies. We also had our disagreements—once over the perils of R-rated movies, once over the evils of caffeinated drinks, and many times over whose mission would produce the most converts.

The last one was a real sticky point with us. Elder Corley, Sister Rafferty, and I were the three going to Toronto, which had the distinction of being in a foreign country. But that kind of made us the outsiders, as the rest of the district was on its way to California. So the question was, would the people of Toronto provide us with enough "humble seekers" to compete with the Latin American folks in California, who were famous for being the most "open to the Spirit?"

Our aspirations were summed up by a picture someone had cut out of a Church magazine and tacked to the wall. At any given time, you could find a group of missionaries staring at it with their tongues hanging out. No, it wasn't Pamela Anderson in a wet shirt; it was a missionary in a wet shirt. He was standing in the middle of an African jungle pond baptizing someone while another fifty grateful souls waited their turn.

Lo, the gates of paradise.

AS THE PLANE circled downtown Toronto, I watched the looming concrete apartment buildings go by, thinking that the city's high-density housing was probably designed on the premise that in 1994, a nineteen-year-old kid from Spanish Fork, Utah, could perform his mighty works more efficiently.



Elder Carter gets his first lesson in “waiting on the Lord” as he arrives a bit early to begin his mission.

After we landed, the mission president and his assistants took us into a meeting room in the president’s home and laid out the glorious plan by which Toronto would be redeemed. I was stunned to learn that here, north of the border—in the land of the Mounties, hockey, and the flag with a maple leaf on it—we were going to baptize weekly.

Take that, you Californians!

Elder Glover laid the plan out in the indisputable language of statistics.

- Talk with three hundred people each week, and
- Twenty will listen to a first lesson, of whom
- Five will listen to the second, leading to
- Four who will commit to baptism
- Three of whom will drop out by the end of the six-lesson cycle, leaving us with
- One baptism each week!

And Stephen, full of faith and power!

This was truly the Lord’s work. Let’s see, two years at a clip of one baptism each week equals . . . 104 baptisms! I was filled with a sense of humility. No doubt I would be tested, but I was up to the task. “If you are obedient,” my mission president declared in his resonant voice, “I promise you will baptize weekly.”

Obedience turned out to be more difficult than I had anticipated. I had envisioned mere work: hours of knocking on

OUR ASPIRATIONS WERE SUMMED UP BY A picture tacked to the wall. At any given time, you could find a group of missionaries staring at it with their tongues hanging out. No, it wasn’t Pamela Anderson in a wet shirt; it was a missionary in a wet shirt. He was standing in the middle of an African jungle pond baptizing someone while another fifty grateful souls waited their turn.



doors and giving lessons and praying and studying. All that was perfectly doable. But something seemed to be amiss.

Some of my shortcomings were obvious. I wasn’t very good at talking to people on the street. They all had stuff to do, places to go, and subways to get them there. Often I could muster up the courage to talk with only people who had the new-immigrant stare.

I didn’t think my sins were that bad since I always did my best. But obviously I was wrong because a whole month went by and not one person hit the water, leaving me with four baptisms to catch up on.

One day as my companion and I were leaving the apartment, he offered our usual prayer: “God, please lead us to someone today ready to be baptized.”

Suddenly angry, I turned on him. “Look, what’s going on? Every day we pray for someone to baptize, and every day we come home empty. Why doesn’t God lead us to someone?”

My companion, a seasoned missionary, answered me with his usual reserve, “Elder. God leads us to three hundred people who are ready to be baptized each week. They just don’t accept.”

You might call that a turning point in my mission. It was the first moment I wondered, in the small of my heart, what faith and power were up to and when the mighty works would start showing up. You know, the promises.

Not to say that things were bad after that. I worked as hard as could be expected, and I enjoyed parts of my mission very much. I met some people who have profoundly affected my life. I even baptized one or two people who were really worth baptizing.

But I did not baptize weekly.

All right, all right. I can hear it banging around in your head trying to get out, so let’s get it over with.

I baptized weakly.

Still, and perhaps it was a reward for my longsuffering with a string of trunky companions one month from home, or, more likely, an act of sheer administrative desperation, I was eventually called to be a district leader, meaning that I was in charge of one other companionship. Well, at least if I

didn't get weekly baptisms, I could ask other people why they didn't get theirs, either. Besides, the mission office sent this really nice letter to my family telling them about my new calling. They probably hung it up by my shrine in the dining room.

But then, three months before the end of my mission, I got a transfer call. It was a bit of a surprise as it was so late in my game and especially because I found out that I would be shacking up with the spit-shiner himself, yea, even the king of aerial sit-ups, Elder Corley.

WHEN I ARRIVED at the apartment nestled in a cobwebbed basement, Elder Corley sat writing in his journal at a kitchen table that hailed from the outer reaches of a 1960's sitcom. He labored over his words with methodical single-mindedness. There was no boy left in those ears. The steel of his glasses formed impenetrable rectangles.

I claimed the easy chair for Spain.

And there we sat.

As time passed, I realized that nothing was beckoning us out the door except a sense of duty as gray as the winter sky outside. So, seeing as how I was the district leader around here, I did the only thing I knew how to do: I walked out the door. Elder Corley set down his pen, closed his journal, picked up his backpack, and followed me.

That evening, I found out that our area was chock full of townhouses and that townhouses are full of people with jobs. People from Third-World countries living in planet-sized apartment buildings who think you're from the Ministry of Welfare—now there's fertile ground. But people with jobs, well, they also have a retirement plan and therefore see no need for a salvation plan.

An hour into the evening, the unspoken became unbearable. I looked down the block, door after door after door, and I knew none of them would open. I didn't even bother looking behind me, because back there was another endless row of doors, all closed.

Elder Corley and Elder Carter. Suits frayed, shoes holed, eyes dimmed. Angels round about us, priesthood burning in our bones, golden God-calls hanging in foyers back home. Put out to pasture. Shoved into a corner. Flyspecks in the Book of Life. I had an inkling of what I'd find if I looked in Elder Corley's journal.

Of all the conversations we might have over the next few months, I knew that we would never talk about the MTC. About the promises. About that poster with all the converts lined up to receive their golden ticket to the celestial kingdom. Sure, we had baptized some people. We'd had some good experiences. But what about the promises? The strangled promises, the corpses of our weeks. Baptismless. Dragging along by chains around our ankles.

HIS NAME WAS Elder Stewart. At three months, he was a district leader. At six, our brand-new zone leader. And we knew he'd be an assistant to the pres-

ident in no time. All he had to do was prove himself just once more. Flooding our zone with the waters of baptism.

"We're going to baptize like crazy in this zone," Elder Stewart proclaimed. "Because we're going to do what no other zone has." Dramatic pause. "Each companionship is going to teach at least one hundred first discussions each week!"

The crowd gasped. A few of the young missionaries jumped forward on their chairs, their shiny new ties catching the sun.

"I've been praying hard about this, and if we teach a hundred first discussions each week, and testify like crazy, I know we'll get at least twenty second-discussion appointments. Heck, teach them both discussions on the bus, who cares! Then at least five will commit to baptism; of those, four will. . . ."

Elder Corley and I looked around to see if we had somehow wandered into a *Twilight Zone* episode. But we could feel the electricity filling the room. That old black magic. The heady stuff that had jackhammered through our veins at the MTC. And we could see it sizzling in the other members of the zone, too. The streets of Toronto were no longer safe.

On the bus, I sat across the aisle from Elder Corley. The stone that had held his face was thinning, the boy reaching up. His heart was pumping like mine. I knew what we were both thinking. We wanted it all back. Every minute of our missions. We wanted the promises.

And Stephen, full of faith and power?

When we got home, we sat down and made a covenant with each other. We swore that we would keep every rule. We'd get up right on time. We'd use every minute of the day



exactly the way it was laid out for us in the missionary handbook. We'd say our prayers. We'd walk our shoes til they crumbled. We'd talk to everyone we met. We'd fill ourselves with faith. We'd *really* believe the promises. We'd expect them to come to pass. Just as God said. Just as our mission president had promised.

We wrote out our plan and sent it into the mission president. "Please," we wrote, "just let us stay together so we can carry this plan out and reap the blessings. We only have two months left."

Transfer night came and went with no call from the mission office, and Elder Corley and I found ourselves in the position of actually having to carry out our plan.

And we did, deviating not one iota. An army of two. Plus God. You should have seen us.

Fast forward one perfect month. The phone rings.

"Elder Carter? This is Elder Caldwell. How are you? Great!"

Something was afoot. Why else would an assistant to the president call a mere district leader? My stomach did its impression of a bowl of Jell-O with carrot shreds as I waited to hear what was on Elder Caldwell's mind.

"We think you've really done a great job as a district leader," he said. "And we know that the Lord is pleased with your service."

Well, there you go. You apply a little elbow grease, and look what happens. True, we hadn't baptized yet that month. But there were still two days left. And we had done our part.

"We think it's time for you to move on now, Elder Carter. We're releasing you from your calling as district leader."

I stared at the scriptures in my lap. The scriptures I had been reading so dutifully from exactly 9:50 to 10:05 p.m. for the last month. Elder Corley sat at his table, pen hovering over his journal (which he had stopped writing in as much so he could read his scriptures at the right time).

I closed my scriptures.

Elder Corley set his pen down.

"Sometimes I think," he said, "that I should just take the food from the fridge and dump it straight into the toilet. It would save me a step . . . eat and crap, eat and crap."

YOU'VE HEARD OF people who reject their callings—Esau, Jonah, Balaam—but have you ever heard of a calling that rejects you?

Well, take a look. We had done everything right. Obedience and faith were not the question. But, if we thought we had nothing before, now we had less. No numbers, no baptism prospects, not even a measly district leadership to lean on. The belly of the whale was looking good right about now.

In the quiet of our subterranean apartment, Elder Corley and I decided that the system could go perform an anatomical impossibility upon itself. Whichever one it chose. We were finished with the whole affair. We didn't care that our zone had a meeting every week to rejoice in its rising statistics. We didn't care that we had to report to our chipper new district leader every night. We didn't care about that lousy piece of imperialist propaganda stuck to the wall at the MTC.

And Stephen, full of . . .

We went out the next day and visited Peter. Peter, the guy with the glass eye. Peter, the guy whose prize possession was a gold inlaid, special edition of the three-level chess game featured in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Peter, who had a stack of business cards proclaiming a computer consulting business that he was going to get off the ground sometime tomorrow. As soon as he potty-trained his dog. We just sat and talked with him. We listened as he harangued the televised Parliament session with hard-hitting commentary. We brought a tuna sandwich from Subway to share with him. And he cooked us something he called lasagna.

It was a good day.

The next day we went to the local hospital and signed up to

push a cartload of smutty romance novels and candy bars around the hallways. Our mission: to linger. To listen to half-sedated West Indian women talk about their childhood pets. To discuss the merits of Danielle Steele's clothing descriptions and how Harlequin Romances could kick Silhouette's pantied little hiney any day of the week. To spend fifteen minutes helping a client go through every drawer and nook in her room to find that last nickel she needed for a Mr. Big

THE FLOCK



BY JEANETTE ATWOOD

WE COULD FEEL THE ELECTRICITY FILLING THE room. That old black magic. The heady stuff that had jackhammered through our veins at the MTC. The streets of Toronto were no longer safe.



candy bar. At times, we found that nickel in our own pockets.

And then there was Janelle, the biggest, nicest lady in the only apartment complex in our area. She always had a project up her sleeve or a computer standing at the gates of death.

And Rene, she had a mom named Martha, hooked up to an oxygen machine, who never got any visitors. Of course she'd enjoy a visit from two nice young men. And her husband Stan needed someone to talk politics with. Politics was an area where we could provide some help, as one of the recent premiers of Canada shared a name with a prophet-warrior from the Book of Mormon. (Well, his name was Mulroney, but we didn't know how it was spelled, so it was close enough for us.) They talked Canada, we talked pre-Aztec Central America, and everyone seemed to understand one another.

Our zone was now legendary throughout the mission for its hundreds of first discussions each week. There was only one blemish on its righteous face: us. All the shiny ties glowered at us—the goats on the left hand of the zone leader, the hisses and bywords.

But just when we thought we'd really hit our “don't give a damn” stride, things started to fall apart. Isn't that always the way it is? You think you've eluded those pesky angels by burrowing deep into the whale's intestines. And then a light appears at the end of the esophagus.

Martha wanted to get baptized. She was pretty sure she was going to meet Jesus pretty soon anyway, and she wanted her eternal passport stamped. Could she make Jesus happy by getting baptized even with her oxygen machine? Then Rene's friend Anita got hot for church, too. It reminded her of AA meetings except without coffee and donuts at the end. And some guy out of the freaking blue just called us up to get his teenage son, Jake, ready for dunking. And Janelle? She had a friend too, April.

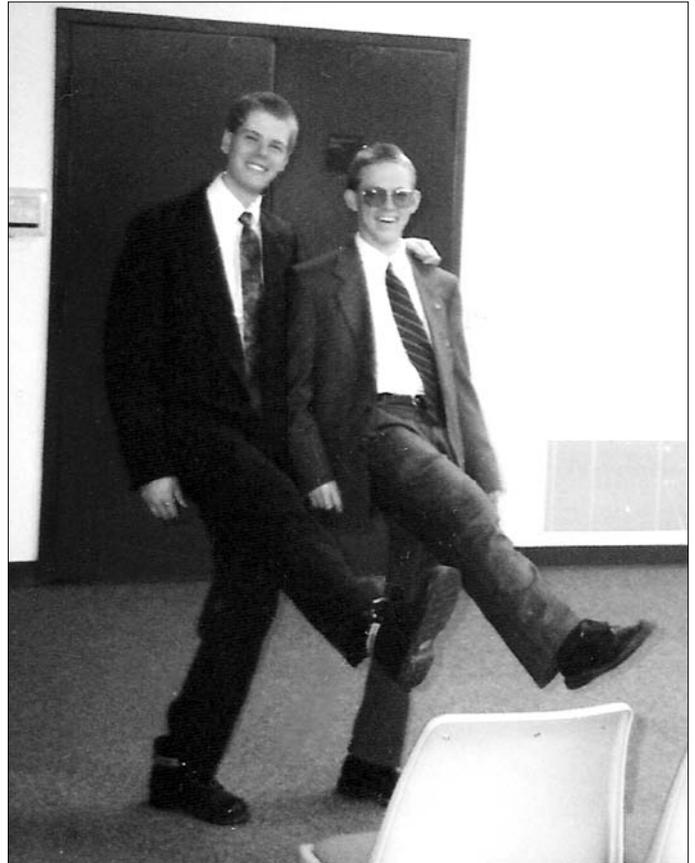
Peter, however, had only his dog.

At the end of that month, Elder Corley and I sat in our final zone meeting, old, tired, and finished. Elder Stewart tallied the stats for all the companionships on the blackboard. Under the column with the heading “First Discussions,” each companionship broke the hundred barrier with ease. The shiny ties bounced up and down in their seats.

Elder Corley and I had four. The bouncing stopped.

The second discussion column registered around 20 per companionship. Smiles all around. Elder Corley and I had four. No smiles.

The thirds made the unexpected plunge to the lower end of the single digit spectrum. Elder Corley and I had four. Fourth



As King David of old, Elders Carter and Corley dance before the Lord—though girded with a bit more than only a linen ephod.

discussions were somehow non-existent—except for the four reported by the two trunk-meisters in the corner. Not to mention the fifth and sixth discussions and the forgotten baptism column. Great big goose eggs until the end.

Four. One baptism a week for a month.

I looked around the room and was surprised to see fury in almost everyone's eyes. “Who are you” their glares raged, “to flout the rules and yet baptize weekly?”

They had a point. If not for this string of baptisms (a fluke at best), our mighty works would have consisted of raising Janelle's computer from the dead, surviving Peter's lasagna, and ministering formula fiction and candy bars unto the sick and afflicted. Our principles, if you could call them that, held no promise of baptism. It was in righteousness that the missionaries of the Canada Toronto Mission desired an army, but Elder Corley and I, like Stephen of old, found ourselves standing in front of them holding an olive branch.

Perhaps the mob had its own wisdom, knowing that an olive branch has never succeeded in running a mission. That to accept the branch would be to accept that no one knows through which vessels faith and power will flow. To accept that when we dip our empty cups, we may receive water, gall, or wine.

That we can never know what we bring to our lips.

And Stephen, finally empty, rejoiced and dipped his cup again. ☺

The 2007 Smith-Pettit Lecture

THE MAKING OF *THE MORMONS*

MY FOUR YEARS AS A STRANGER IN THE STRANGE LAND OF MORMONISM

By Helen Whitney

I AM VERY PLEASED TO SPEAK HERE TONIGHT. IN many ways, I have come to consider Salt Lake a second home. And I'm particularly glad to have this chance to speak at Sunstone, for the organization has given me a great deal of help through the process of making this film. Many, many times I'd call up to ask, "What does this mean?" or "How can I find this person?" and would never go away without a good framing or excellent lead. Everyone has been so wonderful. I can't even begin to say thank you.

*Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
For Thine is the Kingdom*

*Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow
Life is very long*

—From T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Man"

From genesis to completion, the creation of *The Mormons* did not happen in six days; more like three-and-a-half long



HELEN WHITNEY has worked as a producer, director, and writer for documentaries and feature films since 1978. Her films have received many honors, including an Emmy Award, a Peabody Award, an Oscar nomination, the Humanitas Award, and the prestigious duPont-Columbia Journalism Award.

The Mormons, a four-hour Frontline/American Experience documentary, first aired on 30 April and 1 May 2007.

years. As Lou Reed sings, "Between thought and expression lies a lifetime." Or as T. S. Eliot puts it, "Between the idea and the reality . . . falls the shadow."

Well, *The Mormons* didn't take a lifetime, but at moments it did seem to be a lifetime. One filled with a lot of shadow, but also with pain and pleasure, with the sublime and the ridiculous, with beauty and boredom, with horrific anxiety and bursts of confidence. (To be honest, this is true in the making of all documentaries.)

I. GENESIS

WHY DID I choose to examine the Mormons? Since the early 1980s, I have been preoccupied with spiritual themes, both in my life and as a filmmaker. My documentary subjects have been varied, including youth gangs, the McCarthy era, presidential candidates, the mentally ill, and the photographer Richard Avedon. But whatever the subject, I feel a special affinity with the spiritual landscape.

The transformative moment was the six months that I spent in a Trappist monastery in 1981, preparing to shoot a ninety-minute documentary for ABC. It was life-changing, personally and professionally.

I came to know these men intimately. I interviewed all 120 monks before I selected the nineteen who would be in the film. They confided in me their hopes and fears, their certainties and questions, their sexual longings, their mid-life crises, their closeness to God, and, for some, their estrangement from God, even their sense of being abandoned by God. The abbot, Tom Keating, used to joke that I knew more about the inner lives of his monks than he did. I was affectionately called the "Mother Confessor."

The monks were fiercely honest, flawed as we all are, and yet willing to face their weaknesses—as well as those of their brothers—honestly and compassionately. They represented an amazing cross section of America, ranging from an Andy Warhol dropout, to a farmer, an electrician, a Dartmouth '60s



PHOTO: KAREN BERNSTEIN

Helen Whitney on the set of Richard Avedon: Darkness and Light (1996)

radical, an MIT scientist, and an advertising executive.

At the monastery, all stereotypes were broken. The monastery was not a refuge. On the contrary, monastic life was tough and demanding, as well as joyous and fun. It was a place where people asked the big existential questions about ultimate meaning: *Why are we here? Where did we come from? What is of ultimate value? Why must we die?* These were questions I was interested in, and the monks were asking them, not avoiding them as many of us do through immersing ourselves in our busy lives. I came to understand that the monastic life is not exotic and “other”; it parallels the lives of those of us immersed in society. From the early romantic enthusiasms that brought the young monks into the monastery (so similar to the early stages of any new relationship), to the mid-life questionings, and finally, to the late-life confrontation with mortality and death, the monastic journey is the human journey writ large.

The Monastery aired in 1981, and since then, virtually all of my films explore some spiritual idea, even when the subject is not explicitly religious. For example, in my ABC film about mental illness, *They Have Souls Too*, I looked at the redemptive power of love. In my documentary about juvenile violence, *Youth Terror: The View From Behind the Gun*, I meditated on the problem of evil. In my *American Masters* documentary, *Richard Avedon: Darkness and Light*, I focused on the way that great photographer expressed his spirituality and obsessions through his portraits. He really did write his autobiography on his sitters’ faces. In my *Frontline* film about presidential candidates, *The Choice 96: Dole and Clinton*, I examined the shaping influence of religion on their characters. For Clinton, it was his Southern Baptist upbringing; for Dole, Methodism.

And then there were the two more explicitly religious films for *Frontline*. In *Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero*, I explored the spiritual aftershocks of September 11. In that public yet private moment of vulnerability, people were willing to discuss searching questions about God, evil, and religion itself. In my biography, *John Paul II: The Millennial Pope*, I created a portrait of a towering figure whose career intersected with almost every important event in the twentieth century. The central animating idea of his life urged faith upon us all. He believed that man was a believing animal and was lost without faith. He raised the question: can man be good without God?

So, why the Mormons? Why did I choose this subject? Because I am fascinated with radical religious commitment. The commitment of the Trappist monks is total. And while the monks and the Mormons are far apart in the way they lead their lives, they share this radical commitment. Mormonism is not a Sunday religion. It is not practiced just at coffee hour and by occasionally helping out in the soup kitchen. It is all-encompassing. It is hard for me to imagine devoting so much time to my church while also producing films and attending to my family and friends. My head aches just thinking about it. And yet, many of the Mormons I have come to know have even more demanding jobs or larger families than I have, and they somehow manage to pull it off.

I knew little about the Mormon religion and its history

when I started out. But at the same time, I didn't have any set stereotypes. I had met a number of Mormons when I was in graduate school in Chicago, so I already knew that Mormons lived outside Utah, that they can be smart and fun, and that they weren't all polygamists.

These University of Chicago friends suggested that I read Fawn Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*. It was riveting, beautifully written, and not, as so many feel, a debunking biography. Joseph Smith emerges from its pages as one of the most complex, contradictory, and fascinating religious leaders of all time. And his life was so dramatic that if you scripted it for a Hollywood movie, it would be rejected as implausible. In fact, years ago, my co-writer Jane Barnes and I did write a film treatment for such an HBO television movie, and it was rejected for precisely those reasons.

Still, Joseph Smith as a character stayed with me, and I eventually proposed *The Mormons* to WGBH in Boston, and, to my surprise, they agreed. Almost immediately. They offered me development money to begin preliminary research and to write the script for a ninety-minute film. I can't believe that I ever thought ninety minutes would suffice!

II. SPECIAL CHALLENGES

FIRST I'LL ADDRESS the special challenges—and minefields—facing a filmmaker, like me, whose main subject is the spiritual landscape and whose focus over the last four years has been the Mormon religion. We didn't completely resolve any of these questions, but we struggled with them.

Getting religious films made. Polls tell us that we are an intensely religious country, and book editors know that if they put Jesus in their title, sales rise exponentially; but television executives fear the controversies surrounding religion. Religion is raw, it's powerful; executives see it as potentially touching the third rail. Reporting on religion can be dangerous. Dante said it best: “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.” And Mormonism presses a lot of buttons—more than I ever anticipated. As Kathleen Flake said in the film about the complexities of the baggage one brings to the study of Mormonism, and of Joseph Smith in particular: it is “like a religious Rorschach test.”

The problem of access. Access is always a challenge for the documentary filmmaker, but it is especially so when the material cuts so close to the bone. Whether it involves persuading Trappist monks to let me inside their monastery to film their “hidden life” or persuading the Mormon hierarchy to open their doors, access is essential.

I couldn't have made this film without gaining the trust of certain LDS leaders. Mormonism is a top-down church, and while I could have spoken to many liberal or disaffected Mormons and all the non-Mormon historians in America, I would not have been able to explore the heart and mind of the average faithful Mormon if the LDS hierarchy had put out the word: “Don't talk to her!” It would have been a very different film. And hundreds of people *did* call the Church immediately



With Armand Assante at the Sundance Institute, circa 1981

after we contacted them. I used to joke with Michael Purdy in the Public Affairs office that he had a second full-time job just answering calls about us.

Why was the Church so open? I am not completely sure. I know that by the time I sat down with Michael, the Church had done its research. The key decision-makers had seen all of my films; they had talked to people about me. Michael was well aware of the Church's reputation for being "closed" and difficult for outsiders, especially journalists, to penetrate. He said they wanted to change that perception. I think there was an awareness that the walls were going to come down anyway. Mitt Romney's candidacy was going to put them under a klieg light whether they liked it or not. So why not make their network debut on PBS with a filmmaker, albeit an outsider, but one whose work they liked? Church leaders had no control over the content of the film, nor did they ever try to get such control. They never previewed the film. They saw it with the rest of the nation when it aired on 30 April and 1 May 2007.

The problem of biases. How do you properly make use of, but not be used by, your own biases? With religion, most of us bring plenty of biases to the table. More so when that religion is Mormonism.

I am a questioner. So are my friends, both the believers and the unbelievers. I am drawn to these people, and I put them in my films. These are the people who are asking the big questions about life and death and ultimate meaning. I am not drawn to those who think they have the answers.

However, while researching my religious films, I occasionally meet people who possess a surreal certainty. Their faith seems uninflected by doubt. It can be maddening. It can be infuriating. For example, some survivors of 9/11 believed that



*On the set of the 1970 NBC White Paper Series film
Pollution is a Matter of Choice*

they had been saved by God's plan and didn't seem to ponder that others, then, must have been incinerated through God's plan.

With Mormons, as varied as they are, one useful generalization can be made: this religion emphasizes certainty—"knowing." Doubt and questioning undermine faith and are dangerous. For me, faith is a flickering flame in the dark; it is intimately and inextricably connected to doubt. Light and dark, faith and doubt are different sides of the same coin. So I

knew I had to provide a foundation for the viewer but not to slow the film by filling it with icebergs of historical data. Equally vexing was the problem of describing some but not all of Mormonism's complex religious ideas without getting lost in a theology lesson.

I had to constantly decide to what extent I could sketch the bricks and mortar of Mormonism's history but at the same time help viewers recognize that we were dealing with something quite different than the history of a bank or the investi-

I am a questioner. So are my friends, both the believers and the unbelievers. I am drawn to these people, and I put them in my films. These are the people who are asking the big questions about life and death and ultimate meaning. I am not drawn to those who think they have the answers.

was stunned by my first LDS testimony meeting where people got up and said, "I know." Not "believe," not "hope," not "intuit," but the ubiquitous phrase: "I know this church to be true. I know that Joseph Smith is the one true prophet. . . ." As I came to know many Latter-day Saints, I began to understand, however, that even their certainty—so foreign and off-putting to me—can be a many-layered, complex response to the Divine.

The esthetic challenge. Esthetic challenges are especially complex in spiritual films because your subject is the ineffable. The invisible. How do you illuminate spiritual themes such as belief and unbelief, the absence of God, the presence of God in epiphanies, or signals of transcendence embedded in our everyday lives? How do you find the apt image that is neither too literal nor too abstract? And if the religion is shockingly literal—as Mormonism is—how do you suggest this literal quality without allowing the visual metaphors to be too obvious and merely illustrative?

The dance sequence in *The Mormons* is a good example of this problem and its solution. It is also my favorite sequence in the film. Dance is used as a metaphor to suggest the essence of Mormonism: a religion, as Terryl Givens declares in the film, with an embodied god; one that collapses sacred distance between man and God; a religion that seems to celebrate the body. Unfortunately, what was successful about this sequence—its indirectness and subtlety—can be puzzling and disorienting for some people. When you're trying to convey something that is ultimately ineffable, this kind of reaction is inevitable.

The information balance. How much information is too much information? This was an especially vexing problem for this film because the public knows so little about the Mormons. I

gation of a political party. I wanted to bring the viewers "inside" so they could experience the ecstatic leap-of-faith element at the heart of all religions while at the same time unfolding what is distinctive about this particular religion. As always, the devil is in the details, finding the "right" details to share.

Fitting it all in. I've mentioned how this project grew from a ninety-minute film to a four-hour cooperative venture for *Frontline* and *American Experience*, but even with more time to tell the Mormon story, I still had to struggle with very difficult decisions about what I could include in the final cut. For instance, in the act on "Family," Trevor Southey discusses the experience of being gay and Mormon in a church that celebrates family. He describes his own choices, which involved leaving the faith. Yet as wonderfully textured as Trevor's interview was, I was always uncomfortable having it stand for all gay Mormons. I worked very hard to find time for other gay Mormons, in particular those who struggle to remain chaste and within the Church. Ultimately I couldn't find the time for very moving interviews with people such as Rex Goode and Ty Mansfield. Their voices on this issue, as well as vibrant tellings of incredible journeys of both faith and doubt, remain in my six-hour director's cut as well as in my heart and soul.

The question of tone. When focusing on spiritual figures of such epic size as John Paul II and Joseph Smith, the challenge is one of subtlety and balance. These are men who give new meaning to the word "contradictions." To his devout followers, John Paul II is an almost God-like figure; for his detractors—among them the novelist Mary Gordon and other liberals who criticized my film—he is closer to a devil. Likewise Joseph Smith. For scholars such as Harold Bloom and many believing Latter-day Saints, Brother Joseph is an "unparalleled authentic

American religious genius.” To his critics, Joe Smith is a transparent charlatan.

Joseph Smith certainly is a leader whose coat has many colors: a Malcolm X, a frontier Bill Clinton, an American Moses. His life alternated between dramas of annihilation and resurrection. His followers called him a seer and revelator, a true prophet, a good family man; apostates joined his enemies, calling him “lascivious, deceiving, and tyrannical.” For some people, there is no problem whatsoever with these kinds of

Joseph’s anguished cry, “No man knows my history,” is deeply modern—postmodern, in fact. He is a man who can’t put his history together and is experimenting with his many selves.

The problem of truth claims. The greatest challenge is in deciding how to handle the truth claims inherent in any religion. Do you bracket truth claims, as most serious historians do, and focus on how the religion is lived out and why it does or does not succeed? It’s awfully hard, as many scholars warned

How do you avoid both the hagiography of the devout and the reflexive critique of the skeptics? How do you move beyond the extremes without succumbing to another trap: the overly respectful balanced portrait that is without edge and complexity?

contradictions. As the Yale scholar Gilbert Bond said to us, “Yes, there is violence, lying, and theft in Joseph’s history, but what is the net result? The prophet has given birth to a nation, always a messy business. There is an undeniable streak of genius in Smith. There is an undeniable streak of criminality. That’s always true in religion and in most of the great religious leaders.”

Still, for a filmmaker, the challenge remains: How do you avoid both the hagiography of the devout and the reflexive critique of the skeptics? How do you move beyond the extremes without succumbing to another trap: the overly respectful balanced portrait that is without edge and complexity? In the case of Smith, such a portrait would strip him not only of his boldness and visionary insights but also of his recklessness and the ruthlessness that made him both loved and hated. And then, if you do embrace these contradictions, how do you avoid making endless, unresolved contradiction itself the goal and, therefore, finally an evasion?

The question of psychology. How do you apply the lens of psychology to religious figures without your portrait becoming reductive? For example, how was I to reveal the personal as well as the theological roots of John Paul’s beliefs without trivializing him? His views about the Virgin Mary and women are inextricably connected to the early death of his mother. How was I to portray the human as well as the spiritual roots of the calling of each of the Trappist monks without diminishing the mystery and power of such promptings? In the case of Joseph Smith, there is richly suggestive biographical material from which to draw a psychological portrait—the relationship with his failed father, his powerful mother, the death of his brother Alvin, the horrific operation on his leg, and much more. But if you choose to draw them, the connections mustn’t feel heavy-handed; they must be handled with subtlety and delicacy.

me, to crawl inside someone’s revelations, whether it be those of Martin Luther, Joan of Arc, or Joseph Smith.

It is especially tempting to try to “get to the real truth” when examining a recent religion like Mormonism, born in the era of the printing press. As the University of Chicago historian of religion Martin Marty often remarks, Mormonism is so new, there is “no place to hide.” But if you do decide to explore, as we did, some of the controversial questions hovering around Smith’s character and his prophetic claims, you still have to wrestle with the appropriate tone to take: Argumentative? Inquisitorial? Neutral? Respectful? And, finally, you have to ask whether you are applying a double standard when you focus on all the messiness of Joseph Smith’s life and the lack of proof for the Book of Mormon when at the same time you give a free pass to venerable older faiths whose own messiness is conveniently lost in the mists of time.

One of the most fascinating and thought-provoking conversations we had in making the film was with the Hebrew Bible scholar Jacob Neusner. He reminded us with some amusement—a tone he reserves for journalists—that the exodus from Egypt has not yielded archeological support of any kind, and, of course, that the Hebrew scriptures, which begin with the Creation, have no eyewitnesses. For Neusner, a religion that begins in modern times has neither more advantage nor more disadvantage over a religion that began three thousand years ago. Sacred narratives can’t be judged by secular plausibility: you judge a narrative by its power to change lives and by people’s willingness to believe in it.

III. THE RESEARCH PHASE

FOR ME, AND this is not true for all documentary producers, the research phase is the most creative (and the most anxiety-producing) part of the entire process. I don’t

know where I am going. I may know the general outline of my various subjects—Mormons, juvenile delinquency, 9/11—but at the start, I am clueless as to what the film is really about or how to shape it. Half of the time I'm sure I have made a mistake and want to bail out. The great temptation is to start pulling the reins and prematurely narrow my focus. So I force myself to cast my net widely: To talk to everyone. To read broadly. To accept the terror of being in the dark.

What did I do in this anxiety-producing period during the making of *The Mormons*? I figured out pretty quickly who were the big thinkers. And with the help of one of them, Jan Shipp (who later became one of my consultants), I started going to conferences such as the Mormon History Association, Western History Association, and the John Whitmer Historical Association. The folks from Community of Christ (formerly RLDS) were a perfect entry point. They welcomed me into their world with graciousness and trust. My conversations with Robert Flanders were memorable, and he became an unofficial consultant. Next, we started talking to the scholars and intellectuals who write for *SUNSTONE* and *Dialogue*. They were extraordinarily generous with their time and archives. One person led to another.

I wanted to talk to the “full Monty” of contemporary Mormons—Latter-day Saints at every place on the continuums of belief and geography. So I set out to meet Mormons in Utah, outside Utah, and outside of the U.S. I wanted to meet people from all professions, and those who were as spiritually

University of Illinois Press was extraordinarily generous, as was Tom Kimball of Signature Books. I was stunned by the number of amateur Mormon historians. These people have day jobs as doctors, architects, and lawyers but spend their nights researching some corner of Mormon history. By the end of the film, I had hundreds of books in my basement library. By the end of the research period, we had spoken to close to a thousand individuals. Most of these conversations were transcribed and compiled in what the team calls “Helen’s Big Black Books.”

In the early stages of research, I’ll admit to great concern—and “great” would be an understatement. Many of the conversations I had were boring, not illuminating. All too often, historians were unduly attached to a small piece of the picture and were unable to stand back and see it whole. The gulf between the faith-promoting folks and the “let the chips fall where they may” folks was huge.

I was also startled by how little non-Mormon scholars in the comparative religion world knew about Mormonism. With obvious exceptions such as Harold Bloom, Martin Marty, Elaine Pagels, and Jacob Neusner, there were few outside the faith who were capable of making connections between Mormonism and other religions, or who were interested in asking searching questions. Bloom is an interesting case. He is the biggest thinker, and yet he seems extravagant in his appreciation of Joseph Smith and equally extravagant in his condemnation of contemporary Mormonism.

I force myself to cast my net widely: To talk to everyone. To read broadly. To accept the terror of being in the dark.

and intellectually diverse as possible. I spent time in several wards. I virtually lived with two Mormon families. I walked with missionaries on the sweltering streets of Atlanta and on freezing days in Harlem.

I also started to explore the territory of contemporary polygamy, that of *Big Love* rather than Warren Jeffs. I was looking for a window into the world of nineteenth-century polygamy, searching for Mormons today who feel they are living the Principle and believe that they are the “true Mormons.” I wanted to understand polygamy in a visceral, lived-out way.

In the world of scholars, I tried to talk to everyone I could, Mormon and non-Mormon, professional and amateur. I sought out the obvious voices, such as Jan Shipp, Bob Flanders, Carmon Hardy, Robert Millet, Will Bagley, Harold Bloom, Jon Butler, Michael Quinn, Martin Marty, Kathleen Flake, Howard LaMar, Mario de Pillis, Ron Walker, Jim Allen, Val Avery, Richard Bushman, and Tom Alexander. People started to send us books and articles. Liz Dulaney from the

Early on, the dissidents were the most interesting while the faithful frequently expressed themselves in pieties. I was not finding storytellers who could capture the astoundingly dramatic narrative of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mormonism. I was hearing only dry exegesis—factually accurate, but detached and academic. I needed narrative voices that were objective, yes, but urgent and personal as well. People who in their description would begin to answer the foundational questions of viewers: *Why should we care? Why in my busy life should I take the time to learn about this strange faith?* I heard about people who had recently died who would have been perfect: Hal Schindler, Sterling McMurrin, Eugene England, Dean May, and, of course, Wallace Stegner. I just wasn’t meeting the right living narrators. At this point, I felt like abandoning the film. I already knew that we would need more than ninety minutes to do justice to the subject and that it would involve backbreaking financial efforts to raise enough money to make this happen. Meanwhile, I didn’t have my voices, nor my themes. I, too, was lost in a corner of the



PHOTO: PAUL SANDERSON

Preparing for an interview on the set of The Mormons

smaller picture. I was in the shadow between the idea and the reality.

Then I had several breakthroughs. I found a spectacular family who lived in Denver. Faithful to the core but without piety. They were devout but open to questioning. They were Democrats, had ten kids, and the grandparents were Holocaust survivors. A rich bundle of contradictions. They were also a family whose faith was being tested in front of me as they struggled with the possibility of their daughter's death from a rare heart/lung disease. They were living out these big bold ideas.

I next found a truly smart, elegant, conservative thinker who was able to articulate expansive ideas about not only his own faith but its connection to other religions. He was able to acknowledge a period of doubt in his own life. He could speak about the shadow side of Mormonism. He was able to do all of this with poetry and precision—and with passion. This was Terryl Givens.

Soon after, I met other devout believers who also spoke with conviction and elegance, and, when necessary, with

sound and fury. I am thinking especially of Kathleen Flake.

And then, finally, I met my storyteller, a non-Mormon: Ken Verdoia, the director of documentaries at KUED, Salt Lake City's PBS affiliate.

I knew then that I had a film.

IV. MAKING THE FILM

AT THIS POINT, my co-writer Jane Barnes and I took six weeks and hammered out a script or "treatment." The writing of the treatment (in this case, sixty pages long) is always a terrifying process. I have to select my defining themes and events. I knew I wanted to make not a chronological history but a thematic portrait. Chronological presentations are deadly for television. They aren't what television does best. Television can never compete with an article or a book. Nor should it. The art of television lies in compression, in exploring the emotional subtext as well as the text. All too often television documentaries are boring infomercials. The art is to marry crucial information with emotional layering.

Jane and I eventually chose ten defining themes or events in Mormonism. They became the ten acts of the film: Revelation, Exodus, Mountain Meadows, Polygamy, The Great Accommodation, Missionaries, Dissenters, Family, Temple, and Epilogue. We showed the treatment to our consultants. Without exception, they were enthusiastic, though not without their criticisms. I then showed it to WGBH, and with their approval, I started to prepare for shooting.

Ups and downs. The pre-production and production period is always full of highs and lows. I start with the lows. People backed out at the last minute. Not many, but enough to wreak havoc. There was the brilliant young Mormon man at the peak of his fury against the church. He was dying to go on-camera when I met him. But the day of the interview, having flown to

But these were the rare interviews. Most people gave the performance—and I choose the word carefully—of their lives. We spent considerable time preparing each and every person. My procedure is to go over in a general way what we will be talking about long before anyone arrives in front of a camera. There are no surprises with me. No ambushes. I feel a tremendous responsibility for each person I interview. I want them to be as articulate, as authentic, and as moving as they can possibly be.

The art of the interview. Who is the ideal interview, for me? Who makes it into the film and who hits the cutting room floor? I am looking for someone—whether expert or amateur, insider or outsider—who can communicate with urgency and passion, whose head and heart are equally involved, who uses the

I am looking for someone—whether expert or amateur, insider or outsider—who can communicate with urgency and passion, whose head and heart are equally involved, whose language is fresh and uniquely his or hers.

California at our expense, he disappeared. A young Mormon woman had come out as a lesbian—her mother supported her, her sister did not, yet they remained very close. All together they showed how many different—even conflicting—voices the church could support. But then the sister's husband, a bishop, would not let her participate. He was too furious at his sister-in-law going public. An ex-Mormon refused to show up for the interview because he was afraid that I wasn't painting a sufficiently dark portrait of Mormonism. We argued for hours. I felt his revised self-portrait did not do justice to the complexity of his experience—nor his intelligence. Ultimately, he agreed to be interviewed, though he was concerned that I would not honor his more critical judgments of Mormonism. He worried that it would be "too rosy a portrait." Later I heard through mutual friends that he was surprised by the fairness of our film. We interviewed some contemporary ex-polygamist wives who had left their marriages and would rant to us about the evils of all polygamists, never allowing that there might be exceptions. They too have lambasted us for not including their black-and-white portrait of contemporary polygamy.

Some people we interviewed—not many—froze in front of the camera, others rambled, some refused to revisit stories we had discussed earlier. There were a few interview subjects who became so upset and tearful discussing an experience that I had to turn the camera off. Even after we had discussed attire for the camera—the problem with certain colors and textures—several arrived in polka dots and stripes, and we had to take off our own clothes to dress them.

pronoun "I" instead of the pompous "we believe," who is not on automatic pilot and whose language is fresh and uniquely his or hers. I am not looking for someone whose approach to the material is academic, a career move.

I am an active interviewer. I frequently ask people to restate their answers. To compress. To enlarge. To deepen. To provide feeling that is lacking. To provide a topic sentence. And on and on. It's a thrill when I get a person to talk about the ineffable with poetry and precision, to get them to strip away the generic language of piety, the dread spiritual jargon that can kill a film, to say nothing of a genuine human encounter. Frequently people emerge from their on-camera experience pleased but exhausted.

Of my interviews for *The Mormons*, who were the big surprises and disappointments? In the surprise category, Betty Stevenson. Betty is a black convert who had lived a tough life on the streets. She was a breath of fresh air. She is a smart woman whose language is juicy, irreverent, soulful—funny. She acknowledged the wildness of the Mormon story in her now famous statement: "The missionaries told me the most preposterous story about gold plates, a white boy, and a dead angel." By making this preemptive strike, she drew in the skeptics in the non-Mormon audience. I continually hear about her from those who write us.

Marlin Jensen was also a stunning surprise. My experience during twenty-five years of making films has been that the higher you go up the food chain of power—whether in politics, the corporate world, academia, or religion—the more you

must abandon hope of getting fresh, unrehearsed answers. People in power are always second-guessing themselves. Their language is stale, willfully opaque. These interviews give new meaning to inauthenticity. Not so with Elder Jensen. His interview is arguably the most remarked upon. As the *New York Times* review concluded: “You believe him.” Why? I think it’s the freshness of his language. It is unrehearsed; he isn’t pious; he admits the difficulties; he isn’t constantly measuring the effect of his words. The Church would be well advised to make him an even more public face of Mormonism.

The interview with Apostle Boyd K. Packer was my biggest disappointment. I had hoped that one of the most influential voices in the Church would own what he had said and written in the past. I had hoped that he would expand on his writing and lighten and give texture to the monochromatic, dark por-

journey ahead. As we viewed the material, however, both of us felt it was compelling. We knew our film was there. But we were also exhausted because we knew there would be so much material to cut and weave together. We had six months to prepare the rough cut, and then another four months for the fine cut. It was a difficult period for all of us.

Music. The music I chose vexed a number of people. People either loved my selections or hated them. This was the first time my music selections aroused controversy. Music for my films is something that I am known for. It’s my signature. Record companies frequently contact PBS to try to create CDs from my soundtracks.

I almost always score my films from my own record collection. The few times I have used a composer have not been suc-

It’s a thrill when I get a person to talk about the ineffable with poetry and precision, to get them to strip away the dread spiritual jargon that can kill a film, to say nothing of a genuine human encounter.

cessful. The selections for *The Mormons* came from Chopin, Schubert, Prokofiev, Mormon hymns, Beethoven, and others. The defining theme that opens and closes the show is from Prokofiev’s Second Piano Concerto. It was late afternoon in my living room when I first heard this music. I had gone through hundreds of selections—and found nothing. Then I heard the Prokofiev. It was an “ah-ha!” moment. It seemed perfect, and I felt enormous relief. Later, some Mormons criticized it because it was so somber. The executive producers didn’t like it because they thought it was “overwrought.” The word from most viewers, however, has been positive.

Physical challenges. Aside from the challenges of the interviews, many physical elements seemed to conspire against us. There were unexpected rainstorms, and we lost sunsets and sunrises. Equipment mysteriously disappeared. Hotels lost our reservations—and once, I *wished* the motel next to a garbage dump had lost our reservation! These are moments when filmmakers ask: What are we doing? Is this how grownups should spend their lives?

The editing phase. The real moment of truth comes once shooting is finished. I disappear into an editing room for a month with my editor, Ted Winterborne. Some filmmakers live for shooting, but I approach it with dread. Editing is the high point for me. It’s a time of peace and quiet. I have all of my materials. I have my roadmap—the treatment. I can retreat into my room and close the door. In the shooting phase, everything that can go wrong will go wrong. It is an exhausting mini-war where the forces of weather, money, technology, people’s schedules, and difficult temperaments all conspire against you. When editing, I am in control.

Ted and I first screened everything in twelve-hour days of panic, exhilaration, and weariness as we realized the long

Why did I use it? I heard in this music a number of different, though not contradictory, qualities that for me cut to the heart of Mormonism. The opening theme has a simple chord structure and stately rhythms that have the feel of an epic story. The music evokes a long, difficult journey. The main theme is in a major key; it has a traditional melody that grows and thickens and modulates. Yet under it, there are fragments of darker more dissonant melodies, complicating the surface. I believe this musical sequence beautifully captures the complexity of the Mormon experience, the darkness and light.

V. REFLECTIONS ON MORMON PERCEPTIONS

MORMONS HAVE ALWAYS had a strange hold on the American imagination. What is the source of this fear? Mainstream Americans have kept Mormons at bay with generic portrayals, whether it’s Mormons as licentious polyga-

mists or as pioneer heroes, subversives or super-patriots. Whether benign or dark, most images have been thin and without complexity.

While the dark images recede, some of the fear remains. And its expression today can be startling. For the Slate.com writer, Jacob Weisberg, “Mormonism is Scientology plus 150 years.”

Having spent these past few years deeply immersed in the Mormon universe, I am often asked for my own assessments of Mormonism’s place within the American religious landscape. To what extent are Mormons simply the innocent victims of the universal need to demonize the “other”? To what extent are these fears simply the result of ignorance, so that once the Mormons explain themselves, all shall be well? To what extent do Mormons unintentionally participate in their negative reputation, offer up grist for many mills? I’m not certain, but here are my thoughts.

My response is: Own your beliefs, don’t shave off the rough edges so they fit the mainstream Christian mold. Step into the ring with the rest of us, take your knocks, or the smell of evasiveness and deceit will persist.

Fear. According to pollsters, a substantial number of Americans distrust the Mormons and would never vote for one for president. After four years of talking with both Saints and Gentiles about Mormonism, I am surprised by the enduring intensity of the fear many Americans have about Mormons, but I’m only slightly sympathetic with Mormon defensiveness.

When I started out, I was unaware of the intensity of the persecution the Mormons faced in the nineteenth century. I agree that no other American religion has been so persecuted. No other American religion has aroused so much fear and hatred, though the Catholics in the nineteenth century were a close second. None has been the object of so much ridicule, misinformation, and falsehood. And while there is no excuse for the violence, looking at the nineteenth-century context, one can understand some of the fears and misunderstanding Gentiles had. In the film, Terryl Givens and Kathleen Flake talk at length about why the Mormons might have been perceived as politically, economically, and spiritually threatening.

As the Mormons moved into the mainstream in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the mockery was gentler. The new stereotypes are more benign: Mormons now are perceived as industrious, moneymakers, pious, patriotic, slightly boring, and, of course, Republican. Yet secrecy and polygamy still lurk in the background.

Ignorance. It is hard to overestimate the amount of ignorance surrounding Mormons. The Mormons are, as has been said to me at various gatherings, a cult, a theocracy. They still practice polygamy, no matter what they say; they worship Angel Moroni; they worship Joseph Smith; they live exclusively in Utah. And on and on.

At an advance screening of the film at the offices of *The New Yorker* for that magazine’s devoted and unusually literate readers, a man in the audience asked me in all seriousness whether Mormons were allowed to read books or watch television. And weren’t they all farmers because they lived in Utah? He thought Utah was a rural state devoid of industry.

Secrecy. The old chestnut. It never seems to go away. Why? We live in a time of total transparency. People are shouting their innermost secrets on rooftops, on *Oprah*, or on the steps of their churches. In politics, transparency is considered the best disinfectant against corruption. But the LDS temple remains a

no-fly zone for outsiders. You can chant “sacred but not secret” until the sun goes down, but the temple drives people crazy. Even the fair-minded evangelical theologian Dr. Richard Mouw, who is one of the Mormons’ greatest friends, wonders about the secrecy of the temple.

Slipperiness. Mormons don’t tell us what they believe. I can’t tell you the number of times I have heard this criticism. My experience has been that it is the rare devout Mormon who will own the big, bold ideas of Mormonism when speaking with non-Mormons. When asked about Joseph’s powerful final vision about humans becoming Gods, they usually substitute “godlike” instead. Even LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley, when asked by Larry King about the man/God theology, seemed to disown it. “We don’t know much about these things,” is what he said. And then President Hinckley comes home to Utah and discusses the interview with a large group of Mormons and basically says, of course we know about these beliefs. Don’t listen to what I said on *Larry King Live*.

Polygamy, I am told by some Mormons, was never really central to Mormon belief. The Beehive House tour guides never even mention Brigham’s fifty-plus wives. Nor is polygamy mentioned in the Joseph Smith exhibition at the Library of Congress that the Church helped create.

Some say that barring blacks from the priesthood was never official doctrine; it was simply a practice. But isn’t this a se-

mantic difference that denies its importance? It was a practice that was accepted as doctrine with profound implications for white and black Mormons.

Mormons aren't making absolutist claims, so I am told; they are just adding a new scripture, a new fullness. They aren't claiming the sole truth. And yet, salvation, according to Mormons, is achieved only through Mormon ordinances. That sounds pretty absolutist to many who consider the purposes of LDS temple and missionary work.

I know that Mormons are wounded by not being considered Christian. Many have told me this. Fair enough. But in all honesty, do Mormons truly believe that Christians are truly Christian? Not if you take your theology seriously. There is the sense that you want it both ways. And you are not the only ones. Pope Benedict XVI's recent statements suggest that he, too, wants it both ways. According to him, other religions, even Christian denominations are "deficient," and yet at the same time, even he would say that Protestants are in some way undeniably Christian. The Pope has been—appropriately—criticized for his absolutism and his slipperiness.

I am sympathetic to those who tell me that Mormons feel protective of their different beliefs because they are so often ridiculed. In fact, Apostle Dallin Oaks mentioned this to me when I asked him about the Church's reticence in acknowledging its polygamous past. My response is: Own your beliefs, don't shave off the rough edges so they fit the mainstream Christian mold. Step into the ring with the rest of us, take your knocks, or the smell of evasiveness and deceit will persist.

Smugness. People who are uneasy about Mormons sometimes say Mormons are smug. They speak about Mormon certainty, which I discussed earlier. They are baffled by the phrase, "I know." Mormon certainty can seem presumptuous, even arrogant. Of course, "born again" Christians and evangelicals are dogmatic in their certainties. Still, that phrase "I know" especially rankles.

Power. Mormons are powerful. They're disproportionately overrepresented in Congress, in academia, in the CEO world. The same is true about the Jews, and periodically they get slammed for it. And, yes, the "Jewish lobby" does exist, and it does exert an amazing amount of power. And that is a tribute to the Jews who organize so well in their own self-interest. But along with that disproportionate amount of power comes envy and resentment and a suspicion that the tribe will always come first. Mormons need to develop a thicker skin about that.

Hypocrisy. Mormons do not have a monopoly on leaders or followers with feet of clay. All religions have their share of flawed human beings. But when Mormons proclaim their virtues so loudly, there is danger of being accused of hypocrisy. One example is Mormon belief in the family—in the eternal family. I do believe that Mormons have placed an importance on family that is different in degree and kind than that of other religions. And I have been impressed by that—even envious. But at the same time, and this is an irony frequently commented upon,

the Mormon "family" seems to include only those members of the family who fit. For a religion so centered on family, many of its members—whether its gay members or those who have left the faith—have been harshly rejected in the name of family values.

Theology. For Terryl Givens, "it's the theology." He thinks it is the shocking literalness of Mormon theology that discomfits people. It is the Mormon belief that God has a body, that the golden plates were real, that when we die we go to a concrete and specific heaven. Mormonism, at least at this point in its history, refuses to take the journey into metaphor that so many other faiths have. Givens believes that the Mormons' collapse of sacred distance between God and man is the unique Mormon heresy that truly offends—and that it will continue to do so. Most people, he feels, are only comfortable with believing in a God that is ineffable and removed, that creates awe but not intimacy.

Givens's assessment is right. Mormon theology is going to strike many as unique, and, in some cases, it will be off-putting. But it is also fascinating in its boldness and boundless enthusiasm, not only for the way it takes the American Dream and writes it large—not only can a poor person become president, he or she can also become God—but also for its ability to call people to their best selves, which are selves in community with other unique and potentially divine beings.

I'M AMAZED THAT after four years of immersion in Mormonism, after I have put the film *The Mormons* to bed, that I haven't put Mormonism behind me. It's a part of me and will always be. Just as those Trappist monks I sojourned with twenty-five years ago are still with me.

As I move into the years where questions of mortality press in on me, when friends die too soon, I am increasingly compelled by the Mormons' largely successful efforts to conquer death, or at least the terror of it. As I have said before, many of my friends come straight off the pages of a Graham Greene novel. They are interesting, fiercely honest, compassionate people who are doubters. Doubt is what defines them. Sometimes they even doubt their doubt. They are loyal friends and great companions on life's journey. But there are times, like when waiting for the results of a troubling mammography or comforting a dying friend, that I search out different company—and that has included some of my new Mormon friends. There are other times when I feel questioning is overrated and the leap of faith which can't be willed is truly a gift. And it is in these moments that I wonder whether my flickering faith, this whistling in the dark, is about as good as it gets—and possibly is, in its own way, the real thing.

As I said at the start, I like exploring religious landscapes, and I found the Mormon spiritual landscape to be as intriguing and unforgettable as the physical landscapes of Mormon Country. It turned out to be a rich subject to which to dedicate my creative energies over the last years, and I thank all who have helped me.

I hope that I have done it justice.



Participants, critics, and viewers share thoughts on the PBS documentary, *The Mormons*

A MISCELLANY ON *THE MORMONS*

I FIND IT BOTH PLEASURABLE AND painful to reflect on the process of working with Helen Whitney and Jane Barnes on *The Mormons*. The pleasure comes in remembering long and thoughtful conversations with Jane and in watching how Helen conducts interviews. The pain comes in recalling the intensity of those on-camera sessions. Helen's interview questions were brilliant, searching, and unflinching. She would ask a question, and I would think (in my pride) that I had given a satisfactory answer, maybe even a clever one. "Sally," Helen would say after a pause, "say all that again, in half the time, and this time with a topic sentence." The experience was positively athletic in an intellectual sort of way, but I regret to report that it didn't burn calories—only brain cells.

On a serious note, I especially must commend Helen for treating Mormonism seriously. Her work takes The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as it should be taken—as a religious tradition, as Jan Shipp's wonderful book suggests it be treated. Helen did not reduce the history of the faith to a series of social or political points. Instead, she worked long and hard to give visual expression to the emergence of a new tradition and to the religious commitment that has sustained it.

The film's reception is evidence of the power of this treatment. *The Mormons* is among the most watched and debated of all recent PBS documentaries. Almost everyone who sees it is moved and finds much to admire. And most also find something to criticize. The wooden chairs in the chapter on dissent within Mormonism have become something of a metaphor for what some in the faith find to be a generally dark, even bleak treatment of their religion. Outside the faith, the film has often been seen as inordinately favorable to Latter-day Saints, their stories and beliefs. To give just one example: as a non-Mormon participant in the film, I have been asked when I "drank the Kool-aid."

The Mormons has touched some nerves, to be sure. This is its great accomplishment. The film and the filmmakers have given us all tools to use in our classrooms, scholarly conversations and debates, and more. The film has life, because such care was taken to craft it and to hold onto the fact that it is a film about "faith." Now, of course, if Helen were sitting across from me right now, she would tell me to say all this in half the space and with a proper topic sentence. ☺



SARAH BARRINGER GORDON is Arlin M. Adams Professor of Constitutional Law and Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth Century America*.



Helen Whitney interviews Sarah Barringer Gordon for *The Mormons*

PHOTO: PAUL SANDERSON

ON THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR

Lights! Camera! Never Mind!

By Rex Goode

REX GOODE is a social worker and mentor for developmentally disabled adults who lives in Gresham, Oregon. He and his wife Barbara have five children and two grandchildren.



MY EXPERIENCE WITH THE PBS DOCUMENTARY, *The Mormons*, began when I got an email from a friend who had been interviewed for the film in the spring of 2006. He was asked if he knew of others dealing with homosexuality whom the filmmakers might interview. He mentioned me. I interviewed over the phone in two one-hour sessions with the film's co-writer, Jane Barnes. Jane seemed very interested in my story and point of view. After Jane talked with Helen Whitney, I was contacted by a production associate to schedule an on-camera interview in Salt Lake City in June 2006.

By my Oregon standards, the day of my interview was very hot. After checking in with someone at the place I was to be filmed, I was escorted up to meet Helen Whitney. She was very casually dressed, comfortable for the climate. I, on the other hand, was wearing what I had been instructed to wear: a dark shirt and relatively plain tie. If her casual wear was designed to put me at ease, it didn't work. I felt overdressed. I'm not one who enjoys long-sleeved shirts and ties.

We spent a bit of time together off-camera. I found her to be pleasant but decidedly opinionated. She mentioned more than once that she had challenged Church leaders about their ideas on the origins of homosexuality in individuals. She overused the phrase, "The science has spoken." Since I wasn't there to debate her, I let this claim pass. The science has certainly not spoken, at least not conclusively in any direction. Scientists speak, but the jury is far from in.

I was instructed that she would ask the questions and that her questions would not appear in the film, so I was to answer each question by introducing the question in some way rather than just starting to answer. That way, whatever I would say would come out as commentary. She told me that if I forgot, she'd interrupt me and would restate the question. It made sense, and I agreed to it. She also said she would interrupt me if she wanted not to go down whatever road I was on.

I sat for the makeup person, got positioned all over the place for lighting and background, listened to comments about my appearance, and felt quite doted on. Some of the attention I liked.

I don't recall much of the interview itself. It felt like it went fairly quickly, although it took about two-and-a-half hours. We covered my life pretty well. I talked about why the Church means so much to me, how I decided to marry a woman instead of pursuing relationships with men, how great it is to be a father and grandfather, how I related to Joseph Smith because I too had questions that didn't match what people were telling me. I also talked about what a risk I was taking by being interviewed for a nationally released documentary. After the interview, the man behind the camera commented on what a compelling story I had. Helen thanked me and sent me on my way.

Over the following weeks, I was asked to secure permission from my family members to use a family portrait in the film. I also supplied other photographs and background information. After I responded to their requests, communication stopped. They had what they needed from me.

Naturally, I watched and read anything about the progress of the documentary. I told my professors at the university I was attending to watch for it. I told a lot of my friends.

A couple of months before air time, I stood up in testimony meeting and said to my ward, "You people scare me." I meant it. I mentioned that I had been interviewed for the upcoming documentary and was nervous about how my ward family would react to what they would learn about me. After the meeting, several people hinted that they'd like to know why I was chosen to be interviewed, but no one asked directly. Over the many months since I'd been interviewed, my anxiety about



"If he's gay then he's NOT Mormon, so I don't understand why he's in the documentary in the first place. . . ."

the consequences for having been so open had grown. I worried people would not be accepting. My appearance in the documentary would out me not only to my ward but to the whole Church as well.

Besides my worry over the reaction of the Church and its members, I was also anxious about the response from friends at the health club where I work out and shower regularly. I did tell one LDS friend I see at the health club almost every day that I was going to be in the documentary. When he asked why I had been chosen, I took the risk of telling him. He asked me a lot about it, and we had a good conversation. I expressed my anxiety about what my other friends there would think. He said something like, "Well, they might wonder why you spend so much time in the locker room." I replied that if anyone dared ask that, I'd respond by saying, "Don't flatter yourself." That's probably exactly what I'd say.

Three days before *The Mormons* was to air, I received a call on my cell phone from a production associate telling me that my entire segment had been cut from the documentary. She said that the decision had gone back and forth for a long time but it was finally decided there just wasn't time for my story. My response over the phone was polite and mild. I didn't feel mild inside, but without a name for my feelings, I was just nice.

As I thought about it over the next three days, my feelings came more into focus. I felt an odd mixture of relief, disappointment, and anger. I was relieved because the source of my anxiety was gone. I was disappointed because I felt I had been doing a good and helpful thing. I was angry because they had waited until I had gone through a year of many anxious moments before telling me my interview was being cut. I was also angry that I had already told a lot of people that I was going to be in the documentary.

In addition to my personal feelings, I suspected that taking my story out of the documentary meant that the film would likely present a predictable and clichéd treatment of homosexuality: the disgruntled versus the cured. I suppose I was half right. We only got the disgruntled. For many topics, that's all we got. ☹️

A Deer in the Headlights

By Phil McLemore

PHIL MCLEMORE is a former LDS Institute of Religion director who is now working as a hospice chaplain. He and his wife Kim have four married children and live in West Point, Utah.



I FROZE LIKE A DEER IN THE HEADLIGHTS DURING my interview with Helen Whitney. It was surprising and sad. I was surprised because I am rarely at a loss for words. I felt sad because hours of Helen's work were wasted.

Helen thought to invite me to be interviewed for the film after she heard me share some thoughts on Joseph Smith and plural marriage at the end of a Sunstone symposium session. Since I don't speak in public unless I really believe in what I'm saying, when I open my mouth, I usually speak with energy and passion. I've also had some experience doing radio interviews, so I felt confident when "the call" came for the PBS program.

"Pitiful" does not even come close to describing my performance. At the 2007 Sunstone West symposium, which was held just a few days before *The Mormons* aired, I had a chance to chat with Helen and apologized to her about how my interview had gone. With honesty coupled with a touch of compassion, she said, "It really was horrible. We just couldn't use any of it!"



**Even blinded and with my brain on
note cards on a nearby chair, my
mouth still should have performed!**



In my defense, I had two unexpected handicaps. First, Helen didn't let me use the notes I'd brought since she wanted spontaneous, in-the-moment responses. Second, the cameraman didn't like the glare coming from my glasses, so I had to remove them. But even blinded and with my brain on note cards on a nearby chair, my mouth still should have performed! One other thing that hobbled me was the idea that my comments would likely be cut up into fifteen- or twenty-second bites, so I put a lot of pressure on myself to make every two or three sentences I spoke coherent and in context. Of course, that's a job better left for film editors, but I only realized that after the fact. I'm also mildly convinced that the camera must have been borrowed from a *Star Wars* movie set, for surely it seemed to project a thought-paralyzing beam. Once the camera was turned off, I relaxed and made a few parting comments. Helen got excited and said, "That's what I want! Say that again with the camera on." Camera on, mind off. Pitiful!

Some people who didn't like *The Mormons* have accused Helen of possessing a negative agenda. My experience with her belied this assumption. Helen spent nearly three hours interviewing me prior to filming and two more hours on-camera. It was clear to me that she was sincerely committed to comprehending all aspects of Mormonism. She wanted honest expressions from all sides and was particularly interested in capturing an individual's spiritual experiences and growth. I found her to be genuine, highly professional, and hard-working. I was impressed with her integrity and her deep, personal passion for understanding the spiritual path from the perspective of those who profess to be walking it. ☹️

REVIEWS

A Faithful Critique of the PBS Presentation on Mormonism

by T. Allen Lambert



T. ALLEN LAMBERT is social scientist whose emphases include the sociology of organizations and education policy. Following an academic career, he went into business and is now a consultant on school board development. He lives in Ithaca, New York, with his wife Cindy. They are the parents of two children.

HOW GOOD WAS THE PBS FILM, *THE MORMONS*? Any such judgment must be comparative against other offerings or measured against some standard. And it depends on the purpose and perspective of the evaluator.

The perspective I will try to represent is that of a true-believing Mormon, that is, one who really believes in the historicity of the Book of Mormon, in the divine appearances to and calling of Joseph Smith, in the Restoration, and in all that those entail. In addition, my perspective is that of a social scientist and scholar with substantial skill in research methods and critical analysis as well as extensive knowledge of issues and discussions surrounding Mormonism.

Many faithful LDS responded favorably to the show, praising it in various degrees and doing so for various reasons. The documentary was indeed praiseworthy in some ways. However, the most powerful reason many LDS praised the film is, I think, a comparative one. Compared to most portrayals available to the general public, the PBS show was significantly better. Consequently, many LDS experienced relief that this film was not as bad as the rest and not as bad as they feared it might or could have been.

The problem with this comparative assessment is that most other treatments of Mormonism are sufficiently bad that people lose perspective on what a really good portrayal might look like. When the baseline for comparison is limited and includes such trashy films as *The Godmakers* and *September Dawn* and such books as *No Man Knows My History*, *One Nation Under Gods*, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*, *Mormon America*, *The Maze of Mormonism*, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*, and innumerable others, then the merely satisfactory could appear better than it really is.

I have to admit that, despite my critique below, I experienced some relief as well. I am glad that a prominent national television network broadcast a well prepared and extensive production that was not openly hostile and offered some degree of balance. That said, the failings and weaknesses of the program were nevertheless substantial when measured against certain standards of scholarship, objectivity, and fairness. I will focus on what could have been better.

According to the introduction on its website, PBS's purpose in presenting *The Mormons* was to tell the Mormon story since "few know who the Mormons actually are or who they claim to be, and their story is one of the great neglected American narratives." Helen Whitney, the producer/director adds, "Through this film, I hope to take the viewer inside one of the most compelling and misunderstood religions of our time." Such statements suggest ethnography and an "appreciative inquiry" approach to history, approaches which treat "narrative" and "story" as conveying what it is like to be a member of a specific group and culture. The statements imply that the work will strive to dispel popular myths about a people and to be "fair and balanced." While the PBS production achieved some success in those areas, I think that various choices (both explicit and implicit) led to some distortion.

Allocation of time to topics is one measure of balance and perspective. If one were to assign the amount of screen time given to a topic according to the subject's importance in the development of Mormonism, then the Mountain Meadow Massacre would have been almost ignored instead of given the significant share of attention it received in *The Mormons*. From a Latter-day Saint point of view, Mountain Meadows was of marginal significance—then and now. By contrast, the slaughter of Mormons at Haun's Mill played an important role in shaping Mormon identity, yet the PBS film gave that incident barely more than one tenth of the coverage it devoted to Mountain Meadows. Nor did the film give equal time to other significant formative experiences in Kirtland, Missouri, and Nauvoo.



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Another example of disproportionate time allocation was the matter of "polygamy" (or, more correctly, "polygyny"). While that topic is certainly important, the amount of time devoted to it as well as the choice of which aspects to present and whose view to emphasize were somewhat out of proportion and sensationalistic. To understand what I mean, think about how an anthropologist would tell the story of such family arrangements among many groups/cultures of the world, including ancient Israel and contemporary Islam. As one scholar wrote me privately, "the emphasis on schismatic polygamy" was a "blunder" and reinforced, rather than reduced, certain stereotypes.

At the opposite end of the time allocation spectrum, i.e., what received too little attention, was the near absence of the primary driving force behind Mormonism: the Book of Mormon. How could one tell the story of Judaism without

close examination of the Torah and its central stories such as the Exodus, Passover, and Ten Commandments? Around what was the Restoration organized? What moved people to join and make such extreme sacrifices? How can the story of Mormonism be understood without the Book of Mormon being given more attention and time?

Allocation of time to people is another measure of balance. Consider who was given the most screen time and who was given little or none. By far, the most camera time was given to Ken Verdoia, a Salt Lake broadcast personality, who is neither LDS nor a known or recognized scholar of things Mormon. Contrast that with Richard Bushman, the most nationally prominent LDS scholar of American history and the most prominent LDS historian of Mormonism, who was given but two brief moments.

Consider the choice of two non-LDS anthropologists—Robin Fox, who made a throwaway comment about myth, and Michael Coe, who commented on the Maya—neither of whom has any expertise in or publications on Mormonism. Yet there are qualified non-LDS anthropologists who have published on aspects of Mormon culture—e.g., Mark Leone of the University of Maryland and Fenella Cannell of the London School of Economics (who was teaching at Johns Hopkins during film preparation)—who did not appear in the film. Nor was time allocated to LDS anthropologists with demonstrated expertise in Mormon studies and culture—e.g., John Sorenson, Gordon Thomasson, and David Knowlton.

Why was so much time allocated to an unknown female motorcycle-riding poet, Jana Richman, rather than to established LDS women historians of Mormonism such as Jill Derr and Carol Madsen, or to well-known LDS women poets and writers such as Eloise Bell and Carol Lynn Pearson?

Why was the view of Will Bagley (neither a believing Mormon nor an academic scholar) on Mountain Meadows given prominence over that of respected believing historians such as Richard Turley, Ronald Walker, and Glen Leonard, who are doing the definitive research and book on the topic (forthcoming from Oxford University Press)?

Nor was it balanced to permit various critics to suggest that Mormon beliefs are historically baseless and that LDS scriptures lack any support in reality while LDS scholars were not given an opportunity to challenge them or argue the contrary.

At other times, a situation was so misrepresented that it left a misleading impression. The courtroom images associated with Margaret Toscano's saga of her excommunication lent more credence to her side of the story than a balanced documentary should have done.

WHILE *The Mormons* was a television production that provided a better account to a larger audience than Latter-day Saints are used to, PBS's presentation of Mormonism fell short in significant ways with respect to its own goals and general standards of balance and fairness. But perhaps the film represents progress and hope for still more improvement in the future. ☺

Moroni Meets Nietzsche

by Mathew N. Schmalz



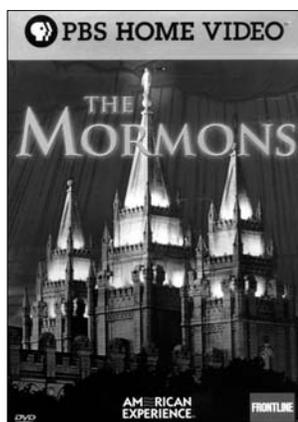
MATHEW N. SCHMALZ is associate professor of religious studies and director of the honors program at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. He is the author of "Meet the Mormons: From the Margin to the Mainstream," in the 9 November 2007 issue of *Commonweal*.

I WAS SUSPICIOUS when I sat down to view Helen Whitney's documentary *The Mormons*. My suspicion centered on the documentary's being advertised as "American Experience." Of course *American Experience* is the title of the PBS series which presented the documentary. But "American experience" also is an apt description of how most scholars have framed the LDS tradition. Generally, Mormonism has been considered interesting to scholars primarily because of what it reflects or reveals about America. Such a focus has its place, but applying it has the effect of deemphasizing the irreducibly religious aspects of Mormonism. In other words, we non-Mormon Gentiles tend not to be interested in Mormon theology or worship. Instead, we are really interested in American experience and how Mormonism casts an oblique light on American identity.

The Mormons makes clear why one can never avoid history or American experience when talking about Latter-day Saints. The documentary begins with a shot of a statue of Moroni being raised to top a temple in Manhattan. The restoration that Moroni trumpets takes place within the full light of history. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the documentary's interviews make clear the deep and abiding significance of history to Latter-day Saints. Yet while much of the initial material is historical, the film reveals LDS theology in some interesting and unexpected ways.

For me, it is Terry Givens who most eloquently articulates the religious worldview of the Latter-day Saints. In a particularly well-done section of the documentary, Givens speaks of Mormonism's notion of an embodied God as we see dancers enraptured in their coordinated but very tender movements. The choice of dancers is meant to highlight Givens's reference to Friedrich Nietzsche's oft-quoted line: "I shan't believe in a God who wouldn't dance."

The LDS understanding of physicality as divine is certainly a potent theological theme. But drawing on Nietzsche to make this point leads us to consider other Nietzschean themes, such as "the will to power," that stand radically opposed to Christian understandings of human nature and destiny. In another inadvertently Teutonic moment, Givens describes Mormon charitable endeavors as having all the "efficiency of the German *Wehrmacht*." While clearly intended as wryly humorous, Givens's comment does highlight the religious significance of discipline and self-mastery in a way that Nietzsche



might see as further evidence of Christianity's "slave morality."

Of course, discipline and self-mastery are crucial components of Mormon understandings of agency and eternal progression. But in the documentary, discipline and self-mastery often seems to be emphasized in their Nietzschean association with power and domination. For example, Ken Verdoia speaks of Utah as a location chosen precisely as a

kind of vale of soul-making that would require domination of a harsh landscape. A fundamentalist Mormon family speaks of how polygamy is a prerequisite for exaltation precisely because it requires domination over feelings such as envy and self-centeredness. Most stunningly, Richard Ostling observes that the real impact of allowing blacks into the priesthood was on Mormonism's relationship to American society, the implication being that public relations was the chief concern behind the repeal of the ban. Given all this commentary, a more appropriate title for the documentary might have been *Moroni Meets Nietzsche*, in the sense that Mormon religiosity and LDS policy seem to share an overriding, and perhaps overweening, will to power.

Of course, Mormonism's public face would naturally reflect disciplined self-confidence. For this reason, some of the documentary's most powerful moments come when Mormons share their experiences of brokenness. LDS Church historian Marlin Jensen speaks of his missionary experience in Germany. Unsure in his faith yet forced into a position in which he had to confront a congregation of suspicious Lutherans, Jensen somehow found the words in German to give witness to the prophethood of Joseph Smith. The point was that the limitations of human agency become an opening for divine agency. In this sense, brokenness is a necessary prerequisite for wholeness.

It is the palpable brokenness of Betty Stevenson that forms the emotional core of the documentary. Stevenson recalls how she was visited by two LDS missionaries and was told a ludicrous story of a "white boy, an angel, and some golden plates." In spite of her suspicions, however, she opened the Book of Mormon and read the first line about Nephi's having been born of "goodly parents." Her shattering realization that she had no experience of goodly parents began the story of her conversion and her return to wholeness.

The Mormons presents us with two kinds of Mormonism. There is the "Moroni meets Nietzsche" kind, with an expansive sense of progress built on self-mastery that complements contemporary American preoccupations with capitalism and empire. But the documentary presents another kind of Mormonism as well, one that emphasizes not victory but surrender and in doing so evokes a very different kind of meeting. In this form of Mormonism, Moroni turns his back on Friedrich Nietzsche and embraces the crucified and risen Christ. ☞

REACTIONS

Commentators on The Mormons have noted its potential usefulness as a discussion aid in religious studies classrooms. Professor Mathew Schmalz, the author of the previous review, offered students in his Fall 2007 "Modern Religious Movements" class at the College of the Holy Cross extra credit for watching the film and writing a short reaction paper. The following are excerpts from these papers.

TO ME, THE most striking issue presented in *The Mormons* is that of individuals who are considered unwelcome or are excommunicated from the LDS Church. My initial understanding of the Mormon faith was that it encouraged continual progress towards godhood, a worldview which was fascinating to me for its optimism and its uniqueness as compared to other Christian faiths. Additionally, the Mormon ritual of baptism for the dead suggested to me a faith so invested in including the greatest number of individuals that learning about the practice of excommunicating certain intellectuals and homosexuals, as well as the marginalization of women within the LDS Church, surprised me.

As a Catholic and a religious studies major at a Catholic college, the notion of someone being excommunicated because of conclusions reached via academic investigation disturbs me. I spend a great deal of time examining questions of faith, doctrine, and policy within my own tradition, so PBS's presentation of individuals who were dealt the greatest punishment by their church for their own investigation affected me on a deeply personal level. It is a difficult task to investigate one's own faith, to ask the big questions, and it is often a spiritually trying experience to come to conclusions which do not agree with official church teachings. Those who study their own religion are taking a chance in an attempt to find answers to deeply held questions. To damn these individuals for following their hearts seems to me to undermine an individual's ability to continually progress towards godhood, thereby undermining the very foundations of Mormonism's claim to be inclusive.

—BRIAN REGAN

THE SECTION IN *The Mormons* that especially struck a chord with me is titled, "The Mission." I still find it hard to believe that at as early as nineteen years old, young men and some young women go out into the world for two years preaching and trying to convert others to their faith. Most young adults around this age are questioning their own religion.

I tried to comprehend how a young adult decides to make this decision to preach, and through watching the video, I found that some of the reasons are simple. For a young Mormon male, not to join "God's army" would be detrimental to his role in the family. There is a tradition of father and grandfather leaving to serve the mission; to decide not to be a part of it would mean that the male would lose respect within the family. Another force is how others would view the young

man's family if the son is not ready for this journey.

As I watched, I tried to put myself in these young men and women's positions and wondered how I would react to the familial pressures as well as those coming from the outside world. How would I deal with strangers rejecting my message? As people in the video seemed upset when they were approached by two young Mormon men, I questioned how I would feel if even before I began talking someone said, "Oh, no!" when I started to approach them. How would I feel if I was unable to draw any converts? How would I be able to accomplish this journey without my family's help? To not be able to see my family for two years and to only have contact with them through letters and a couple of phone calls seems awfully strict and extremely difficult. Yet, at the same time, I can also see how rewarding it can be for a person to accomplish their mission, even if they are unable to make any converts. People ultimately have faith in religion despite times of hardship because it is their religion that provides a framing that makes the suffering bearable.

A Mormon mission definitely makes a young adult mature quickly. Not being able to rely on family, having a companion with you 24 hours a day, and having everything in your life controlled when you are at the age that young adults normally tend to rebel is a challenge.

How is it that Mormon children grow up to become Mormon adults? The accomplished mission solidifies their position in the group. A man in the video sums it up nicely when he says that had he not gone on his mission, he would not be able to exist in the world as he knew it.

—CAITLIN RUSHWORTH

THE MOST STRIKING of all the sections in the documentary is the coverage of modern-day polygamy and its effects on those who continue to practice it. This film gives the viewer heartfelt testimony from polygamists who truly think that their way is what was revealed by the prophet Joseph Smith as the only way for them to become gods themselves. While it is a way of life that the women interviewed describe as difficult, it is what they seem to truly want for their lives. This aspect of contemporary Mormonism, which is by far the most mysterious and taboo-feeling part of the religion, was put into a positive and illuminating light by the documentary, which seems to suggest that polygamist Mormons should simply be left alone.

—MATT GUARDINO

ONE OF THE most memorable and poignant episodes from *The Mormons* centers on the religious conversion experience of Betty Stevenson. A former addict, convict, and single mother, Stevenson revealed the immediate impact her first reading of the Book of Mormon had on her life. The central theme of family, found in the first passage citing the lineage of Nephi, struck a chord with her. After reflecting on the book's opening lines, she saw her own flaws as a mother and a responsible family member.

Stevenson, an African American, is a convert who exemplifies the diversity of new membership in the LDS Church,

which through missionary endeavors as well as transformative revelations has had a drastic effect on the Church becoming a much larger, multicultural entity. It is not surprising that the LDS Church is growing and thriving overseas. A focus on family, as well as a theme of self-improvement and growth into godliness, attract those who are downtrodden and destitute. But even in America, as seen with Betty Stevenson, Mormon missionaries are finding fertile ground to sow their message of love, family, and growth. Although the initial story of Joseph Smith may not attract many converts by itself, the revelations about family, heaven, and one's spiritual purpose on earth are persuasive tools to gain converts.

—CAITLIN LACROIX

THE PBS DOCUMENTARY includes a teaching by John Taylor, the third president of the church, that blacks survived the flood so that Satan might have representatives on the Earth. When this teaching is coupled with second president Brigham Young's assertion that black skin was a curse and punishment not only for wrongdoing in the pre-existence but also for Cain's murder of Abel, it seems there was certainly an air of racism within the Mormon Church. Priesthood denial and being barred from the temple rituals provided a glass ceiling of sorts for African American members.

When Spencer Kimball received guidance from the Holy Spirit that people of African descent should receive the priesthood, the change seemed to come quite suddenly. Given the widespread racism of the time period, I was left to wonder how the majority of Mormons took the new proclamation. Also, I would like to know if the Church's beliefs before 1978 attracted racists to the church. I suppose, though, that it is a great testament to the power of the Mormon Church and the Book of Mormon's message that, even with these discriminating tendencies, some Africans were still attracted with such zeal. No example is better than those black Africans who started the nascent Mormon movement in Ghana and Nigeria and who waited for many years before true recognition from Salt Lake City. Lastly, I wonder what kind of promise or message this piece of history sends to other minority groups within Mormonism, such as homosexuals and women, who may feel like they do not have the equal rights of others in the Mormon "family."

—KEVIN LAVELLE

ONE OF THE more interesting parts of *The Mormons* is the section on the family. I am drawn to the idea of being sealed together as a family for all eternity. It is very different from what I believe as a Catholic, but at the same time, it is a beautiful concept that one's family will endure forever. Many people believe in heaven and that they will be reunited with their loved ones in the afterlife. In contrast, Latter-day Saints claim not simply to *believe* in a reunion in the celestial kingdom but to *know* that their families will be together again. I found the story of the young woman who was diagnosed with a fatal disease particularly compelling because through her knowledge that she would be with her family

again one day, she dealt with the idea of possible early death better than most people would.

While most religions are family-oriented, there is something unique about the family being the center of the Mormon faith. Its notion that couples are sealed together for time and eternity in the temple appears to make people think more seriously about marriage and uniting themselves as a family knowing it is an eternal commitment and should not be made lightly. But while this is a beautiful image for many Latter-day Saints, it can be a disheartening issue for those who are not part of a family. For, as I understand it, members of the LDS Church who do not marry, get divorced, or are homosexual are going to be kept out of the celestial kingdom. Many religions take a stance against divorce and homosexuality, but I find Mormonism's exclusion of individuals who do not marry to be most discouraging. Some people may never find someone they feel so connected to that they are compelled to form a bond with them for eternity through the ritual of marriage. In my opinion, remaining single is nobler than marrying someone because it is your duty to form a family and produce children.

—ANNMARIE DEVER

AS WE DELVED into some of the beliefs of the Latter-day Saints in class, one of the things that struck me most about Mormonism is how very open-minded it is to receiving new revelations into the religion. This sense of ongoing revelation from God is far more progressive than most, perhaps even all, other religions. Yet the testimony of Margaret Toscano verified that Mormons have been excommunicated from the LDS Church for their taking a staunch stance on feminine equality or for speaking about the feminine counterpart to God that Mormons also believe in. As another intellectual, Jeffrey Neilson, stated, "There's a great fear in the Church that if you openly look at these things then you will doubt, and if you doubt—well, there goes the whole purpose of life." I find it somewhat disheartening that the LDS Church is not enthusiastic about intellectualism among its members.

Prior to college, I could have been considered somewhat religiously ignorant. Because I didn't have a real awareness of other religious traditions, I felt I was not really entitled to proclaim my Catholicism. With my education, I am realizing that there are some facets of Catholicism that I do not necessarily agree with, but this knowledge does not cause me to shift in my self-identification as a Roman Catholic. My doubting only leads to a greater curiosity and desire to further my education. It is only in first doubting that exploration and, ultimately, greater conviction can be born. Intellectualism is another step toward progression, a concept so fundamental to Mormons, yet it still seems that outspoken members are stifled. I am left to ask if this stifling is born out of an ungrounded fear that conviction will dwindle with education?

—KATIE MEEHAN

Intellectualism is another step toward progression, a concept so fundamental to Mormons, yet it still seems that outspoken members are stifled. Is this born out of an ungrounded fear that conviction will dwindle with education?

JOSEPH SMITH AND his devout followers faced a tremendous amount of persecution throughout the 19th century. Perhaps because of the misunderstanding and isolation Smith and his followers experienced, some high officials of today's LDS Church are very protective and often adamant about maintaining certain longheld beliefs, even if they are detrimental to some of its members. The documentary makes clear that there are obvious contradictions between the LDS Church's choice to uphold historic traditions of Mormonism while the modern environment it finds itself in is pregnant with pressure for it to change. What I don't understand, however, is why the Mormon Church seems to go out of its way to protect certain doctrines which deny the freedom of certain individuals to practice the Mormon faith.

In the film, author Richard Ostling asserts that recently the Mormon Church has become more sensitive about and aggressive toward those who appear to be attacking the Church's philosophies or members. He says, "The Church seems to be drawing in and wanting to sharpen its message, and in some cases, this takes on a very harsh and personal edge." Perhaps Ostling was alluding to Apostle Boyd K. Packer's orthodox notions about the biggest dangers to the future of the Church. In the film, Gail Houston, a former Brigham Young University instructor and current women's studies professor, recalls Packer's hurtful statements that the greatest dangers for the Church were gays, feminists, and intellectuals. She said it was like "a slap in the face. . . . It was like, 'We don't want you.'"

Is this really what the Mormon faith is all about? Is this what Joseph Smith would have done—that is, deny the fact that the Church must modernize and grow as the times change? It seems to me that denying homosexuals and women the freedoms that male LDS members have is counter to the doctrine of "family" and beliefs in opportunities for ultimate growth for all. It just does not make sense to me for the LDS Church to have, in the past, suffered a great amount of persecution and struggle and yet deny persons, who have also suffered and faced intense opposition, the chance to take full roles in the Church. For a religion so pure and popular and focused on the togetherness of people, it is hard to believe that the LDS Church still struggles with things like this. It seems that its leaders cannot determine how to modernize while not losing the religion's core beliefs. Exclusion does not, to me, seem like the best answer to this question.

—SALLY ANN HILE

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

I thought back to Robert Rees's inquiring spirit and wondered if he had been able to remain in the Church amid all the controversies. Interestingly, I realized that I hoped he *had*.

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

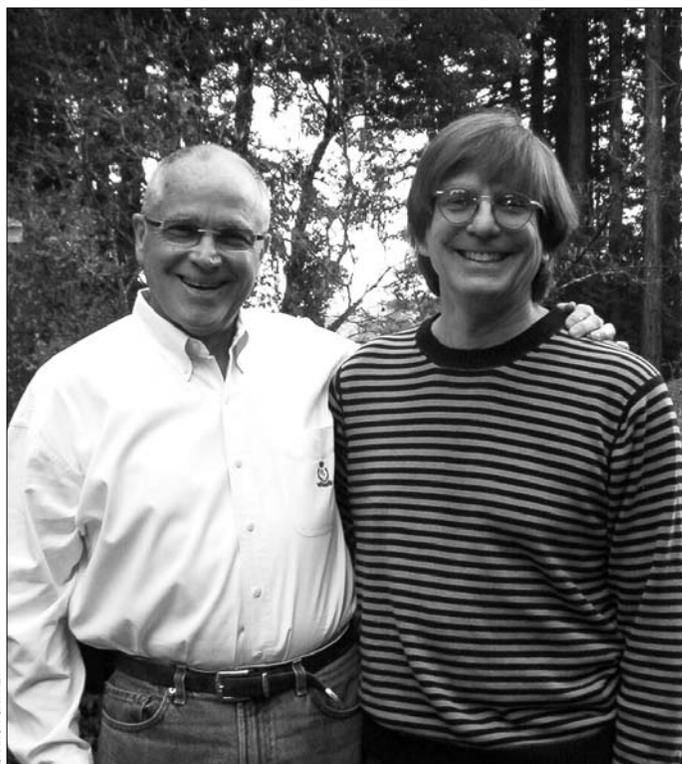
Another "perspective-changing" essay for me in the same volume was John Kesler's "Facing Spiritual Reality." John's journey, then and now, has moved me towards viewing Mormonism through a lens of experience and practice rather than as a set of beliefs. A convert, whose story is similar in ways to mine, 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

"Is God speaking to me through this particular faith tradition, regardless of what I feel about historical and theological problems?" 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."

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

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.

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.

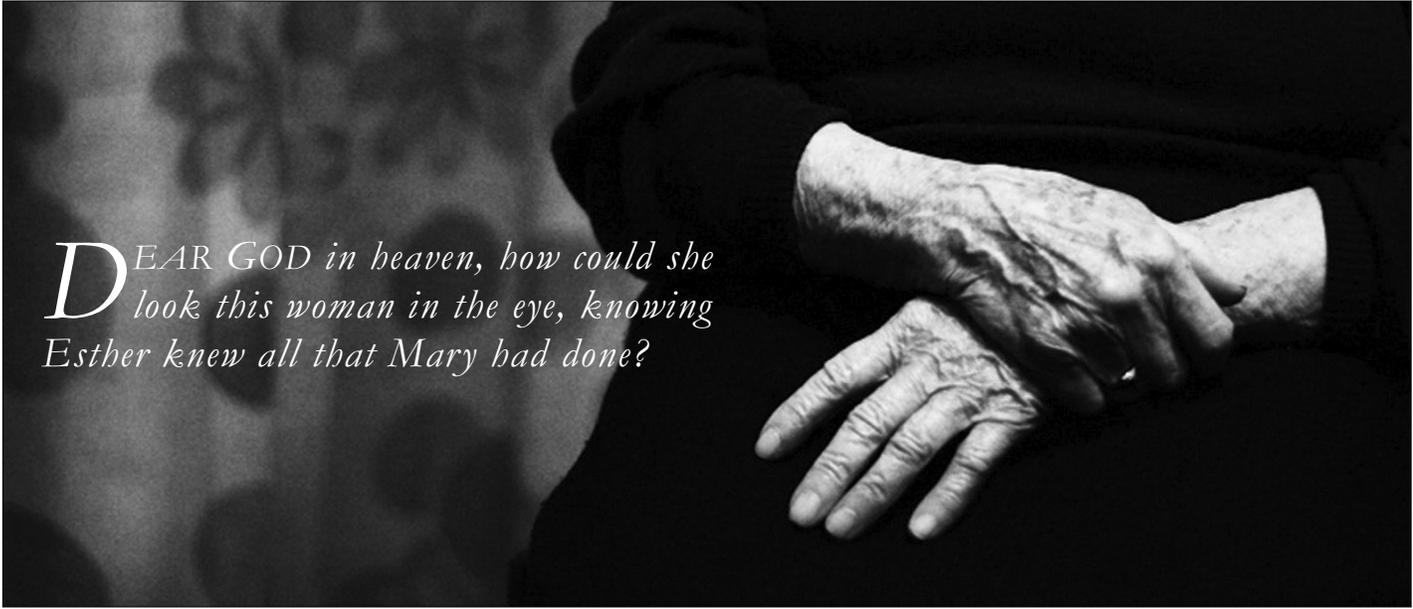
I'd set each envelope aside
but eventually I'd sigh,
glance toward the sky and read,
as sure back then as I am now
that nothing can be done
about the weather.

—DAVID FEELA

2005 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Moonstone Winner

CLOTHING ESTHER

By Lisa Torcasso Downing



DEAR GOD in heaven, how could she look this woman in the eye, knowing Esther knew all that Mary had done?

MARY HAD STOOD BEFORE HER MOTHER-IN-LAW countless times before this. Stood before her more than beside her, the way Esther had always wanted her. *Help me with this roast, Mary; Come sing while I play; Read to me awhile, won't you, dear?* Most women who are bound together by their love for a man who is, to one, the protected and the beloved, and to the other, the protector and the lover, get their heads and hearts all snarled together so that neither reason nor tender feeling can be loosed to a useful satisfaction. Sometimes, though, life waters people instead of drying them out. Sometimes standing before someone becomes less a stance of submission and more a pose, a position that is neither weak nor strong, but one which simply allows the other to



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look upon the one. Curiosity, envy, affection, all kneaded together like dough, rising quietly in a warm spot on the kitchen counter.

Mary, you have to knead the dough with your knuckles.

Devotion: Mary and her husband Lance had taken in Esther and her husband George two weeks before George was diagnosed with stomach cancer, twelve weeks before he died, leaving ten weeks for Mary to learn to pose before Esther, ten weeks to establish the new habit of standing before.

ROUNDING DOWN, THE years between the death of Lance's father and the death of his mother were sixteen. Mary had plodded along them like a tired horse on a familiar trail, passing detours and distractions with little more than a tail flick, pausing only to provide suck or to again foal. Mary had not been unhappy, and neither had Esther, who enjoyed the pleasure of sleeping a wall away from her eldest son.

And of course there were the grandchildren.

But the nights often bore down hard on Mary. Her secret fear was that the darkness—that bit which tore into her senses

like soil—was attached not to the spinning universe, but to her own spiraling mind. Over the years, Mary had shared many things with Esther, a bathroom scale, sometimes a hairbrush, and, of course, the children. Yet, she never shared (wouldn't want to bother her with) every little worry or wonder in her brain, whether it popped in only every now and again or whether it had taken up permanent residence. Simple things had vanished, and though Mary swept under the table for them and hoped bleach would reveal them, she just couldn't put her finger on the simple things Esther always told the children we were on this planet to enjoy.

Certainly the path Mary trod is common, full of head colds, Scout meetings, and parent-teacher conferences, but with Esther always before her to cluck and nod and encourage, Mary moved along with a sense of purpose. She was building a family, a thing she did not at all know how to do, while Lance, especially in more recent years, was off building communication systems in Thailand or Sri Lanka, an important service in anyone's book. The difficult nights were Mary's "alone nights," and during them, she lay awake and still, staring up into the darkness and listening beyond the sheet rock for some symptom, any sign, of Esther's life—a cough, a moan, a snore, even the hummed notes of a pioneer hymn; something to assure her that all is well. Any sound which seeped through the wall or under the door into the crevices of her mind came as a sound from heaven, testifying that this path was the chosen one, and Esther, her unlikely companion.

Of course roads end—sometimes abruptly—and Esther's road was like this. An unexpected and wholly massive stroke put a quick halt to Esther's plans for Sunday dinner. Tonight Lance would've been on a jetliner to Corporate in Chicago, but instead he is at home, watching the kids watch him and not knowing at all what to do when Colleen spits at him, then locks herself in the bathroom. And Mary, who should've been at home helping Colleen with her four's times table and Marcus with his solar system report and refereeing her three teenage sons as they fight over the computer, instead finds herself standing before Esther. Finds herself staring down at Esther, staring down at her mother-in-law as she lies upon her back, is laid on a stainless steel table in a stark back room of the Village Gate Funeral Home.

MARY CLUTCHES THE overnight bag, examines the green hospital gown in which Esther is clothed. She wills herself not to glance again at Esther's face, not to see what she noticed immediately: that this face she loves—with its small hump on the bridge of the nose and that old-age wattle beneath the chin, with its thin lips and elongated cheeks—has been made unfamiliar through the subterfuge of a mortician's make-up sponge.

Beside Mary stands a woman, and this woman has a voice, soft, smooth. Her touch lands on Mary's elbow, then comes a tug against the suitcase. Mary resists. That which she has carefully packed inside this bag is sacred to her and to Esther: the white gown, the ceremonial vestments worn in the temple,

and the holy garment. The voice again, tender, and Mary comprehends, gives in, releases the case which the woman places atop the counter behind them.

"I'll show the others in as soon as they arrive." Another touch, this time on her shoulder, then footsteps across tile; the pull of the door and its attending, vacuum-like sensation as the woman withdraws; and then the hush. . . .

There is a moment in every life when we learn, we see, we slam head-on into the comprehension that what we always knew is no longer real, that experience is unduly egocentric, that color is subjective, and that silence cannot be where breathing is found. We have, all of us, we have said it, have said, Sit still, Hold still, Simmer down, Be still. Even God Himself has commanded it. And yet, when we face the face of death, when we see the ones we've seen every day truly stilled and made artificial by life's last word, only then do we begin to sense how hollow our minds are; how empty, how barren of things known. In that moment—that lonely, isolated, imperative moment—the only thought we can form, the only word we can hold on to, is that one simple word; that odd, unanswerable word. *How?* Not "How could this happen?" nor "How will we manage?" Only, "How?"

Right now, Mary stands in this moment; and that simple, syllable is gyrating in her mind, gathering nothing, not even a dusting of sense, but spreading itself thinly, evenly, line upon line, an anaesthetic-like numbness between reality and acceptance. Her hands remain at her sides, and yet she desperately reaches for something to hold on to, an edge into which she can sink her teeth, a ledge onto which she can crawl; something with which she can save herself from facing herself, from looking down and seeing the great nothing that becomes us. When a distant door bangs, from Mary there comes no reaction.

MARY HAD BEEN only sixteen when she married Lance, himself only seventeen. The ceremony occurred in her mother's backyard beneath a rented arch laced with crepe paper and pink silk roses. She married him before a sparse, outdoor congregation of relatives, voyeuristic ward members, and high school baseball players. The bride and groom, respectively a sophomore and a senior, were nothing more than a pair of everyday kids who had become too familiar with one another, a clumsy pair of kids who confused exotic with erotic, and who believed, for a few brief minutes anyway, that passion might transport them away from the mundane. Of the two, she loved the most, loved with a zeal she felt could heal his wounds and make him visible in the same way that heat in the desert makes the air above the road visible, causing it to wave back and forth, all silvery, and be noticed. An illusion, perhaps; but to Mary, at sixteen, illusion and vision were more than bedfellows. They were creators of life.

George had raged at his son and then wept. Esther had closed the bedroom door and stared.

It had been Mary's mother who begrudgingly made these arrangements and Mary's mother who had footed the bill. But

it was Mary who paid and Mary who lived with the consequences. It was Mary's ears which rang with her mother's incessant whine: *worthless whore, worthless Mormons. Don't ruin your life. Don't marry him. No one has to know.* But of course everyone knew. They may not have known Mary's mother cursed when the girl stubbornly asked if she was coming out to the wedding, may not have realized the woman lay drunk on the sofa throughout, but still they knew. They saw. The fact was undeniable: Mary gave herself away.

Lance's father was not an educated man, but he had had sense and enough connections to land himself a career position in the public relations department of the Church during the early 1960s, about the time things were heating up. The pay, of course, was not substantial, especially for a man with six children, but it had been enough to allow him a mortgage on a five-bedroom rambler situated on a couple of acres outside the city limit. When Lance's wedding plans were announced, George cashed out the meager savings he had accumulated for his son's mission and bought him a wedding gift, a twenty-foot tin can with a bed, a kitchen, and an impossibly small bathroom. He parked it on the acreage behind the house.

His gift to his "new daughter" (he had swallowed when he said it) was a promise, a finger-in-Lance's-chest sort of promise, which he made to her as he looked Lance in the eye and proclaimed: "You're finishing school." Both he and Lance, both Mary and Esther, knew he didn't mean just high school. "You've got a family," her father-in-law said, straightening up while loosening his tie, and Mary's heart beat and beat and beat. "And you're going to live up to it." He handed Lance the key to the trailer, then walked away and around the few Relief Society sisters who remained, kindly picking up fallen napkins and emptying punch bowls into the garden. Mary's eyes followed him, looked beyond him, and saw in the distance, somewhere over the salt flats, tufted white clouds against the hazy sky. The year was 1977.

1977. . . Hair was still worn long. The bottoms of blue jeans still belled. The blacks would never hold the priesthood. The Berlin Wall was immovable, and Mary stood before Esther in a long dress of white lace she'd bought at Deseret Industries using her babysitting savings.

Everyone had gone home in a flash, everyone except Lance and his parents. All Mary had left to do was step inside her mother's house, change into her street clothes, and walk into a new life, become a new wife, and soon a mother—a grown-up. Esther offered to help her, but of course Mary said no. Of course she said no. She said no, and her lip quivered. Esther took her chin and tipped it up, looked into her pale eyes, and they locked eyes. But only for a moment, the tiniest, briefest of moments, before Mary slammed hers shut. Dear God in heaven, how could she look this woman in the eye, knowing Esther knew all that Mary had done, that she had willingly spread her legs to entice her son, that she had robbed him of his status in the Church, had embarrassed his family, hurt them in a way that no temple sealing ceremony a year down the road could completely heal?

It was all her fault. Lance had been good—the first assistant

to the bishop—he had been that good. She had never been anything, not even bad, and hardly ever present. In fact, more days than not, Mary bedded down wondering: Had the day really happened? Did she really exist? Or was her life someone else's dream?

So it was odd, the way Mary opened her eyes when Esther said, "Look at me, child," odd the way Mary responded with both arms to Esther's tug on her hand, an invitation into an embrace, and odder still the way Mary's eyes watered and simply couldn't stop. It was 1977. The world stood somewhere between war and peace. And Mary, this little Mary who had never taken up more space than was absolutely necessary, had seen, in that fragile, unexpected moment, the world turn in Esther's eyes.

FOOTSTEPS SOUND ALONG the tiled corridor, the heel-toe click of pumps, one pair. Mary inhales deeply, smells witch hazel. The shoes stop. Another door closes, and Mary exhales, the sound fading.

She turns from Esther to the suitcase on the stainless counter. It sits between a plastic filing box and a fist-sized clock which is plugged into a socket over the backsplash. She hates having become, by default, the presiding matriarch of a family that the winds of responsibility have scattered like sand. She tugs on the zipper and opens the lid. How she does not want to do this.

But when such things are expected, such things are done. She removes two transparent packages, each marked with the rose-colored symbol of Beehive Clothing. It is her duty to clothe Esther—to hide her most intimate self—in the sacred garments, in their silky white camisole and knee-length bottoms, to adorn her in a white gown and in the robes of the Holy Priesthood.

And so last evening, after the children had finally fallen asleep and as Lance wept alone in their bed, Mary had steam-ironed Esther's hand-embroidered apron; she had carefully heat-creased each fold of the robe; she ran the sash along the length of the ironing board and pressed it to a beautiful sheen. To the temple packet, she had added her own never-used knee-high white stockings. Then today, on the way to Village Gate, she had purchased at a department store a pair of white satin slippers to replace the worn pair Esther had used in the temple each week.

Mary lays one garment package beside the clock, presses the other against her chest. She turns back to her mother-in-law.

Four other women whom Mary trusts to know better than she how to dress the dead are on their way. But it is Esther who needs dressing, Esther who is dead. And so, with only twenty minutes between now and the appointed time of their arrival, it is Mary who steps forward.

Lance should not have asked this of her.

Her eyes traverse Esther, toe to crown. Where is the trembling hand? That forward tilt of her right shoulder?

When his father passed away, Lance had chosen not to par-

ticipate in clothing him in the temple garb. His great regret remains that he cast that one last dignity to strangers. So with the pronouncement of his mother's death still ringing in Mary's ears, Lance had put his foot down. "We owe my mother this dignity." He had repeated himself at the breakfast table. And in the den. And in the car. He had even told the funeral planner, his fingers pressing tightly into Mary's waist, "We owe it to her."

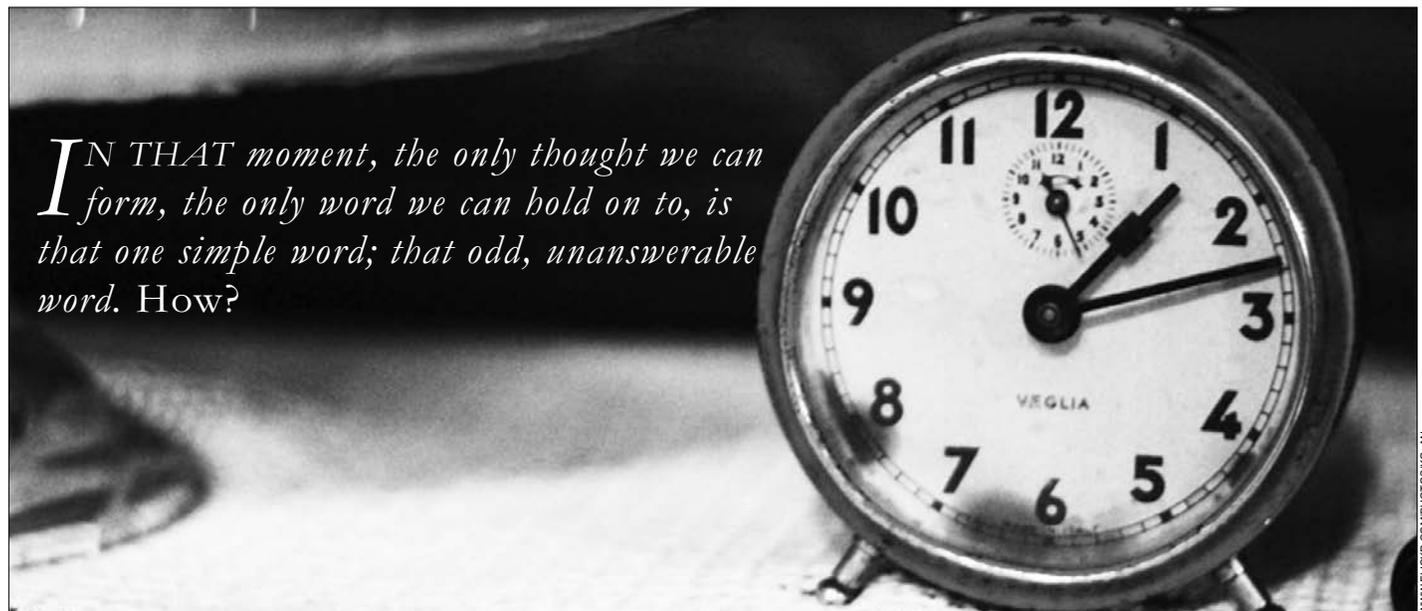
Inside each Mormon temple is a place which is like no other—a quiet, veiled-in space where initiate blessings are granted, woman to woman; a place where two sisters in faith, two strangers, stand before one another, look one another in the eye and touch one soul against the other, fingertip to flesh,

No. With every breaking sinew in Mary's body, she does not want to do this.

Using the nail of her index finger, Mary scratches at the cleft of Esther's chin until the old age spot shows through. Grandma's chocolate drop. The children will expect to see it.

She straightens, thinks, *How?* Meaning, *How can Lance expect this of me?*

The answer comes—though she neither expects it nor feels ready to receive it—as an impression in her mind, more an image than an actual memory, more like the touch of the Spirit than a process of the brain; an answer which allows Mary to see as though through a window back to a day when Esther had stood in the front of a chapel wearing a deep coral suit



*I*N THAT moment, the only thought we can form, the only word we can hold on to, is that one simple word; that odd, unanswerable word. How?

and repeat the words of a blessing and an anointing, the undefiled intimacy of which reflects the very depths of God's eternal love for woman, and through her, for all his children. And Mary has been there.

It is not that she is thinking of this place as she stands before Esther this final time, for the years between back-then and now have dimmed the flame of this memory. Rather, she is feeling the experience in much the same way an old woman sitting in a breeze beside the last blooms of summer feels her first kiss, feels it neither in her heart nor in her mind, but all along that tendril we call the soul. In truth, Mary is scarcely aware that her left hand is rising or that her fingers are curled like the petal of a tulip. She is barely aware that the garment package has slipped from her hand onto Esther's forearm, or that her hip presses against the stainless steel table.

When Mary's fingertips alight on Esther's right cheek, she draws back her hand—the absence of warmth, the lack of response—and takes in the whole of Esther's face. Touching again, she pushes against the subtle sag, a stubborn remainder of that grotesque twist which had marred Esther's face while she lay dying in the ICU. The skin feels cool; the cosmetics, waxy and moist.

with a daisy pinned to her lapel and had leaned over a coffin to bestow a final kiss. Not on George, for his coffin had been large, black, and stately.

Suddenly, as Mary envisions a long-ago Esther leaning over a small, white casket, the memory of a once-told story flows back, the tale of Lance's youngest sister, of how Lance had left her unattended in the pool at the house of one of his junior varsity teammates, and of how the angel at the top of the family's Christmas tree had come to be named Kristie: The story of how Lance had disappeared inside himself, where Mary had found him.

Suddenly it is clear: Lance expects because Esther did.

Mary dusts the white gray curls from Esther's forehead.

Sadly, what Mary most wants to know is unknowable. What is knowable, she thinks, as her finger gently twists one of Esther's locks, is that she is the "we" and has always been. Lance never knew it: He never really saw.

She places a hand on either side of Esther and gazes at the chocolate drop.

Lance had come to think of Mary as his partner, the same way he considered the two women in his domestic life a team. But Mary understands the truth: Lance may bring home his

paycheck, may sometimes even take her to a movie; but the only thing which leaves him feeling truly alive is sharing the blessing of modernization with strangers in foreign places. He knows his mother baked cookies for the kids and read them Beatrix Potter only because Mary told him, but she didn't mention—and he never noticed—that Esther's bedroom door always closed at eight and that the crumbs which were left were Mary's to wipe away.

Bending her elbows, she slowly lowers herself.

Not that Mary minded cleaning up. Hers was a heart grown in the soil of gratitude, in that relief which comes from having been put alone in the dark, in the dirt, and then feeling the rain of heaven fall.

There is water here, tears in Mary's eyes as she hovers over Esther's face, looking down on the features of the woman who had showered love upon her life even though she never deserved it. A tear lands on Esther's cheek. Good-bye is so hard, so Mary waits . . . holds out for the miracle, for that puff of spent air which surely will arise from Esther's mouth. The fallen tear slowly tracks down Esther's cheek, leaving a trail upon her made-up face. Esther deserves a miracle.

But nature, as it most often will, triumphs over miracle, and soon Mary must exhale, must let go, must feel and hear her own breath slowly escaping her lungs, unanswered. As her exhale sweeps across Esther's mouth and nose, Mary tenderly presses her lips against Esther's cold, unresponsive mouth. She pulls back, hovers inches over Esther's face, and her soul gathers up final intimacies like the sun draws moisture over a desert pond. Then she says it, whispers it really, whispers it like a call, implores, says, "Esther?"

And the response, of course the response remains only, the response remains nothing more than the quiet murmur of her own heart, of her own breath, of her own soul.

This—Mary straightens, wiping her eyes—is *the woman who taught me how*. With one hand, she clutches the steel rim of the table. *How to change a diaper. How to bake whole wheat bread*. The other hand comes to rest on the plastic package from Beehive Clothing which has come to rest in the crook of Esther's elbow. *How to survive*. She closes her fingers around the garment package, lifts her chin—*How to forgive*—and she scans the air over Esther's body. Though she strains to detect even the faintest aura or apparition or manifestation or sign, Mary understands that Esther is not here, that she can no longer exist in this mortal sphere except in Mary's mind, that she has gone home to those who've gone before.

Resigning herself, Mary lifts the package and tears through the plastic. Certainly the robes of the Holy Priesthood are one thing, a public thing in comparison to this. Mary holds the sacred garment against her bodice. This, Mary thinks, smoothing the silky fabric of the pant leg, is quite another. This will be Mary's gift.

THE TREAD OF Esther's foot had experienced the excess of seventy-five years of wear. The callouses, cracked and white, are all still here, on top of the little toe, on the underside of the

big one, and on the pad at the base of it. Oddly, pink veins, where there should be blue, traverse the summit of Esther's foot. Her toenails are clipped, filed, and painted pale pink. Mary pinches off the memory of Colleen's slumber party, of seven little girls with cotton between their toes and seven little bottles of glitter nail polish lined up atop an unabridged dictionary. Those cotton balls had been Esther's idea. She begins with Esther's right foot. Mary gathers up her courage as she gathers up one leg of the garment bottom, and then loops the fabric over Esther's toes, which point straight up, a position which seems unnatural considering her state of repose. Enough space exists between Esther's feet so that Mary's right hand slips between them nicely.

Next Mary wills the fingers of her left hand to temporarily release the fabric. She then slides the palm of her hand into the narrow space between the steel table and Esther's ankle. She lifts: The tendon gives, startling Mary, who had supposed *rigor mortis* to be a permanent state for the human dead. But after a closed-eye moment in which she regroups her determination and chastises herself for the uneasiness in her stomach, she continues, lifting the foot with one hand and sliding the garment past the heel with the other. The foot is not light, but the act is easier to perform than she anticipated. She takes heart, then repeats the motion on Esther's left side.

With Esther's feet properly through the legs of the sacred garment, Mary surveys the situation. Esther's legs are shaved and the skin loose, especially about her knees, but Mary realizes that the thighs beneath the hospital gown remain a formidable obstacle. She hooks both thumbs and each finger into opposite sides of Esther's right garment leg and pulls it to where the calf meets steel. Perhaps this gift Mary is offering is only a weak outward sign of what she feels for Esther—Mary does the same with the left leg—but at least it is discernible. With her task on the left side likewise completed, Mary hunches down and force-wiggles the garment between Esther's calf and the steel. Clothing Esther would be easier with someone there to lift the leg, but Mary will not have her gift diminished. In this world in which so little can be known, discernible becomes certainty enough. Therefore Mary continues alone, successfully tugging the hem of each garment leg to the appropriate spot three inches over each kneecap.

From here on, Mary's hands move in secret beneath the hospital gown, pulling, tugging, urging this to end. Thread at a seam pops quietly as Mary contends resolutely with Esther's bulk. In this effort to raise honor to Esther's most private and sacred self, Mary is discovering that the weight of death is a much heavier burden than she ever could have known.

THE TIME WILL collapse before Mary knows it, and the four women whom she invited to assist her in clothing Esther will arrive, respectfully clad, reverently hushed, shown in by the rail-thin woman who had touched Mary's shoulder. These five will find Mary sitting on the cold, tile floor, her legs extended, her head propped against one of the steel table legs. Her eyes will be wide, red; her cheeks damp,

and her hair out of place. The four women, her friends, will rush to her, cooing words of comfort, words like, “Mary, oh Mary, you know this is too hard,” “Mary, you shouldn’t have come alone,” and “Sweet Mary, how Esther must have loved you.”

The mortuary hostess will roll over a chair for Mary, and the sisters from the Church will insist she elevate herself and sit. So she will. The reward for her obedience will be the feel of their soft hands on her shoulders and hair. She will nod that she is all right. Of course she is; yes, all is well. The hostess will leave them. All is well.

“We should pray,” one of the sisters will suggest, and Mary will watch them bow their heads.

But she will not join them. Instead Mary will sit in the black chair on caster wheels and stare at this closing rendition of Esther, at her legs left splayed and her hair mussed, at the hospital gown smoothed as flat as Mary could manage. The prayer will end swiftly, and the women will turn their attention to the overnight bag and to the white gown and the robes of the Holy Priesthood which remain inside it, undisturbed. Mary, who will use her feet to glide the chair out of their way, will make herself look on their faces as they raise the hem of Esther’s hospital gown and gasp, as they pull the green, cotton fabric from her shoulder and whisper in worried glances, as they see for themselves how Mary’s good intentions measure against death.

“Oh, Mary,” one of them will murmur, “you can’t do this alone.”

Mary, whose chair will then rest near Esther’s feet, will flick her gaze from the face of this known stranger down to Esther’s strange face and remember the last time she had sat beside her. An IV had been dripping while monitors recorded what had seemed important. Though the medical staff had worked, though the priesthood had blessed, though Mary and Lance had prayed, Esther’s eyes had still rolled heavenward and fixed themselves eternally there. Only then had Lance put his arm around Mary and led her, weeping, from the ICU.

Today Mary will find no comfort except that which comes from wrapping her own arms about herself. She will cringe as her friends jointly push, pull, and shove the woman she loves into positions amenable to dressing a corpse. The ladies will be discreet, of course, will avert their eyes, will not see what only Mary sees, given her vantage point in the chair, when, during that first violent roll, Esther’s hospital gown defies decorum in favor of gravity, opening a glimpse of Esther’s faded pubic region. Instantly Mary will think of Lance, of where he came from, bloodied and wet; instantly she will feel in her groin a dark shadow, the black press, which marks the descent of a child; and then, almost as though the one hunted the other, an image of the battered Christ standing before those cursed souls who cast lots for his vesture. Each image, each worry, each fear will tear into her as that cruel and familiar bit has, for decades, torn into her confidence; will tear in and grind out the words, “*You can’t do this alone,*” will scrape her insides, “*You can’t do this alone,*” will remind her, “*You can’t do this . . .*”

But sometimes the voice that resounds in the heart is louder than the one that sounds in the mind. Sometimes words are

whispered from soul to soul, from sphere to sphere, and can be heard only when we hold still, sit still, keep the wheels beneath us from turning, and listen for what lives beyond the veil. Such whisperings, such transparent and flawless communication, will come to Mary today, will set a diamond wall around the part within her that is brilliant and divine; will be here soon, will promise her, will say, “*My beloved child, there is no other way.*”

And suddenly she will have enough of looking. She will not finish watching the women as they amend what she was unable to do correctly herself, as they tug the seat of Esther’s garment bottom over her nakedness. Nor will she endure witnessing them untangle the stranglehold that the garment camisole has upon Esther’s neck. Instead, Mary will close her eyes, seal them against the nightmare before her, preferring to imagine herself many miles away and many years ago, standing in a temple at the base of a mountain, a temple made golden by the lights which shine at night, wearing a slitted gown and feeling the press of fingers at her hip as a blessing and an anointing is bestowed. She will return in her mind to the small trailer, to the fold-away bed, and to the memory of that first set of tiny pink fingers kneading her breast while a matching tiny, pink mouth drinks in life. She will look up in both places, in both times, and beside her she will see her husband. Of course she will see Lance. But before him, before her, she will always see Esther. 



BABEL

In those days men sometimes saw angels frowning from arches of the upper rooms, and because I had made bread for them I went that morning before the workmen made their way. But I found only dust

and feathers (and strangely a grey sole fish and a shell and a weed that grows only in the salt of the sea). I sat long and prayed, but never did they come to me; there was only

a tapping of the ropes, and somewhere: locusts. As I descended, the howls of my city shook sparrows from the rafters, rung our tower like the hull of a broken bell. We do not go to that place any longer;

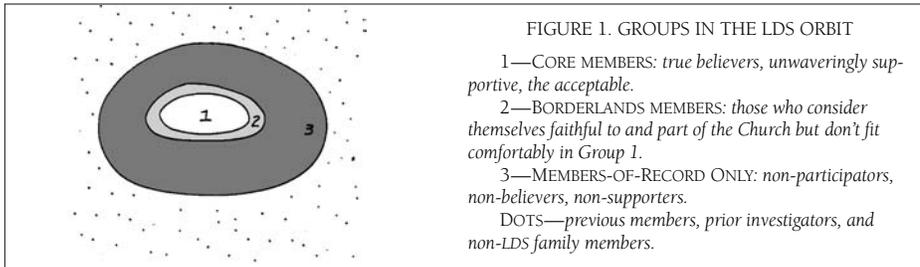
it tatters like some ghost of a dream: each moon more star, each day more sky: it crumbles like all we were. I am still learning all my lover’s words. This one, I am shown, is love. This one, I am told, is God.

—BRIAN LONG

BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

A BORDERLAND STORY AND SURVEY

By D. Jeff Burton



I RECENTLY EXCHANGED emails with a young woman, Kristen (name changed), struggling with typical Borderland family and activity issues.¹ At the end of this exchange of messages, she asks a couple of questions that she would like readers to respond to.

KRISTEN: I have been reading your Borderlands column online and have listened to past Sunstone symposium talks that you have given. I am writing first to thank you and Sunstone for what you do, and second, because I need some support with a crucial decision.

I'm 31 years old, grew up in Orem "on the track"—temple marriage and the whole nine yards. We have three children, ages seven, six, and four. My doubts began with the temple ceremony nine years ago, and try as I might, I have been unable to make peace with it and other issues. I tried putting it all "on the shelf," but about two years ago, the shelf broke. My husband and I went through the awful experience of learning many of the details about Church history and experienced the all-too-common "devastation." The good news is that we were united in our experiences and decisions. (I have heard the horror stories of fractured marriages over these issues.)

About a year and a half ago, we decided that we had to find out if there was another way that brought more peace of mind. So we stepped away from the LDS Church. I think "stepped away" is the best term, because nothing was done in anger or in a huff. We

did not have our names removed. In fact we love our ward members dearly. I miss the community. We were just honestly seeking peace in our spiritual lives. We have been attending a Methodist church near our home. The people there are also wonderful. And yet I feel like a magnet is pulling me back to my Mormon roots. I feel like I'm wading upstream constantly fighting this feeling I have that I'm supposed to go back to being a Mormon.

I know that you don't have hard numbers that you can share with me, but anecdotally speaking (I'm assuming that you have contact with many people in our predicament), do you find that more have found peace staying inside the Mormon Church than when they step outside it?

Also, is there a way to go back and be peaceful? Can I just politely excuse myself at those moments when my head feels like it will explode listening to a "TBM" (True Believing Mormon) go on and on? I've always felt guilty if I wasn't attending all my meetings. Can I go back and be a little more choosy? I am not asking that you make any decisions for me. I am asking for your insight and experience with this situation.

I feel the urge to attend my old ward this coming Sunday. So that is what I plan to do. We aren't going to bring the kids with us—it has been too much of a rollercoaster ride for them already. I need clarity before we make another drastic change. This has all been rough.

JEFF: Thanks for sharing your interesting

story and questions. I spoke with my wife Marlene, and we have some thoughts for your consideration:

- Your "stepping away" experience is not unusual except that most people just leave for good. Congratulations on sticking around long enough to explore what impact such major changes might have on you, your husband, your children, and others.

- You are fortunate to have a "soul mate" for a spouse. Many other couples grappling with these issues have had a lot of trouble because they didn't see eye to eye. We hope that, as you are doing now, anything you do in the future will continue to be coordinated with your husband such that both of you have negotiated an acceptable "deal."

- It has been possible for many people to find some way to stay connected and involved at the ward level (and beyond), but the ways and means vary from person to person.

- Motives for church activity vary widely, even among the "TBMs"—and these motives aren't often spoken except for the presenting reasons: "the Church is true," "we're commanded to be active," "I don't want my kids to be outsiders." If you could get into the hearts and minds of your fellow ward members, you would be surprised (and relieved!) to know that many of them are struggling with various issues not known to other ward members. But they stay active.

- Any honest effort on your part to be involved, helpful, and part of the main ward group is certainly acceptable.

- What never works in a healthy way is dishonesty—e.g., pretending to be a TBM, lying to get a temple recommend. What you decide to divulge (in being up-front and open about your "faith journey" with other ward members) is up to you, but "honesty is the best policy" in the long run. You'll likely find a few with whom you can share your feelings and beliefs, and vice versa. Once people trust that they can open up with you, you may find lots of people wanting to talk to you.

- As for your kids, they can be involved with you, and you can be honest with them about why you're all going—e.g., to be part of the group, to learn Christian principles, to get the benefits of Scouting, because it's our tradition, or because it makes me feel good.

- Maybe you should explore your ideas with the bishop or Relief Society president to see if they would support your being involved even if you're a Borderlander.

- Be tactful with members. Don't try to convince them "why the history is wrong," "why I don't believe." You can upset and

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alienate them, not to mention push them off the fine wire they themselves may be teetering on. Each person should be allowed his or her own journey.

- You can be a fine follower of Jesus (or just a good, loving, honest person) as a Mormon just as easily as not. The pressures, pro and con, are there in any setting, including at the ward.

KRISTEN: Jeff and Marlene, thank you for sharing your thoughts. I think the best part of this experience—and I suppose why it needed to happen—is the increased belief we have that God stays with his children no matter where they choose to worship. His presence has been in our home. He has not left us. We did, unfortunately, have the fear-mongering brand of Mormon warn us that we are currently under Satan's control because we aren't going to church. I know now (from experience) that that is not correct. I think the gift of this whole experience is that I am no longer ruled by fear—the fear that if I didn't take every last word of the Church literally, we would be doomed. It doesn't have that hold on me anymore.

Thank you for letting me share this with you. I guess my bottom-line questions for you are these: Has it been worth it for you? Do you regret your decision to make your way within Mormonism? What about our children? That is of primary concern at this time for me. If you were at the crossroads again, would you still choose the Mormon path? I'm at the crossroads.

I don't want to do anything rash (as I mentioned, our kids don't need any more hopping around). Tomorrow is Sunday, and my husband and I plan to attend sacrament meeting together and leave the kids home. We'll hopefully continue to navigate the waters together.

JEFF: Thanks for the detailed message. It is good that you and your husband are united on this. As for your questions, here are some thoughts

Has it been worth it for you? It has been for us. If I (Jeff) had pretended to be a TBM, I might have been a bishop. I was headed in that direction, having served as counselor in two bishoprics, on the high council, and as a branch president. And one could justify that secret dishonesty by saying, "I can do so much good as bishop." But the honesty path, while keeping me from leadership positions in the Church, has opened up many gratifying doors and experiences—e.g., my experiences on the SUNSTONE board, being able to talk to and get to know people like you,

and so forth. And I feel good about it. I can look anyone in the eye and say, "This is me."

What about our children? There is a definite benefit to having kids walk a narrow path like the one provided for active LDS kids. They don't get into trouble as easily as other kids do, but I also believe that in many cases, they don't excel or become as creative as they could be given a broader education and experience. I will expand on this most important question when I have a little more time and can get some additional information about your kids.

If you were at the crossroads again, would you still choose the Mormon path? I would still choose the Mormon path. But everyone is different, and I have known members who have chosen to leave, and they have done



I THINK THE best part of this experience is the increased belief we have that God stays with his children no matter where they choose to worship. His presence has been in our home. He has not left us.



very well. It has to be your personal decision. I think you need to listen to yourself very closely, give the issue some prayer, weigh the options, talk with your husband and significant others, and make "crossroads" decisions that work best for you and your family.

You can change your mind, whatever you decide to do, if you leave that door open—don't burn bridges, and don't destroy current relationships.

KRISTEN [writing shortly after attending church]: Thank you, once again, for the thoughtful response. We went to church on Sunday. I went to Relief Society, then went home during Sunday School. (I didn't want to shock my system too much!) I returned with my husband and went to sacrament meeting. It was the Primary program, and it was lovely. Nothing earth-shattering happened either positively or negatively, which is a good thing. At one point, my husband leaned over and said, "This all feels very familiar." I asked him if he meant that in a positive way, and he replied, "Not really." He had meant that it felt *long*, just like it used to!

I have no explanation for the peaceful feeling that I have right now. I don't have any more clarity about my "pet issues" (Church history, temple worship, priesthood, garments), but I feel like God is giving me a reprieve from wrangling with it. And it's so nice. God has answered my prayer, I suppose, in an unexpected way. My feeling is that we need to find a place within Mormonism if it's okay that I'm not a hardliner/true believer. The next hurdle is deciding what to do next Sunday!

The eyes of my second and third children lit up when they saw we'd gone back to church last Sunday. They want to go to Primary. They like it. Their friends are there. My oldest child (the one who seems the least interested in going back) will turn eight next

January. Can you see where I'm heading with this? The baptism question.

At this point, we feel that eight is young, and frankly, it's a lot to ask of a kid to commit to a spiritual path at such a young age. On the other hand, these days I view baptism as simply a ritual, a rite of passage where a child is welcomed into a spiritual community. So another question: Do we take a hardliner stance and make him wait while every other kid in his class is already baptized? Right now, our plan is to wait to see how he feels about it. He might not want to at this point.

I think my favorite part of your response is when you said you can look anyone in the eye and say, "This is me." As I look back on this experience—as confusing and heart-breaking as it has been for others, my parents in particular—it was necessary. This is *my* journey. This is *my* experience. And this is *ME!* <grin>

Since going to church last Sunday, I have already received, as you suggested I might, a call from a former visiting teacher who confided in me that for most of her married life, she has been on the brink of doing the same

thing that we did. I have a feeling her call will not be the last.

JEFF: The children/church issue is a knotty one. One family I know simply took their kids to church every week and let them go the full distance. These parents didn't tell their kids the way they truly felt or believed. One of the kids is now a "true believer" and openly worries about her parents "going to hell," not coming to temple weddings, and so forth. The other appears to be a skeptic. They're both good kids, however, now in high school. So that's one parental approach—staying in the closet. That approach is very common and can work, but it can also backfire.

All parents have to be judicious in what they let their kids know and when to tell them. We're all in the closet to some degree when it comes to our younger kids.

A family I have written about in a previous column took their kids to church with them but then talked with them afterward to "correct" or give a more complete explanation of any misinformation the kids happened to pick up—e.g., "other churches are evil" or "the Jews killed Christ." They also worked to expand their religious teachings so that the children fully realized that Jesus-based behaviors are more important, for example, than "attending church every Sunday." This family was open with their

kids, and things seem to be okay (their children are approaching high school and college age). At least one of the children has come to view the gospel just like his parents do.

Another approach is to let the kids decide for themselves all the way, every time. If they want to go to church, then help them, go with them, and support them in all ways. Same with those who want to do something else or who just don't want any religion.

With any approach, we must take responsibility for our kids' religious, moral, and ethical training and their behaviors and attitudes: "moral home schooling." Most Mormons let the Church be the only teacher of "religion" to their kids, which is an easy way out of an important responsibility. Sometimes that approach backfires, too. You get a few robots that way, as well.

Whatever course we choose, we must always be prepared for the unknown, the surprising, and the unexpected.

My basic thinking is this: If the Church has something important and useful to offer, then children and adults will willingly attend and participate. Sometimes I think the Church should be required to rise or fall on its own merits (within reason, of course). The attitude that we often encounter in local wards that "this is the true Church, so we'd better support it or else" just won't cut it in today's world.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to desig-

nate a single "solution" to this quandary of "children and the Church." Each child is unique and must be handled differently. The "one child/one program" approach seems best, but it does require extra effort on the part of parents.

KRISTEN [about a month later]: I wanted to check in and let you know the latest and greatest on our journey. We have been attending our ward for the last four weeks, and things are going well. The Relief Society has already plugged me in on the piano for the entertainment portion of the Christmas party. It's like we never left—which I say with much gratitude and appreciation for a wonderfully accepting and loving ward. My husband has decided that priesthood meeting and Sunday School are not his thing right now, so we all get dressed up, drive over together and drop the kids at Primary. I go to my meetings, and he goes back home and has his own quiet communion with God before returning for sacrament meeting. It's a good system so far.

The bishop has been over for a visit, inquiring about our status. We were always pretty open with him about our issues. At times, it felt like his questions were a bit loaded—as if he were hoping for a tearful confession about how "all else pales in comparison to the one true Church." He asked "So, what was your experience like at the other church you were attending?" I figured it was my time to make a plug for a more Christ-centered focus in LDS meetings, so that was the drum I beat in my response to him. It was all very friendly and done in love on both sides.

Our oldest turns eight soon. We've made it clear that baptism is not out of the question, but also not necessarily happening during his birth month. I still have mixed feelings about it. On one hand, I can view it simply as a way for my son to commit to a relationship with Jesus Christ, following his example of being baptized, and so forth. Yet, the emphasis from the Church can be weighted so heavily on becoming "a member of the one true Church" that it makes the issue more complicated in my mind. What to do?

All in all, I would say the transition back to having an association with the Church has been a good one. Perhaps you can ask SUNSTONE readers to comment on my main questions:

1. What is the best approach for children?
2. How should we deal with the baptism issue?



JONNY HAWKINS

Okay, readers. Please email me with some good advice for Kristen and her family.

A BORDERLANDER SURVEY

AT this year's Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, forty-five attendees responded to an informal survey I passed out during the session about Borderlander experiences. I didn't do a statistical analysis of the data, but I've summarized below some obvious trends and interesting outcomes. If you're interested in exploring the results in more depth, the raw data is available for you to explore on the Sunstone website at SUNSTONEONLINE.COM/EXTRAS.

- Two-thirds of those who responded considered themselves to be in the "Borderlands" as we have defined it for this column. Does this percentage hold true for SUNSTONE subscribers? I'm very interested in hearing your thoughts on this. My contact information is at the end of the column.

- The majority of "problems and issues" that led to respondents feeling they were in the Borderlands (or beyond) were related directly to the Church in contrast to more general religious issues such as their beliefs about Jesus or God. Three-quarters of respondents listed having issues with Joseph Smith's history or behavior; more than half with the Book of Mormon; and nearly half with Church leadership structure and practices. Struggles with the temple followed closely behind, and "authority" and "feminist" issues were also high on the list, with many more women than men listing these as problematic for them.

- A large percentage of respondents reported still being "in the closet" about their problems and issues. Only about half had told their spouses everything they were struggling with. When queried about whether they had shared their concerns with friends, children, or parents, the number of affirmative responses dropped off dramatically. Fewer than a tenth of respondents had shared anything with their bishop or fellow ward members. These responses suggest that the phenomenon of the "closet doubter," which I wrote about twenty-five years ago, is as real today as it was then.²

- For nearly half of the respondents, their entrance into the LDS Borderlands had begun in their mid-twenties to late thirties. Another thirty percent reported that it had been in their forties and fifties when the problems and issues surfaced in such a way that they could no longer be ignored.

- When asked about how they deal with being honest and open about their issues with the Church, more than half of the respondents selected, "I am trying to be open and honest," with the remainder struggling to find a way to be open within our current LDS culture and climate.

- Presented with a list of motives, more than 40 percent of respondents who claim Borderlander status checked that they have chosen to attend church and maintain activity because of family ties or because they "like it" and feel it is the "right thing to do." Another third reported their wanting to maintain "membership" in a familiar ward group as another reason for keeping them connected with the Church, even if in the Borderlands. Fewer, but still a significant number, reported that they've maintained ties because of "fear or hope," for reasons related to their job or profession, or to hopefully have influence in changing the Church.

- I was interested to learn that fewer than half of respondents had ever sought "help" in understanding or coping with their Borderlander status. Of those who said yes, 60 percent reported that they'd consulted spouses, parents, or other family members; nearly that many had sought help from friends; and just over a third had spoken about it with professional counselors. Only 15 percent had turned to LDS officials or leaders for guidance.

- Three-fourths of respondents were older than forty years of age, and nearly 40 percent were sixty or older. Only one respondent was under twenty-five. A substantial number of respondents reported strong church activity, holding temple recommends, and obeying the Word of Wisdom.

BOTH Kristen's experience and the survey results suggest that we still have a long way to go before Borderland members who are willing to be both honest and faithful can feel fully accepted in the Church. Maybe more of us sharing our journeys with family and leaders in a way similar to how Kristen and her husband have done will help speed the day when faith in all its forms are honored and welcomed within the LDS tent. ☺

*Please send me any of your
experiences from life
in the Borderlands.*

D. Jeff Burton, jeff@eburton.com

NOTES

1. In my first column (this is the twenty-seventh), I introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief and testimony, a different view of LDS history, some open questions about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria. See the figure. Copies of former columns are available on the *For Those Who Wonder* website, WWW.FORTHOSEWHOWONDER.COM.

2. Please see my book, *For Those Who Wonder*, for a copy of the essay which was originally published in the September-October 1982 SUNSTONE. A free download of this book is also available at WWW.FORTHOSEWHOWONDER.COM.



TABLE MANNERS

In India, Northerners pride themselves on eating with their fingertips, while Southerners enjoy their foods with the entire hand, to the wrist if need be.

No wonder JoAnn and I sit stunned at the table as our cousins scoop and slurp their lunch: dried fish in gingilly oil, poori soaked first

in sambas then cooled in cucumber rayta. I motion to Oomana, the servant girl: *do you have fork, spoon?* She laughs a little longer than necessary, then

disappears into the storage room. Each finger-lick makes us grimace but secretly I want to join them in slick-smacking this beautiful food.

The three-year old sees my fork and cries until he gets one, bangs and draws lines in his plate of sauce.

No one here ever wishes you happiness and now I know why: it is supposed to be of your own doing, your own relish, of your own open hands.

—AIMEE NEZHUKUMATATHIL

COMMENTARY

“HOW IS IT THAT YE COULD HAVE FALLEN!” A REQUIEM FOR THE LAMANITES

By Hugo Olaiz

*And my soul was rent with anguish, because
of the slain of my people, and I cried . . .*

How is it that ye could have fallen!

—MORMON 6:16, 19

I HAVE FOND MEMORIES OF BEING A Lamanite. As a Mormon boy growing up in Argentina, I often sang a Primary song that went like this:

*Soy un joven lamanita
de humilde situación,
pero llevo agradecido,
en el alma una canción.¹*

[I am a young Lamanite
of humble birth,
but I gratefully carry
a song in my heart.]

Social stereotypes aside, the song was intended to tell the members in Latin America that they are a special people with a special racial identity, a once prevalent message from which Church leaders are now retreating. In past years, discourse about “Lamanites” played a key role in the missionary program in Latin America, used both as a proselytizing strategy and as an explanation for missionary success.

Time after time, early Church leaders were first fascinated, then disenchanted, by the idea of taking the gospel to the Lamanites in Latin America. When Parley P. Pratt attempted to open a mission in Chile in 1851, he wrote enthusiastically that the Spanish language “is wonderfully adapted to the simplicity of the Lamanites,”² but Pratt failed to learn how to speak it, and more importantly, he failed to make a single convert. In

December 1925, Apostle J. Melvin Ballard, sent to Buenos Aires to dedicate South America for the preaching of the gospel, prayed for “the fulfillment of promises contained in the Book of Mormon to the Indians of this land, who are descendants of Lehi, millions of whom reside in this country,”³ but he saw the Church established only among a small group of German immigrants.⁴ The first mission president of South America, a German named Reinhold Stooft, was so enthusiastic about preaching to the Lamanites that in 1927 he made a long trip to preach to an impoverished tribe who lived near the border with Paraguay, only to discover that he couldn’t communicate with them.⁵

Those first missionaries failed to convert “real” Lamanites, but they succeeded in turning German, Italian, and Spanish immigrants into, if not Lamanites, at least Mormons who *believed* in the Lamanites. The first LDS convert in my hometown of La Plata, Argentina, discovered the Church in January 1937 when he picked a flyer off the floor that read, “KNOW THE ANCIENT AMERICAN CIVILIZATION.”⁶ When he contacted the missionaries, he was shown slides of Central and South American ruins. When the Saints began to grow strong in Mexico, Chile, and other Latin American countries, Church leaders concluded that, just as the Doctrine and Covenants predicted, the Lamanites were “blossom[ing] like the rose” (D&C 49:24).

I HAVE FOND MEMORIES OF BEING A Lamanite even though, as a young teenager, I discovered some of the confusion and stereotypes Church leaders held in regards to issues of race. One day, while

going through old family papers, I found a letter that President George Albert Smith had sent to my grandfather. I felt proud that my grandfather had received such a letter, yet I was confused that in it President Smith called the Book of Mormon “the history of *your* ancestors.” From the extensive genealogical work done in my family, I knew that this grandfather was 100 percent European. The incident didn’t make me question my grandfather’s genealogy, but it did raise questions for me about the misconceptions that color a prophet’s vision.

I HAVE FOND MEMORIES OF BEING A Lamanite even though I saw racism at work in the Church. White Mormons in Latin America (such as my grandfather) might take umbrage when Church leaders called them “Lamanites,” but some of those same Mormons didn’t mind taking advantage of that perceived status. A blond, green-eyed Argentine girl I met at BYU confessed to me that she was the recipient of a so-called “Lamanite scholarship.” She told me that every time she went to the office to reapply for the scholarship, she styled her blond hair into an Indian braid. “Just in case,” she said.

I HAVE FOND MEMORIES OF BEING A Lamanite, even if only one great-great-grandmother of mine was ever confirmed to be half Indian. For its first twenty years, the LDS Church in my hometown consisted mainly of two families: my dad’s, whose siblings and cousins were light-skinned college students and merchants, and my mom’s, whose relatives were dark-skinned workers and laborers. When my parents married in 1957, Church members quipped that Nephites and Lamanites had finally become one. Perhaps—but it was my dad, his brother, and his male cousins who became stake presidents, mission presidents, and regional representatives, while my mom’s relatives became home teachers, branch secretaries, and Sunday School superintendents.

In fact, because I am light-skinned, I am the best kind of Lamanite there is. Dark-skinned Lamanites are perceived by many as dangerous, prone to take too seriously the notion that they are literal descendants of Israel. Sometimes they end up rebelling against their leaders. For instance, in 1936, dark-skinned members of the Church in Mexico, led by *mestizo* Mexican nationalist and LDS convert Margarito Bautista, rose against their Anglo leaders. Among other things, they demanded a Mexican mission president “*de raza y sangre*” (of our race and



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MY LIGHT-skinned dad, his brother, and his male cousins became stake presidents, mission presidents, and regional representatives, while my dark-skinned mom's relatives became home teachers, branch secretaries, and Sunday School superintendents.

blood), and their rebellion split the Church in two for over a decade.⁷ In an effort to counter the “errors” of newly empowered Lamanites, the president of the Mexican Mission, Arwell L. Pierce, toured the mission with his special assistant, Harold Brown, a bilingual Anglo missionary.⁸ In his sermons, Brown would often quote Brigham Young's statement that the children of Ephraim are the Anglo-Saxon race, “bearing the spirit of rule and dictation, [going] forth from conquering to conquer.”⁹ Brown also quoted Wilford Woodruff's prophecy that the chiefs of the Lamanites “will be filled with the power of God and receive the Gospel, and they will go forth and build the new Jerusalem, and we [Ephraim] shall help them.”¹⁰ Brown made sure the phrase “we shall help them” was printed in bold type when his sermon was published in the Spanish-language magazine *Liahona*.¹¹ That phrase was key because it explained why dark-skinned Lamanites should welcome the “help”—that is, the leadership—of light-skinned Ephraimites.

I HAVE fond memories of being a Lamanite. Still, I am glad that LDS leaders changed the introduction to the Book of Mormon to read that the Lamanites are “among” the ancestors (no longer the “principal” ancestors) of the American Indians (see story this issue, page 74). I am, however, disappointed by *when* and *how* they made and announced the change.

The change came only after years of resistance to mounting DNA evidence, including threats of excommunication to those who called attention to the mismatch between LDS claims that Amerindian peoples were of Middle Eastern ancestry and the overwhelming genetic data showing their descent from Asian peoples.¹² Acting with the implicit blessing of Church leaders, LDS apologists at FARMS and FAIR decided that their

best defense was to attack, and they spent an inordinate amount of time, effort, and resources trying to defuse the scientific evidence against “Lamanite” DNA. Much of this work took the form of attacking those who pressed the issue.¹³



church is printing.”¹⁴ This method of announcement reminds me of the way the First Presidency ended Church-sanctioned polygamy—not by communicating directly with the members who had sacrificed so much for the doctrine and practice, but by sending a telegram to Washington.¹⁵

I HAVE fond memories of being a Lamanite, even though the LDS Church now seems to be moving towards the



JOSEPH SMITH PREACHING TO THE INDIANS BY WILLIAM ARMITAGE, CIRCA 1830-1838

MORMON CONVERTS with Amerindian ancestry may have “owned” the Lamanite identity; but they never really owned the discourse around what it means to be a Lamanite, and it is not clear that they now have the power to preserve that identity.



I am also disappointed that instead of announcing the change to Church members, LDS leaders chose a back-alley way to implement it: instructing a non-Mormon publishing house working on a new edition of the Book of Mormon to make the desired revision to the book's introduction. The media learned of the change only through Doubleday senior editor Andrew Corbin, who is quoted in the *Salt Lake Tribune* as saying that he was told the new wording was “in accordance with future editions the

notion that the only good Lamanite is a dead Lamanite—one who lived centuries ago in an undisclosed location. The Church no longer seems to have much use for living Lamanites. Despite the emergence of independent forums such as *Dialogue* and *SUNSTONE*, the latest debates about Lamanite identity have continued to be advanced, almost exclusively, by white Mormons.¹⁶ Mormon converts with Amerindian ancestry may have “owned” the Lamanite identity; but they never really

owned the discourse around what it means to be a Lamanite, and it is not clear that they now have the power to preserve that identity. Sadly, some of those who did develop “Lamanite” discourse, such as Margarito Bautista or Navajo General Authority George P. Lee, became so fixated about the concept of Lamanite identity that they were perceived as a threat and eventually excommunicated from the Church.

In the discussions that will inevitably surround this shift from “principal” to “among,” I fear that most white Latter-day Saints will fail to ask themselves the most important question: What does this change mean for millions of Latter-day Saints who have been told—and many of whom have treasured the knowledge—that they are the children of Lehi? Imagine how other Saints would react if one day the prophet told them to black out the reference to tribal lineage in their patriarchal blessings. That wouldn’t be the same thing, you might say. That is true, I might cynically reply: the same thing would be for the prophet to tell Mr. Andrew Corbin of Doubleday to announce the blackout decree in his stead.

I HAVE fond memories of being a Lamanite, yet I have learned not to trust Church leaders to tell me who I am—or who I am not. According to an old dictum, if you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The current LDS strategy in connection with Lamanite discourse seems to be the exact opposite: If we stop telling truths we once held dear, our members will hopefully come to forget them.¹⁷

NOTES

1. “El Joven Lamanita,” *Los Niños Cantan* (Salt Lake City: Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Ultimos Dias, 1960), no. 27.
2. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt* (New York: Russell Brothers, 1874), 434.
3. Frederick G. & Frederick S. Williams, *From Acorn to Oak Tree: A Personal History of the Establishment and First Quarter Century Development of the South American Missions* (Fullerton, California: Et Cetera Graphics, 1987), 24.
4. *Ibid.*, 17–31.
5. *Ibid.*, 46–48.
6. “Rodolfo Saltalamacchia: Entrevista realizada por Hugo Olaiz el 22 de diciembre de 1993 en Don Bosco,” WWW.BELLOTA.ORG/RODOLFO.HTM (accessed 9 Nov. 2007).
7. F. LaMond Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico: The Dynamics of Faith and Culture* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1987), 122–68.
8. *Ibid.*, 152–53, 165 n.60.
9. *Journal of Discourses*, 10:188.
10. *Ibid.*, 15: 281–82.
11. Harold Brown, “Ephraim Esparcido entre los Gentiles,” *Liahona*, November 1947, 451.
12. “Several LDS Authors ‘Called In’ to Defend Challenging Writings,” *SUNSTONE*, December 2002, 73–74.
13. On 11 November 2003, the LDS Church released a statement defending the historicity of the Book of Mormon and referring media to four articles published in the FARMS publication, *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 1 (2003). On 16 February 2006, the LDS Public Affairs division reissued the statement verbatim and added new resources for the media, including David M. Stewart’s “DNA and the Book of Mormon,” available on the FAIR website (WWW.FAIRLDS.ORG).

One of those most singled out for personal attack was Thomas Murphy, whose essay, “Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics,” in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, eds. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002) was the first to press the issue. See, for

instance, Allen Wyatt, “Motivation, Behavior, and Dissension,” WWW.FAIRLDS.ORG/PUBS/MURPHY.PDF (accessed 10 November 2007). For more background on the controversy around “Lamanite” DNA, see Brent Lee Metcalfe, “Reinventing Lamanite Identity,” *SUNSTONE*, March 2004, 20–25, and Trent D. Stephens, “Now What?” *SUNSTONE*, March 2004, 26–29.

14. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Single Word Change in Book of Mormon Speaks Volumes,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 8 November 2007.

15. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 212.

16. One exception is Arturo de Hoyos, “I Am a Lamanite,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19:3 (Fall 1986):15–17.

17. Speaking about evolving LDS views of race, Armand L. Mauss writes that the Church prefers to change through forgetfulness instead of through explicit disavowal because “if something about the past is embarrassing, then recalling it and dwelling on it, even if only to repudiate it, merely confuses the matter.” Mauss believes this mode of operation is associated with the LDS-cherished myth of history as time-filtered, a myth that “is particularly useful in an organization with a constant influx of new members or converts, who are unaware of very much in the organization’s past.” See Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 262–64.



WEST

At the edge of a terminal moraine they made their camp, one family in fading light. The young daughter carried one thin book of her own, full of memories of another place. Her father recited blueprints of a house he’d built so far behind them, and the cultivated fields. Their mother hummed a song of honeybees. And still they hungered for a wilderness.

They came upon a man who’d turned around on God’s good counsel. He said he could walk backwards to a land of parasols, where men could die in the bed they were born in. But still they saw horses in the storm-clouds heaped against mountains on the west horizon. No matter how the cart creaked, and the mule sang of sweet timothy pasture, there was no other way to go.

—TAYLOR GRAHAM



This IS the late edition!

UPDATE

NEW CHURCH LEADERS ANNOUNCED



PRESIDENT HENRY B. EYRING



ELDER QUENTIN L. COOK

A NEW MEMBER OF THE FIRST PRESIDENCY AND A NEW apostle were announced during the opening session of the October 2007 General Conference. Elder Henry B. Eyring was called as second counselor in the First Presidency. Elder Quentin L. Cook, a Seventy, was called as an apostle. The vacancy in the First Presidency was created by the recent passing of President James E. Faust, and the calling of Elder Eyring to fill that position left the vacancy in the Quorum of the Twelve that Elder Cook filled.

Elder Eyring, 74, has a background in business administration. Before working full-time for the Church, he worked at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. In 1972, he was appointed president of Ricks College (now BYU-Idaho). Later he became the Church's Commissioner of Education. In 1985, he was called as a counselor in the Presiding Bishopric and in 1992 became a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy. He was ordained an apostle in April 1995, the first apostle appointed during Gordon B. Hinckley's tenure as Church president.

Elder Cook, 67, is a former managing partner of a San Francisco Bay area law firm and president and CEO of a California healthcare system. He is a former stake president, regional representative, and area authority. A native of Logan, Utah, he was appointed to the Second Quorum of the Seventy in 1996 and to the First Quorum of the Seventy in 1998. At the time of his call to the Quorum of the Twelve, he was serving as the executive director of the LDS Missionary Department.

Following their new appointments, Elders Eyring and Cook held a press conference in the lobby of the Church Administration Building. One reporter asked Elder Eyring, who had been serving on the Public Affairs Committee, if a recent announcement that apostles would be meeting with the editorial boards of major newspapers around the country signaled an increased availability to the media.

"We went from the Public Affairs Committee [to the First Presidency]," Eyring explained, "and [asked], 'would

this be a good thing to do, to have a little bit more opportunity for a give-and-take in a world where the media is going that way. The First Presidency was nice enough to suggest that we could begin to do that."

"They were careful," Eyring added. "The Prophet is the Prophet—he is the voice of the Church—and so for the First Presidency to show that kind of confidence was a marvelous indication of trust. I would think that you will see more openness, [but] not complete willingness to turn loose all the senior officers of the Church to speak on every issue, because there is a voice, and I believe that the Prophet of God is the Prophet of God."

During the event, Elder Eyring politely declined to answer a question about homosexuality and same-sex marriage. "The Church has already issued statements on those [topics]," he said, "and I think I cannot do better than to refer you to those [statements]."

Elder Eyring, who choked up several times during the press conference, recounted the moment when he was called to the First Presidency. He said President Hinckley extended the calling to him in a phone call he took "outside" (presumably on a cell phone). He added that the phone call took place "late Thursday, at 4:30 or 5:00 P.M."

Answering the same question about the circumstances of his call, Elder Cook said it took place in President Hinckley's office and was "wonderful, sweet, and short." He mentioned that because he has had fewer personal experiences with the Prophet than President Eyring has, if his call to the Twelve had come over the phone, he would likely have thought it was someone playing a prank.



JEFFREY D. ALLRED, DESERET MORNING NEWS

In a moment that delighted conference-goers, following his announcement of Henry B. Eyring's call to the First Presidency, President Hinckley used his cane to "knight" his newest counselor.

CONFERENCE FEATURES DEFENSES OF MORMON CHRISTIANITY AND TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

IN THE 177TH SEMI-ANNUAL GENERAL CONFERENCE, Church leaders launched a strong defense of Mormonism's core beliefs, including LDS teachings about the Godhead and the reality of the Apostasy and the Restoration. The message came at a time of unprecedented media interest in the LDS Church and scrutiny of its doctrines.

President Hinckley, who was strong enough to conduct the sustaining of Church officers and to speak at two conference sessions, marveled at the progress of the Church and testified about Joseph Smith's First Vision, the Restoration, and the Book of Mormon. While defending LDS beliefs, he specifically criticized the theology of traditional Christian creeds.

"I have read [the creeds] a number of times," said the 97-year-old leader. "I cannot understand them. I think others cannot understand them. I am sure that the Lord also knew that many would not understand them. And so in 1820, in that incomparable vision, the Father and the Son appeared to the boy Joseph."

In a message that dovetailed with President Hinckley's, Apostle Jeffrey R. Holland delivered a passionate defense of Mormon theology, also criticizing the theology of the Trinity inherited from the Council of Nicea. "Such a formulation for divinity is truly incomprehensible," said Holland.

"It is not our purpose to demean any person's belief nor the doctrine of any religion," Holland clarified. "We extend to all the same respect for their doctrine that we are asking for ours. (That, too, is an article of our faith.) But if one says we are not Christians because we do not hold a fourth- or fifth-century view of the Godhead, then what of those first Christian Saints, many of whom were eyewitnesses of the living Christ, who did not hold such a view either?"

Elder M. Russell Ballard, who serves in the Public Affairs Committee, discussed both similarities and differences between LDS doctrines and those of mainstream Christianity, but his emphasis was on presenting Latter-day Saints as "committed Christians with strong traditional values."

"Many Christians do not understand that we have much common ground with them," Ballard noted. "We commemorate Christ's atoning sacrifice in our Sunday worship services, similar to taking communion in other churches. We accept as fellow Christians all who believe Jesus Christ to be the Son of God and the Savior of all mankind." Whenever they share the gospel with others, Elder Ballard urged members to focus on four main areas: "Facts, faith, families, and fruits of the restored gospel."

Elder Ballard also added that Latter-day Saints "believe that Jesus Christ is our personal Savior."

In their regular gathering in which they discuss the most recent conferences, members of the Mormon Alliance noted how Ballard's language is similar to that being used by presidential candidate Mitt Romney who, in seeking the Republican nomination, has been actively working to align himself as much as

he can with mainstream evangelical Christian faith. "I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior," Romney reportedly told a group of conservative Christians (*Newsweek*, 8 October 2007, 35).

The use of the expression "personal Savior" is uncommon among Latter-day Saints. In recent years, Elder Bruce R. McConkie and several other Church leaders and influential LDS teachers have criticized the belief that someone will be "saved" by merely "accept[ing] Jesus Christ as [their] personal Savior." However, other Church leaders such as Elders Richard B. Wirthlin and John H. Groberg have more recently taken to describing Jesus Christ as "our personal Savior," and Elder Bruce C. Hafen has talked in positive terms about "making Jesus Christ our personal Savior."

Mormon Women Respond to Controversial Remarks



SISTER JULIE B. BECK

A CONFERENCE TALK THAT generated a measure of controversy was given by Julie B. Beck, General President of the Relief Society. In her remarks, Sister Beck delivered a vigorous defense of traditional feminine roles. Within minutes of the close of her address, hundreds of posts filled LDS blogs, initiating a lively debate that went on for days and spilled into Utah-based radio

talk shows. The controversy ultimately culminated in the creation of a website dedicated to rebutting Beck's speech.

Inspired by the story of Helaman's 2,000 young Lamanite soldiers, whose protection in battle the Book of Mormon prophet attributed to the faith instilled in them by their mothers, Sister Beck praised contemporary LDS mothers who instill similar faith. Playing off language in Alma 56:48, in which the stripling warriors tell Helaman that their mothers "knew" that if the young men did not doubt, "God would deliver them," Beck used the phrase "Mothers Who Know" to introduce seven characteristics shared by similarly faithful mothers of today.

Citing President Ezra Taft Benson's 1987 speech, "To the Mothers of Zion," Beck declared that "mothers who know" do not delay or limit childbearing. In a section entitled "Mothers Who Know Honor Sacred Ordinances and Covenants," Beck cited as an ideal the mothers she has encountered in "some of the poorest places on earth" who nevertheless "bring daughters [to church] in clean and ironed dresses with hair brushed to perfection" and whose "sons wear white shirts and ties and have missionary haircuts." In another section, she equated women's "nurturing" with "homemaking," which "includes cooking, washing clothes and dishes, and keeping an orderly home." She continued, "Home is where women have the most power and influence; therefore, Latter-day Saint women should be the best homemakers in the world."



JEANNETTE ATWOOD

"Mothers who know" make sure their husbands know, too.

Five weeks after Beck's address, a group of LDS women launched a website, WHATWOMENKNOW.ORG, in which they stated that "several ideas within the body of President Beck's talk conflict with our inspiration and experience." In the document, the women state that "fathers as well as mothers, men as well as women, are called to nurture" and that "individuals and relationships flourish when we are able to share not only our strengths but also our mutual imperfections and needs." The women responded to Beck's references to "clean and ironed dresses" and "hair brushed to perfection" by saying that "cleanliness depends upon access to resources, and has more to do with priorities than purity of heart."

The document also objects to Beck's lifting up of a story about military experiences. "We are filled with unutterable sadness by the Book of Mormon story of more than 2,000 young soldiers whose mothers teach them that faith in God will preserve them in battles in which they kill other mothers' children," the website reads. "This is not a success story. It is a story of the failure of human relationships and the horrors of war. In a world that has grown increasingly violent, we believe that one of the most important passages in LDS scripture is D&C 98:16: 'Therefore, renounce war and proclaim peace...'"

The online "Women Who Know" document has so far been signed by some 600 women and 150 men. Lisa Butterworth, one of the women who signed the document, told the *Salt Lake Tribune* that she wants to sustain Sister Beck. "I don't want to bash her, but there is no way that I can believe that 'keeping our homes as tidy as the temple' or 'being the best homemakers in the world' are the vital lessons that will bring myself and my family closer to the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Mormon Alliance trustee Lavina Fielding Anderson believes that Beck's emphasis on traditional gender roles represents an attempt to return to the early 1980s—a time before the more progressive tenure of General Relief Society President Elaine L. Jack. "The problem is not what Julie Beck said as much as

what she left out," Anderson told SUNSTONE. "Because of what she left out, her speech suggests not only that motherhood is women's most important responsibility, but also that is *only* a woman's responsibility and women's *only* responsibility."

"Not mentioning the words *husband* or *father* is a pretty serious omission, considering how conception occurs," Anderson added. "Further, the talk's assumption is that women have the financial option of *choosing* to be full-time homemakers. It contained no recognition that in many cases that's just not true."

Sister Beck has declined to respond to the controversy. In mid-December, a group of women supporting the principles in Beck's remarks circulated an invitation to send expressions of support that can counter "websites and blogs dedicated to tearing [Beck] apart as well as her words of guidance and wisdom."

"It seems that sometimes the liberal voices are the only ones that make themselves heard," complains an 18 December entry on BLOGGEROFJARED.COM.

"Wouldn't it be great if we could get 2000 women to send their support to Sister Beck this Christmastime? Like the 2000 mothers of the Stripling Warriors—we could stand united and strong and let Sister Beck know [that] we stand beside her!"

The entry includes instructions on how to send an email to Beck. "Once we reach 2000 emails—from women or men—I'll send Sister Beck the password to the email account so she can see all those who support her and read the messages if she'd like."

Elder Wirthlin Wobbles During Sermon



LDS.ORG

Joseph B. Wirthlin is braced by fellow apostle Russell M. Nelson after nearly falling from a case of locked knees.

apostle Russell M. Nelson. Elder Nelson, a medical doctor, stood behind Wirthlin, gently bracing him by the shoulders and back while Wirthlin finished his speech.

"He's 90 years old and locked his knees from standing in one place too long," his son Joseph B. Wirthlin Jr. told the *Salt Lake Tribune*. "It's like if you hold a weight up in the air, after so long your arms start shaking because you don't have enough strength to continue."

LDS spokesperson Scott Trotter reported that Wirthlin didn't miss any of the conference's five sessions and "continues in his regular day-to-day church assignments."

CHURCH REVISES BOOK OF MORMON INTRODUCTION ABOUT LAMANITES

THE LDS CHURCH HAS CHANGED A STATEMENT ABOUT Lamanite ancestry in the introduction to the Book of Mormon. The new wording seems designed to accommodate archeological and genetic evidence that strongly disqualifies the introduction's previous claim that "the Lamanites . . . are the *principal* ancestors of the American Indians." The revised introduction says that "the Lamanites . . . are *among* the ancestors of the American Indians."

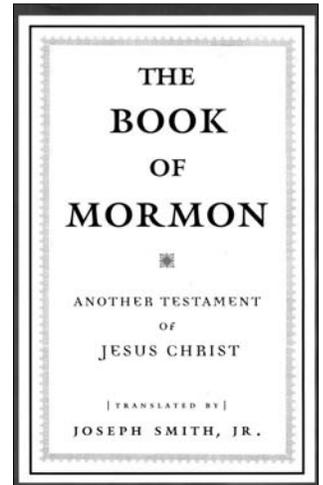
The news of the change broke in a very low-key manner. Instead of a Church announcement of the new language, word of the change came through Doubleday senior editor Andrew Corbin when he told the *Deseret Morning News* that the Church had requested Doubleday use the revised language for the new edition of the Book of Mormon it's planning. Doubleday produced its first Book of Mormon in 2004.

In a statement following the release of the story, Church spokesman Mark Tuttle claimed that the change was made to "[take] into account details of Book of Mormon demography which are not known" and said that the new wording will also be included in future Church-produced editions of the Book of Mormon. He added that "the current introduction page was not part of the original text translated by Joseph Smith, Jr."

It is widely believed that the previous introduction, first published in 1981, was written by Elder Bruce R. McConkie under assignment from the First Presidency. In his classic reference work *Mormon Doctrine*, McConkie writes that many Nephite groups "mingled themselves with the Lamanites, the

resulting peoples being known to the world as the American Indians" (*Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966], 529).

The now defunct introduction has been the center of controversy since 2002, when Mormon anthropologist Thomas Murphy wrote an article arguing that "new genetic evidence adds to an already impressive amount of linguistic, archaeological, cultural, biological, anatomical, and psychoanalytic data that challenge the traditional Book of Mormon view," including "the belief that Lamanites described in the text are the 'principal ancestors of the American Indians'" ("Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics," in Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002], 61). Scholars at the LDS apologetic group FARMS (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies) criticized Murphy's essay, and Murphy's stake president summoned him to a disciplinary council. Following public protests by Latter-day Saints who felt such an action was unfair, that council was postponed indefinitely.



The introduction in the next Doubleday edition of the Book of Mormon will be the first to contain new wording about Lamanite ancestry



—“So, would you say that FARMS has become the principal influence on the Church’s teachings about the Book of Mormon?”

—“Oh, no. We’re merely ‘among’ them.”

An article in the *Salt Lake Tribune* suggests that a SUNSTONE author may have played a key role in the process that triggered the new change in wording. About the same time that LDS biologist Trent D. Stephens wrote an article about DNA and the Book of Mormon for the March 2004 issue of SUNSTONE, Stephens told his stake president that Book of Mormon critics were pointing at the wording of the introduction as evidence against the book. Stephens’s stake president took the issue to area authorities, who took it to the LDS Missionary Committee.

“The new wording eliminates the collision between the traditional understanding that the Lamanites inhabited the whole hemisphere and the FARMS theory that, if any, the Lamanites are the Maya,” says Armand Mauss, who has written extensively about changing Mormon conceptions of race and lineage. “The new wording opens up the question of who the Lamanites are and where they are.”

Mauss believes this is one example of how the Church is moving away from a racist framework that no longer facilitates the growth of a worldwide Church. “While never explicitly repudiated, the traditional racist teachings simply fell into disuse,” Mauss has written. “In the final decades of the twentieth century, early Mormon universalism once again dominated official discourse, with no more references to different lineages and their special blessings or curses” (*All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* [Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003]: 276).

Church Revises “Mormon” in Chinese

IN A RELATED STORY THAT SUGGESTS LDS LEADERS have been evaluating other Book of Mormon issues as well, the Church announced it has changed the Chinese characters used in translating the word “Mormon.” In order to avoid negative connotations, new Chinese-language editions of the Book of Mormon now use characters that are roughly pronounced as “Moermen” instead of ones more typically pronounced “Momen.” According to a *BYU NewsNet* story, the pronunciation of the original characters sounded similar to an expression that means “evil door.” The change, which has been in the works for more than two years, was officially announced in September when the Church made available a new triple combination in Traditional Chinese.

MORMON STUDIES PRAISED, ADVANCED

A STATEMENT POSTED IN THE NEWSROOM SECTION OF the LDS.ORG website praises the creation of new programs in Mormon studies at Claremont Graduate University and Utah State University for “demonstrating the legitimacy of Mormonism as a serious subject of academic investigation” The statement also lists recent symposia in Washington D.C., Sydney, and Taiwan, as well as the ongoing Joseph Smith Papers project, as developments that “illustrate that Mormonism has a depth and breadth of substance that can hold up under academic scrutiny.”

According to the 2 November statement, new interest in Mormon studies “is a welcome development for two reasons—the Church encourages a deeper and broader examination of its theology, history and culture on an intellectual level, and this is a wonderful opportunity to expand open dialogue and conversation between the Latter-day Saints and various scholarly and religious communities.”

The statement ends with a quotation from President Gordon B. Hinckley: “This Church came about as a result of intellectual curiosity. We believe in education, and we spend a substantial part of our budget on the education of our young people. We expect them to think. We expect them to investigate. We expect them to use their minds and dig deeply for knowledge in all fields. If we have a motto, it is this, ‘The glory of God is intelligence.’”

Bushman Appointed to Claremont Program



MERIDIANMAGAZINE.COM

RICHARD L. BUSHMAN

IN RELATED NEWS, EMERITUS Columbia University historian Richard L. Bushman has been appointed to head up the new Mormon studies program at Claremont Graduate University. The Council for the Study of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints/Mormon Studies, a group of community and academic leaders whose mission is to “promote the development of a graduate program in Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate

University’s School of Religion that reflects both academic rigor and scholarly integrity while maintaining sensitivity to the LDS community,” has raised about \$1 million so far, mostly from Mormon donors. This amount is enough to establish the Howard W. Hunter visiting professorship in Mormon Studies while aiming to ultimately raise \$6 million to fund a permanently endowed chair, along with funds for scholarships, conferences, materials, and a building to serve as a center for Mormon studies. (For more information, visit WWW.HOWARDHUNTERFOUNDATION.ORG.)

Bushman, 76, is an emeritus professor from Columbia University, where he recently held the Gouverneur Morris Chair in American History. He is the recipient of the prestigious Bancroft Prize in American History and has written twelve books, most recently *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*.

Summer Seminar to Respond to Joseph Smith’s Critics

BEFORE BEGINNING HIS CLAREMONT APPOINTMENT, Bushman will chair a six-and-a-half-week summer seminar on Joseph Smith at BYU’s Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, exploring the theme, “Joseph Smith and His Critics.”

“The theme has been chosen in response to the growing number of critical attacks in books and on the web,” Bushman wrote in an announcement letter. “Many Latter-day Saints have been affected adversely by these criticisms, and the materials supplied by our apologetic institutions have not always met their needs.”

The seminar will bring together a dozen experienced LDS scholars who will each receive a \$3,000 stipend. After researching the various criticisms, each participant will prepare one or more papers to be presented at a symposium for BYU’s Religious Education faculty.

“The emphasis will be less on providing answers to every question than on putting the adverse evidence in a new light,” the Bushman letter continues. “Our aim is to persuade readers that the facts do not compel them to discard Joseph Smith. In fact, negative information can sometimes illuminate his cultural situation and mission.”

ROMNEY DELIVERS “JFK SPEECH”; MORMONISM DEBATE CONTINUES

AFTER MONTHS OF SPECULATION ABOUT WHETHER HE would formally address the challenges his Mormonism has brought to his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, Mitt Romney delivered a speech on 6 December titled “Faith in America.” His remarks, primarily an essay on religious freedom, were calculated to appeal to conservative Christians by condemning secularism and extolling the role of religion in the public sphere. Ultimately, however, Romney’s speech did very little to stem the tide of questions about Mormonism’s peculiar doctrines and practices that have distracted the candidate throughout his campaign.

Almost from the beginning of his run, some of his supporters have pushed Romney to deal head-on with his Mormonism the way that John F. Kennedy dealt with suspicions about his Catholicism in a speech a few months before he was elected president. “Almost fifty years ago, another candidate from Massachusetts explained that he was an American running for President, not a Catholic running for President,” said Romney in his address. “Like him, I am an American running for President. I do not define my candidacy by my religion. A person should not be elected because of his faith, nor should he be rejected because of his faith.”

Like Kennedy in dealing with concerns that Roman Catholic church leaders could influence the decisions he would make in office, Romney asserted his independence from LDS leaders in Salt Lake City in matters of national concern: “Let me assure you that no authorities of my church, or of any other church for that matter, will ever exert influence on presidential decisions. Their authority is theirs, within the province of church affairs, and it ends where the affairs of the nation begin. As Governor, I . . . did not confuse the particular teachings of my church with the obligations of the office and of the Constitution—and of course, I would not do so as President. I will put no doctrine of any church above the plain duties of the office and the sovereign authority of the law.”

Unlike Kennedy’s speech, which championed separation of church and state, Romney’s speech extolled the role of religion in the public sphere. “In recent years, the notion of the separation of church and state has been taken by some well beyond its original meaning,” warned Romney. “They seek to remove from the public domain any acknowledgment of God. Religion is seen as merely a private affair with no place in public life. It is as if they are intent on establishing a new religion in America—the religion of secularism. They are wrong.”

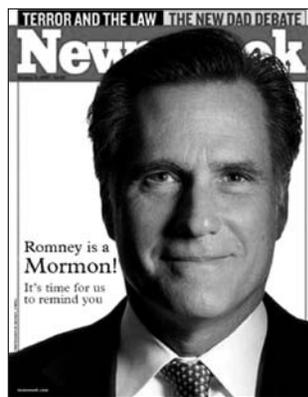
Reactions to the speech varied widely, with most LDS commentators feeling that Romney struck the right tone. “I was absolutely thrilled,” LDS historian Richard Bushman told *The Salt Lake Tribune*. “Mitt distinguished himself with this speech. I thought he would say more about Mormonism, but he wisely didn’t.”

Other Latter-day Saints questioned whether this type of speech, so clearly evidencing Romney’s strategy of trying to appeal to conservative Christian positions, would help him gain

the votes he needs to become the Republican nominee. “[Romney’s] speech, though a masterful political performance, won’t help him win the Republican nomination,” wrote Mormon activist Jeffery S. Nielsen in *The Salt Lake Tribune*. “He seems to have decided his only hope of winning is to appeal to the religious conservatives—the very people who will reject him out of religious prejudice.”

A Gallup poll conducted after the speech revealed about 17 percent of voters are less likely to vote for a qualified candidate who happens to be a Mormon—a drop of merely 2 percent from a poll conducted last March. The same poll shows 16 percent of Americans have a “very unfavorable” opinion of the LDS Church. In a recent *Newsweek* poll, 72 percent of Iowa Republicans say they would vote for a Mormon if nominated by the party, but only 45 percent believe the nation is ready for a Mormon president.

Campaign Coverage Continues Strong Focus on Mormonism



ROMNEY, WHO USED THE word “Mormon” only once in his speech, refuses to debate or even explain Mormonism’s peculiarities, systematically referring reporters to Church spokespersons. He has instead taken advantage of opportunities to emphasize Mormon similarities with mainstream Christianity—even if that means what some would call “spinning” certain LDS beliefs.

As noted by Jonathan Darman and Lisa Miller in a *Newsweek* cover story, “Romney has positioned himself as the candidate with conservative principles and strong faith, even adopting evangelical language in calling Jesus Christ his ‘personal savior’ (vernacular not generally used by members of the Mormon Church). But when he’s pressed on the particulars of his own religious practice, his answers grow terse and he is quick to repeat that his values are rooted in ‘the Judeo-Christian tradition.’”

Darman and Miller’s article underscores Romney’s religious faith, with pictures of Romney praying, playing the Mormon Tabernacle organ, and riding his bike as an LDS missionary. “Romney’s candidacy will be many voters’ first glimpse into the world of Mormonism,” Darman and Miller say, “a world that embraces American ideals of hard work, frugality, self-reliance and optimism, as well as more off-putting aspects—such as zeal for evangelism, an image that some see as overly wholesome and plastic, and secret temple rituals like baptisms for the dead.”

“It is puzzling that when *Newsweek* looks at me, what you mostly see is Mormon,” Romney protested to *Newsweek* in a letter to the editor the following week. “I would have thought that more important to my potential presidency would be my record as a governor, 25-year business leader, Olympic CEO, father, husband—and American.”

Romney's opponents have not resisted the temptation to cash in at his faith's expense. A Utah-based company, Western Wats, is accused of "push polling" in New Hampshire—asking survey questions intended to send negative messages. In calls to New Hampshire residents, voters were asked whether they knew that Romney received military deferments when he served an LDS mission in France, that Romney's faith did not allow blacks to hold the priesthood until the 1970s, and that Mormons believe the Book of Mormon is superior to the Bible. The state's attorney general has launched an inquiry into the matter but has not yet determined what organization was behind the survey and if it had any direct connections with another candidate.

Mike Huckabee, an ordained Baptist minister who has risen to the upper echelon of candidates after winning the Iowa caucuses, played the Mormons-are-strange card in a recent interview with *The New York Times*. "Don't Mormons believe that Jesus and the devil are brothers?" he asked the reporter. Within twenty-four hours after an Associated Press story carried Huckabee's comments, the LDS Church issued a statement which only vaguely implies Jesus's and Lucifer's relation as spirit brothers and emphasizes Mormon similarities, rather than differences, with historic Christianity: "Like other Christians, we believe Jesus is the divine Son of God. Satan is a fallen angel. As the Apostle Paul wrote, God is the Father of all. That means that all beings were created by God and are His spirit children. Christ, however, was the only begotten in the flesh, and we worship Him as the Son of God and the Savior of mankind." Huckabee later apologized to Romney for the comment.

LDS Church Responds to the Media

THE QUESTION ABOUT JESUS AND SATAN BEING brothers is exactly the kind of controversy the LDS Church has been anticipating for months. In early October, the LDS Public Affairs department hosted its first online press conference as a way to educate the media about Mormonism. Michael Otterson and Kim Farah answered questions that were either phoned in or emailed to Church headquarters. Utah-based reporters were allowed to observe the conference but not to participate. On the same day, the LDS newsroom posted online video clips, including one in which Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve asserted that Jesus Christ "is the center of all that we do."

In early November, Elder Ballard and newly called Apostle Quentin L. Cook made a round of visits to the editorial boards of major American newspapers and magazines "to address misconceptions" reporters have about the Church. Ballard and Cook, who serve on the Church's Public Affairs Committee, spent about an hour each with the editorial boards of *USA Today*, *U.S. News & World Report*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* (in New York), the *New Republic*, and the *National Review*.

In his interview with *U.S. News & World Report*, Ballard re-emphasized that "Jesus Christ is the center of everything we

teach and believe," but he also set Mormonism apart from mainline Christianity. "God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost [are] separate individuals," Ballard said. "When you go door to door, as we did as young men, and talk to the average person—the theologians might have a different view—but people think of them as distinct."

Following Huckabee's comment on Jesus and Satan, stories about Mormon belief appeared in several national media outlets, including *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Newsweek*. Some of these stories touched on topics the LDS Church finds embarrassing or sensitive.

The *Newsweek* story bluntly announced that "Mormons believe in eternal progression and that they may someday become gods." The *Los Angeles Times* stated that in Mormon theology, "the savior and the devil are both sons of God"; the paper also described what Mormon garments look like—"a boxers and T-shirt set embroidered with sacred symbols." The *New York Times* explained that "Mormons believe that God has a body of flesh and bone, in human form, and that Jesus does, too."

When FOXNEWS.COM submitted questions about Mormon beliefs to the LDS Church, the response it received distanced Mormons from many of its peculiar but long-held doctrines.

"Kolob" is a term found in ancient records translated by Joseph Smith," LDS officials explained, glossing over the Pearl of Great Price's assertion that "Kolob is set nigh unto the throne of God" (Abraham 3:9). "Joseph Smith did not provide a full description or explanation of Kolob nor did he assign the idea particular significance in relation to the Church's core doctrines."

When asked by FoxNews.com whether Mormons could become "gods and goddesses" after death, LDS Public Affairs quoted Paul's reference to being "joint heirs with Christ." "The goal is not to equal them or to achieve parity with [God the Father and Jesus Christ]," the statement adds, "but to imitate



"Truthfully boys, ordinarily we wouldn't give you the time of day . . . but anybody who pisses off Huckabee supporters so much has to have something interesting to say."

and someday acquire their perfect goodness, love and other divine attributes.”

National Pundit Uses Extreme Rhetoric in Criticizing LDS Beliefs and Founder

ONE OF THE MOST extreme negative reactions to Romney’s “Faith in America” speech quickly devolved into an all-out attack on Joseph Smith and Mormon teachings—an assault that was so overboard that conservative evangelical politician Pat Robertson found himself vigorously defending Mormonism. On the 8 December broadcast of the syndicated political roundtable *The Mc-*



LAWRENCE O'DONNELL ON THE MCLAUGHLIN GROUP
Mormonism was “founded by a criminal who was anti-American, pro-slavery, and a rapist.”

Laughlin Group, Lawrence O'Donnell, a political analyst for MSNBC, called Romney’s “the worst political speech of my lifetime” and criticized commentators who have been too afraid to note that Mormonism “is a racist faith.” O'Donnell continued: “[Romney], if he believes the faith of his fathers that black people are black because in heaven they turned away from God in this demented Scientology-like notion of what was going on in heaven before the creation of the earth . . . when did he change his mind? Did the religion have to tell him to change his mind? And when he talks about the faith of his father, how about the faith of his great-grandfather, who had five wives?”

O'Donnell then turned his attention to Joseph Smith: “[Romney’s] religion is based on the work of a lying, fraudulent criminal named Joseph Smith, who was a racist, who was pro-slavery. . . . Joseph Smith was a slavery champion—the inventor of this ridiculous religion.” (In fact, Smith ran on an anti-slavery platform during his ill-fated campaign for the U.S. presidency.) Later, O'Donnell added “rapist” to his descriptions of the Mormon founder.

Despite objections by panel moderator John McLaughlin and fellow panelists Pat Robertson, Eleanor Clift, and Monica Crawley, O'Donnell continued to press his diatribe. Calling Mormonism a religion “full of crazy beliefs,” O'Donnell raised for ridicule LDS teachings about the Garden of Eden being in Missouri and Christ’s eventual rule over the earth from headquarters in Jerusalem and Missouri. “He thinks the world is going to be ruled from Missouri.”

O'Donnell eventually summed up the problem he has with Romney. O'Donnell questions whether Romney, as a believing Mormon, would have the judgment needed to be president: “Look, Romney comes from a religion founded by a criminal who was anti-American, pro-slavery, and a rapist. And he comes from that lineage and says, ‘I respect this religion fully.’”

Over the next several days, O'Donnell attempted to defend the legitimacy of his attacks, reiterating his position that other commentators are too soft on Mormons even though, he insisted, they, like him, believe LDS teachings are so bizarre as to disqualify someone who believes them from running the country. Nevertheless, reactions to O'Donnell’s attacks were almost universally negative. Some protesters, trying to send a message that this kind of rhetoric is beyond the pale of acceptability, have been campaigning for O'Donnell to be fired from his job at MSNBC as well as from the HBO television series *Big Love*, on which O'Donnell moonlights as the attorney for the polygamist Henrickson family.

AT BYU, HARRY REID SPEAKS OUT ON HIS POLITICS AND HIS RELIGION



SEN. HARRY REID AT BYU
“I am a Democrat because I am a Mormon, not in spite of it.”

ON 9 OCTOBER, LDS Senator and Majority Leader Harry Reid addressed some 4,000 students in the Marriott Center on the Brigham Young University campus in Provo, Utah, recounting some of the hardships he endured as a young man growing up in Searchlight,

Nevada and recalling the friendships with Latter-day Saints that led to his eventual conversion while in college at Utah State University. He also boldly defended his record as both a Mormon and a Democrat.

“My faith and political beliefs are deeply intertwined,” Reid said. “I am a Democrat *because* I am a Mormon, not in spite of it.” He added, “Democrats have not always been the minority [in Mormonism], and I believe we won’t be for long.”

Reid called the invasion of Iraq “the worst foreign policy blunder in our country’s history” and defended his record as a pro-unions, pro-life Mormon Democrat. “Some say Democrats can’t be pro-life,” Reid said, “but I am proof that we can.”

In a press conference following the event, Reid acknowledged that some past Church leaders, such as Ezra Taft Benson and Ernest L. Wilkinson “were very right-wing people politically,” a fact he lamented. “Members of the church are obedient and followers in the true sense of the word, but these people have taken the church down the path that is the wrong path.”

Reid called the Christian Right “the most anti-Christian people I can imagine” and lamented how their influence has narrowed the Republican agenda. “They have focused on just a few issues, flag-burning, gay marriage, abortion,” Reid said.

“The country has gone beyond that to other issues,” he added. “We have a country that needs to do something about health care. Global warming is here. We have a president who doesn’t know how to pronounce the words.”

WARREN JEFFS SENTENCED, DOCUMENTS RELEASED

AS A UTAH JUDGE SENTENCED FUNDAMENTALIST leader Warren S. Jeffs to serve two prison terms back-to-back, newly released papers and videotapes revealed the depth of Jeffs's depression and documented his brief renouncement as prophet of the FLDS Church.

Jeffs was convicted in September on two counts of rape as an accomplice because of his involvement in the marriage of a 14-year-old girl to her cousin. Jeffs will serve five years to life in prison for each count. After the sentence, he was immediately transported to the Utah State Prison in Draper, but Jeffs is likely to go soon to Mohave County, Arizona, to face more charges related to teen brides. Jeffs also still faces a federal count of flight to avoid prosecution and is named in additional lawsuits, including one that alleges misconduct as a trustee for a property trust connected with his church.

The recent release of a mental competency evaluation reveals that while awaiting trial in early 2007, Jeffs tried to hang himself inside his cell. The attempt on his own life led to a visit to the emergency room and to Jeffs being placed under suicide watch. Jeffs was diagnosed with a depressive disorder but was ultimately declared competent to stand trial.



In a video of a prison conversation, Warren Jeffs declares that he was never the rightful prophet of the FLDS church.

"I yearn for everyone's forgiveness for my aspiring and selfish way of life," Jeffs says in the video, "in deceiving the elect, breaking the new and everlasting covenant, and being the most wicked man on the face of the earth in this last dispensation. Farewell, all of you, for the Lord has promised that I [will] have a place in the telestial kingdom of God."

The video also shows Nephi protesting to Jeffs, "This is a test. You are the prophet."

Jeffs's renouncement was also documented by a photographer who took a picture of a note Jeffs attempted to pass to the judge. But on 10 February, Jeffs made a series of phone calls recanting his renouncement and affirming that he remains committed to the priesthood of the FLDS Church.

People



Deceased. INIS EGAN HUNTER, 93, second wife of late LDS President Howard W. Hunter. She had been a divorcée for twenty-four years when Hunter, then president of the Quorum of the Twelve, married her in the Salt Lake Temple in 1990. An old acquaintance since 1945, when President Hunter was a bishop in California, Sister Hunter became reacquainted with him when she worked at the main lobby of the Church Office Building, beginning in 1968. As President Hunter's wife, she traveled and spoke to Church members worldwide.

Deceased. GEORGE OSMOND, 90, patriarch of the prominent Osmond family. A World War II veteran, Osmond helped launch the entertainment careers of seven of his nine children and formed the Osmond Foundation, which later became the Children's Miracle Network, raising funds for children in hospitals. A devout Latter-day Saint, he served two missions for the Church with his wife Olive in Hawaii and in the United Kingdom.



Featured. LDS historian and Pulitzer Prize-winner LAUREL THATCHER ULRICH, in articles in the *Washington Post*, *Deseret Morning News*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, and other media outlets in connection with her new book *Well-Behaved Women*



Seldom Make History. The book, a survey of centuries of women's history and discourse about women, also offers a glimpse into Ulrich's own career as a historian. The book's title comes from a line Ulrich first coined in a 1976 article that unexpectedly became one of the best-known slogans of feminism and is today produced on bumper stickers, mugs, and T-shirts.

Winner. TODD HERZOG, 22, in the thirteenth edition of the CBS reality show *Survivor*. Herzog, who identifies as gay and Mormon, had to complete grueling challenges, from running long obstacle courses to eating chicken embryos and baby turtles. As the season's winner, he receives a \$1 million prize. Herzog is the second gay Latter-day Saint to be featured on *Survivor*. RAFE JUDKINS finished third in the Fall 2005 season of the same show.



Forgiving. LDS missionaries SEBASTIAN HERREY, 21, and BRANDON WOOLSEY, 19, of the gang of fourteen teenagers who attacked them in Bolton, United Kingdom. Herrey, who is from Sweden, received a fractured jaw and a gashed forehead. Woolsey, from Utah, escaped the altercation with a black eye and a cut lip. The missionaries told the *Bolton News* that they don't hold anything against their attackers and look forward to serving the remainder of their missions.

AN OLIVE LEAF

“TOO VAST, TOO ARDUOUS,
FOR ANY ONE PEOPLE”

By Orson F. Whitney

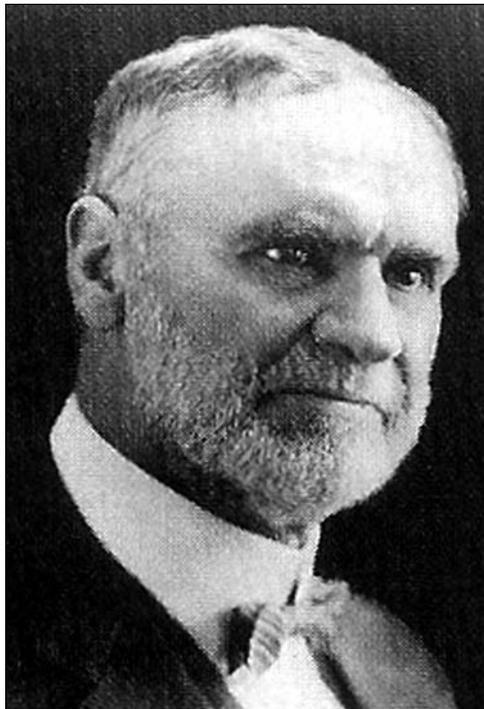
Helen Whitney's reflection in this issue on her experiences in creating the documentary The Mormons, the reflections on the film from Sarah Barringer Gordon, Mathew Schmalz and his students at the College of the Holy Cross, and the essay by Les Gripkey on his spiritual journey "among" Mormons but not as Church member, call for the celebration of friends who through their willingness to explore our hearts and minds serve Latter-day Saints as mirrors and thoughtful conversation partners. Thinking about them brings to mind the April 1928 General Conference address by Apostle Orson F. Whitney, from which the following is excerpted.

WHAT CAN COMPARE with [the mighty work in which we are taking part]? Is there anything half so wonderful?

Yes, there is something almost as wonderful—and that is, that the wise men of this world do not see in it anything worthy of their special care or attention. “Mormonism,” to its devotees, is the most glorious thing in existence—the sublimest poem that was ever written, the profoundest system of philosophy that the world has ever known. But the “wise” and “prudent” pass it by as a thing of naught, or stand at a distance, sneering at it and pelting it with unsavory epithets. Why is it?

Why couldn't Abraham Lincoln, that good and great man, see in “Mormonism” what we see in it, and what it really is—the Everlasting Gospel? He and Joseph Smith lived almost within a stone's throw of each other in Illinois. Why did not the future president recognize in the prophet of God what the Latter-day Saints recognize in him—the most remarkable human being that has walked this earth in two thousand years? Why couldn't Lincoln see it? . . .

Horace Greeley, another great character, the founder and editor of the *New York Tribune*, a man whose utterances were more potent in his day than those of the president of the United States—he came out to Utah . . . on his way to California [and] tarried certain days in Salt Lake City. He had



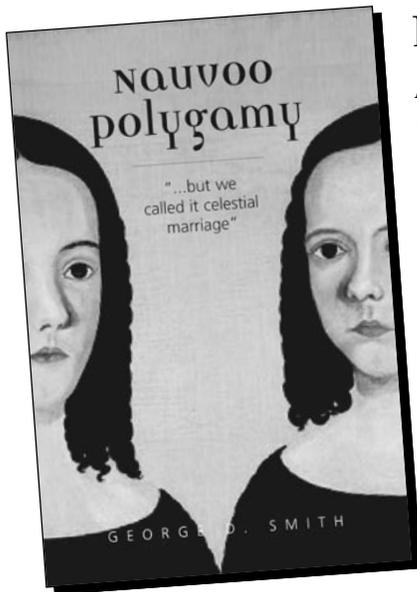
repeated interviews with President Brigham Young, and in a book afterwards written and published he paid high compliment to the pioneers and early settlers of these mountain solitudes. He didn't believe the “Mormons” were robbers and murderers, as he had been told, and he spoke of them as honest and industrious people. But that was all. Brigham Young's views on marriage and slavery interested the great editor, but the “Mormon” religion in its sublimest phases was a sealed book to him. Why?

Well, doubtless there were good reasons for it; and I will venture to advance one. Perhaps the Lord needs such men 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. And the

same is true of the priesthood and its auxiliaries inside the Church. Hence, some are drawn into the fold and receive a testimony of the Truth; while others remain unconverted. . . the beauties and glories of the gospel being veiled temporarily from their view, for a wise purpose. . . .

God is using more than one people for the accomplishment of his great and marvelous work. The Latter-day Saints cannot do it all. It is too vast, too arduous, for any one people. Our part in it is the greatest. We have the gospel and the priesthood, with a mission to gather Israel, build the New Jerusalem, and prepare the way for the advent of the King of kings. And this duty has been laid upon us because we belong to the house of Israel. It is the God of Israel who is coming to reign and we are the right people to prepare the way before him. . . .

Again I say, the Lord's Work has need of auxiliaries outside as well as inside, to help it along. Because of their worldly influence—which would depart if they connected themselves with the Church—many are kept where they are, where the Lord has placed them, and can best use them for the good of all.



Nauvoo Polygamy by George D. Smith

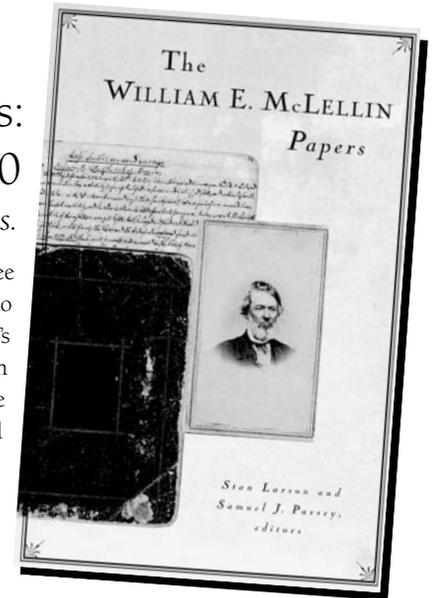
As Joseph Smith enlisted men and women in the cause of polygamy, a pattern of initiation developed, including what might be called courtship and persuasion—long walks in the woods, urgent appeals, secrets confided, promises made, and threats to discourage rejection or disclosure. This volume contains a comprehensive scrutiny of available records from Nauvoo, Illinois. Readers will learn how the practice spread among some 200 men and 700 women even before the dispersion out of the city. The author traces a recurring fascination with polygamy back to the sixteenth century and forward to the nineteenth in answer to the question of where the idea in Nauvoo came from. *Nauvoo Polygamy*: "... but we called it celestial marriage." George D. Smith. 672 pages. hardcover. \$39.95. March 2008.

The William E. McLellin Papers: 1854–1880

Stan Larson & Samuel J. Passey, eds.

The well-educated, highly enigmatic school teacher of Tennessee origin, William E. McLellin, converted to Mormonism early on and rose quickly to become one of the original twelve apostles. In 1836, he saw his peaceable kingdom turn violent in the Zion's Camp march and became disillusioned. Yet throughout his life, he retained his belief in the Book of Mormon and revelation by "peep-stones," the Second Coming, and spiritual gifts. His perspective is unique in that he associated with nearly every faction of Mormonism—and his wife was RLDS. In later years, he reminisced about what his early experiences meant and what he believed. *The William E. McLellin Papers: 1854–1880*.

Stan Larson & Samuel J. Passey, eds. 608 pages. hardcover. \$39.95. December 2007.



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The Sunstone Education Foundation is pleased to announce:



THE 2008 R. L. "BUZZ" CAPENER MEMORIAL WRITING CONTEST IN COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

THE SUNSTONE EDUCATION FOUNDATION invites submissions of papers to the 2007 R. L. "Buzz" Capener Memorial Writing Contest in Comparative Religious Studies.

The contest originates in the conviction that the study of Mormon theology and doctrine can greatly benefit from examination in a comparative context with other Christian and non-Christian traditions. The contest encourages entries that bring LDS concepts and practices into discussion with the worldviews, doctrines, and rituals of other faiths, trusting that the comparative act will enrich the understanding of each. Papers should exhibit sound scholarship but also be accessible to a broad, non-specialist readership.

The papers, without author identification, will be judged by qualified scholars of Mormonism and religious studies. The winners will be invited to give their papers at the 2008 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium to be held 6–9 August, and the winning articles will be published in a future issue of SUNSTONE magazine. Only the winners will be notified personally of the results. After the judging is complete, all non-winning entrants will be free to submit their essays elsewhere.

The contest is sponsored by the family of R. L. "Buzz" Capener to honor the memory of his life of faith, acceptance of diversity, and the pursuit of truth.

PRIZES: A total of \$1,000.00 will be awarded:

- \$750 for the best submission
- \$250 for the runner-up

RULES:

1. Only one entry may be submitted by any author or team of authors. Four copies must be postmarked or reach the Sunstone offices before or on **31 MAY 2008**. Entries will not be returned.
2. Each entry must be 8,000 words or fewer (exclusive of footnotes). Entries must be typed, double-spaced, on one side of white paper, paginated, and stapled in the upper left corner. Author name(s) should not appear on any page of the entry.
3. Each entry must be accompanied by a cover letter that states the essay's title and the author's (or authors') name, address, telephone number, and email address.

Each cover letter must be signed and attest that the entry is the person or team's work, that it has not been previously published, that it is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere, will not be submitted to other forums until after the contest, and that, if the entry wins, SUNSTONE magazine has one-time, first-publication rights.

4. Winners will be selected by anonymous evaluations supplied by judges appointed by the Sunstone Education Foundation and the R. L. "Buzz" Capener Memorial Writing Contest organizing committee. Sunstone will announce the winners in SUNSTONE magazine and at the foundation's website, WWW.SUNSTONEONLINE.COM.

Failure to comply with these rules will result in disqualification.

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