

TOUCHSTONES

COMING CLEAN

THE SWEET ONIONS
OF FORGIVENESS

ONE FALL DURING college, I came home for Thanksgiving along with all my siblings. During dinner my older brother asked for the stuffing but was reminded that it had onions in it, and so he wouldn't like it (as a child, he had been famously opposed to them). He persisted until he eventually had to blurt out, "I like onions now, okay? That was, like, ten years ago! People change! I . . . LIKE . . . ONIONS . . . NOW!"

Clearly he felt he had tried to communicate this to us before, but old habits die hard, and his old reputation had persisted in our minds. His outburst was funny, awkward and surprising, but we finally passed him the plate.

It reminded me how hard it is to change when those around you expect you to stay the same. That same weekend, I noticed the difficulty of acting like an adult around my family. To this day, when we get together, all of us siblings seem to revert to certain childhood roles and habits. In many ways it's tons of fun, but I'm also often annoyed by my own tendencies toward sarcasm, flippancy, or bossiness. I act the same way I did when I was seventeen, despite the fact that I don't act that way now as an independent adult. When I'm with the whole family I can't seem

to stop myself, even though I recognize what I'm doing when it's happening.

To me, this situation gets at the real purpose of forgiveness. Sunday School vogue seems to be to talk about how the real purpose of forgiveness is for us, the forgivers: to become free of the burden of a grudge or ill-will. But I think this is only a happy by-product; it's secondary to the real point. As with most of Christ's teachings, our first and foremost concern should be the other, not the self. The most crucial reason for forgiveness is not so that we can continue our happy-go-lucky lives unfettered by the burdens the *other* sinner imposed on us, but so that sinner can behave differently.

My own experience in something as simple as a family gathering is evidence that it's extremely difficult to behave differently than others expect. Despite moments of resolve, it's very hard not to believe the subtle and unspoken suggestions from others about who we are, what we are worth, and what we will become. Perhaps it's one of the reasons "bad" kids sometimes stay bad, criminals often stay criminals, abused children frequently grow up to abuse.

Jesus knows that if he wants his lost sheep back, it will have to be a group effort. He needs us to expect the best of each other, to honor the divinity in each other, to treat each other as though we've already moved on from our hang-ups. He needs us to keep passing that plate of oniony goodness, even if

we think it will be refused. Because people can change. And it's our job not only to let them, but to pave their way by treating them as though they already have. He needs us to forgive.

SKYE PIXTON ENGSTROM
Portland, Oregon

MYTHBUSTER

IT WASN'T THE silence of a pin drop; and it certainly wasn't the gentle silence of one good sister handing a tissue to another. But it was silence. I should have known that Joseph Campbell and Joseph Smith don't belong at the same Relief Society meeting.

Well, I did know it, but the Gnome of the Moral Imperative had nudged me that day.

"Tell them about myth," the Gnome prompted.

"I can't do that," I hissed back. "Say the word 'myth' in this place, and you might as well be a yodeler in avalanche season."

"They're getting it wrong."

"Wrong is relative. They need the myth. We all need a myth. Awareness of the myth would only threaten their construct of reality. It works because it's invisible."

"Do you have a testimony or not?" the Gnome persisted.

Drat. I did have a testimony—a lumpy, misshapen, Mr.-Potatohead-without-cute-accessories testimony, but a testimony all the same. My problem was that it was about something these Relief Society sisters probably didn't even know existed. I could see it in their isn't-the-prophet-so-sweet-and-don't-we-love-him eyes.

"Noah, Lehi, and Abinadi did not fear to speak out," the Gnome chided.

My hand—the weak hand which had made only 1,000 loaves of bread rather than the requisite 10,000; the hand which had changed diapers for a mere two children instead of the whole host of Israel; the rationalizing hand which had spent more time typing than tole painting—yea, my weak and small hand rose high enough to catch the teacher's eye. It looked pathetic, even as a light on a hill looks pathetic when surrounded by suburban glow.

Then, like Moses with his speech impediment, my stupid mouth opened—only I had no Aaron to translate my words into the dialect of Tuna Casserole.

I told the sisters how grateful I was for Joseph Smith, how possibly his biggest sacrifice was to give up his identity. The real Joseph had issues (some that I was not about to bring up in Relief Society no matter how many Gnomes whacked me), and he wasn't

TOUCHSTONES is a SUNSTONE section that debuted in the December 2005 issue. 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 the editor at: stephen@sunstonemagazine.com. Due to space limitations, 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: { A WINDOW OPENS
EYE OF THE NEEDLE



BRIAN HENRY

perfect. The way I could sustain him as our first prophet was to separate the myth from the man and let him have his own life—warts and all—and not make him be the “Praise to the Man” only.

The silence, the shuffling of feet, the “yes, wells,” and then the recovery as we moved on to *real* testimonies. Nice save on the part of the teacher. Through the patience exercised by the sisters, and in spite of me, a good lesson was had by all.

Only later, as I sat in the foyer with a sulky Sunbeam on my lap, did someone come up to me. I didn’t even know her name. Like me, she was not part of the core ward. I was student, and she was military—in other words, we wouldn’t be there for the next four generations.

“I wanted to say thanks,” she said. “I had been feeling exactly what you said, but I didn’t know the right words. Can you tell me more?”

For half an hour we talked about myth, about stories, and how we all need the right sort of things to believe in, even if they didn’t

actually happen that way. She said she felt better about continuing on in church; she had been wondering and worrying.

And that was it; we didn’t become best friends; I don’t think we even talked again. In fact, she moved soon afterward with the military.

I don’t know where the Spirit was that day, but I do know that there was a smug little Gnome poking me in the bewildered gut saying, “I told you so.”

NOELLE CARTER
Lyman, Wyoming

THE BIRD EGG INCIDENT

WORLD WAR II was being waged, and I could feel it in Franklin, Idaho, even as a six-year-old. When my brother Richard was commissioned and called to duty, he came home to tell us all goodbye before going to Dayton, Idaho, to catch the train for California. Richard had been away at college

and wasn’t home very often, so I was eager to spend time with him.

He had lots of private things to tell Mother: things that had happened at the Sigma Chi house at Utah State Agricultural College in Logan, Utah, and things about boot camp. He told Mother the army had given him a supply of some stretchy rubber things which he had found a very good use for: when he knotted the ends together they made great garters to hold his pants in his boots.

I wanted to be in on all that good conversation, but every time I tried to get their attention, Mother told me to go play. I stood in the bedroom near the kitchen door and tried my best to hear what they said. I noticed Richard had his uniform laid out neatly on the bed. Everything was new and perfectly pressed. I went to the door a couple more times, but Mother motioned for me to go and play.

Feeling somewhat dejected, I walked out of the house and remembered a little egg in a bird’s nest up by the railroad tracks that my



*Nan during her innocent years
before the "bird egg incident."*

big sister Diane and I had seen the day before. She had told me not to touch the egg. I walked up to the tracks and found the little nest. The egg was still there. I knew I shouldn't pick it up, but I needed something to make me feel better. Besides, I fully intended to take the egg back when I was through playing with it.

I walked back to the house, went in the front door, and sneaked back to the bedroom. As I sat on the bed admiring the little spotted egg, it occurred to me that Richard's necktie would make a very fine tunnel for the egg to travel through. So I gingerly worked the egg all the way down the tunnel and then started back. But when I got it about halfway, the egg broke.

I went into shock. Heart pounding, I hurried to the kitchen door to tell Mother what had happened. She told me for the last time to go play. That was it; I lost my nerve. I folded the necktie so the stain was on the un-

derside, and scuttled guiltily out of the house.

Soon it was time to get ready for our trip to Dayton. Suddenly there was an explosion in the small bedroom. "Who in the hell ruined my necktie?" Richard bellowed.

I froze in my tracks and waited for an apocalypse to be unleashed. Miraculously, no one approached me or even hinted I might be the guilty one. Finally someone laughed, and then everyone laughed, and the tension was broken.

I remember riding solemnly to the train station and telling my big brother goodbye as he went off to war. Everyone cried on the way home, especially me: the secret, guilty, tie stainer.

For years, the conventional assumption was that little brother David had done this dastardly deed, and when the family scattered to far away places, all seemed to be forgotten.

But then we started meeting for reunions, and I began to notice, my face flushing, that someone always mentioned the bird egg and the necktie. In fact, the first time around, I heard someone say they thought that little Nan might have done it, and my heart

leaped to my throat. They were on to me!

On other occasions, when the story was mentioned, a family member would laugh, whisper, or point at me. Then one day, I was the one called on to recite the story, and out it came, my confession. The story of my childhood crime. Finally, out in the open.

And with that, a family legend was born.

There are lots of ways I would prefer to be remembered by posterity, but it looks like I'm stuck with the infamous "bird egg incident."

NAN PARKINSON MCCOLLOUGH

Draper, Utah

A STAIN IN TIME

A FEW YEARS ago, my husband and I took two granddaughters to the property my parents owned in Spanish Fork Canyon. We hiked, picnicked, goofed off in the pond, and had a fine time.

Only after we returned and gathered clothing to launder, did I notice pine gum on my favorite long-sleeved blouse. It was still sticky, and though I know how to pre-treat many stains—for instance blood and grease with lukewarm water and handsoap—I didn't try this remedy. I didn't want to make it worse by doing the wrong thing, so, pending taking it to the dry cleaners for advice, I hung it on the "to do" rack in a basement closet.

But I forgot it. Forgot for several years until cleaning out that closet. Seeing the gum still on the cuffs, I regretted that I hadn't had it treated right away and wondered if it were too late. Absently, I picked at the marks. The dry resin fell right off. I stared. But before putting it in the washer, I did the lukewarm-water-and-hand-soap routine. The stain vanished.

So dealing with sins is that simple? Don't even need to be lukewarm about repentance? Just hang your soul up in a back closet until you have more time and interest? Maybe even wait five years? Then dig your soul back out, pick at those little sins—and, wow, they fall right off!

Of course you've had to run around without a soul all that time. And by the time the sins fall off, you'll have to wear a clean soul several years out of date. That maybe even smells of mothballs. It may sound easy, but, wait, "and should you die, before your laundry's through . . . ?"

CAROL QUIST
Salt Lake City, Utah

I THINK YOU ARE ON TO SOMETHING

In this day of technology and clash
In this age of instant communications
Twenty-four hour news in a flash
In this day, we seldom accept

The child's new idea
We shush him
Tell her that it will not work
That things are not that simple

They look up to us and feel shame
Like failures, untried all the same
They listen at first, unbelieving
Eventually agreeing—unbelieving
themselves now

Where does the guilt lie
And will not anyone say
To the child's hopeful idea today
I think you are on to something . . .

I am repenting today
I shall endeavor not to say
It can't be done,
I wish not to be guilty

I pray God hears, and will say
You are on to something . . .

M. EMMETT TOWNSEND
Victoria, Texas

THE WONDERING JEW

AS A NON-MORMON who travels widely in Mormon circles, I'm often a bit lost in a morass of culture and creed that, at times, passeth all understanding.

From time to time, I can feel God's breath on my neck, pushing me one way or another, but finally giving up on me, an old stiff-necked Jew.

One day, I'm sure, God will say to me, "Assume the position!" At which point, I'll

spread my legs, place my palms flat against my own private Wailing Wall, and pray that God has at least as much sense of humor as I have.

I guess we all come to places in our lives where we have to come clean—confess our sins and promise, usually with little conviction, to do better next time. I seem to come to that place several times a day.

And each time I pledge to reform my life, I know that it's a big lie—I'll likely continue on as I have for the past fifty-eight years.

And maybe, in the end, that's okay. If God himself is continually progressing, then the least he can do (being a fair God and all that) is to understand that I, and my fellow travelers, are desperately flawed but generally well motivated. We try to do good, but the good sometimes escapes us.

My Mormon friends assure me that a small army of well-wishers will gladly do temple work for me after I die. That's good to know. The line is probably at least as long as those wanting to baptize me *before* I die. But

I've yet to find someone who will agree to let me back out of the water.

Spirituality is a strange thing, no? We find places in our lives where we look this way and that, and wonder whether we've developed spiritual cataracts or if the mess we're seeing is, indeed, essential reality.

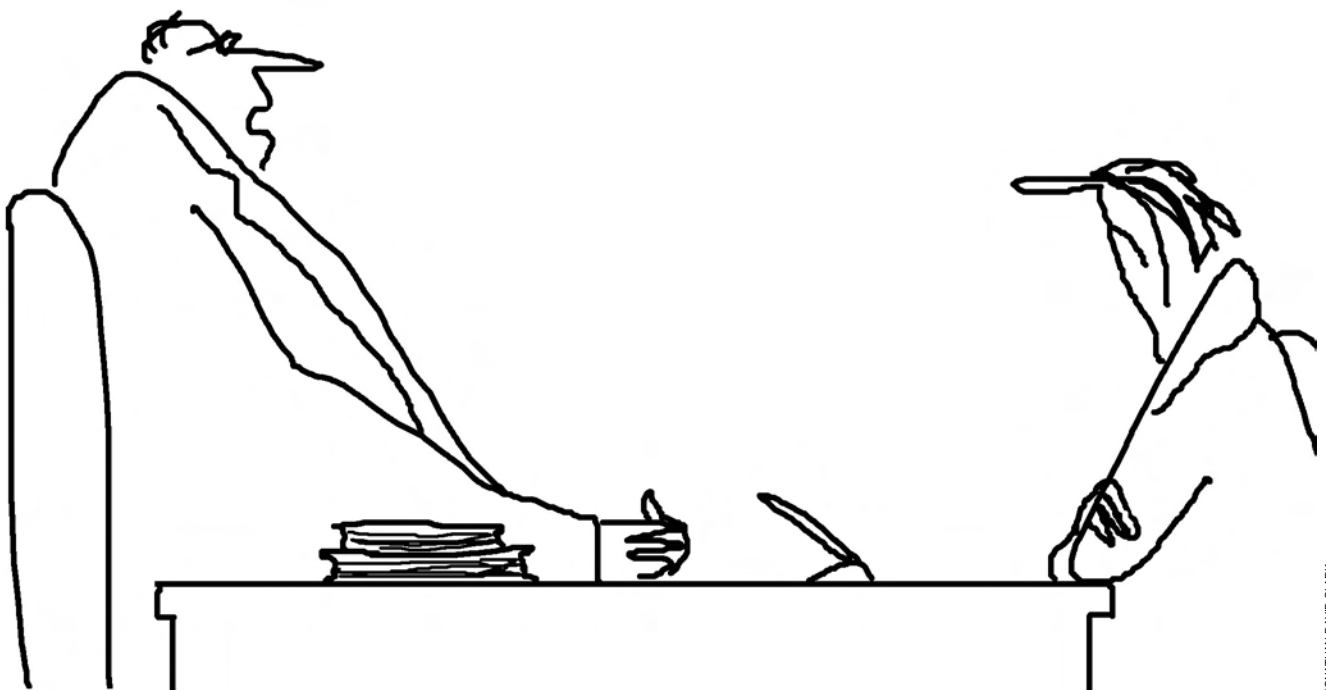
God, in his heaven, presides over a God-awful mess. And, to a degree, he's responsible. Give humans free agency, let them make decisions based on flawed assumptions, and this old world is about as good as one can expect.

But, in his great wisdom, God recognizes that even the worst of us have some essential goodness that can be tapped by just waiting patiently for us to finally let his Spirit speak through us.

We all have the potential—Mormon or not. The real trick is getting religion out of the way and letting the Spirit shine through.

JEFFREY NEEDLE
Chula Vista, California

**Do you want me to speak as your bishop,
or tell you what I really think?...**



JONATHAN DAVID CLARK