

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

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BYU AND BERKELEY
A SURVIVOR'S TALE

WHEN I GRADUATED from high school in western New York, as optimistic and bright-eyed as any incoming college freshman, I packed up my books and stereo and headed straight to Brigham Young University. Ah, Utah, where well-dressed, eternal families live together in perfect harmony! Unfortunately, Provo's Stepford-Wives-style conservatism gave me a nasty case of culture shock.

I left BYU after two years, choosing to finish my degree at the University of California at Berkeley. That would be much better, I thought. No conservative thought-control in that oasis of liberalism! Indeed. Friends say I couldn't have chosen two more bizarrely different schools, and, on the surface, BYU and Berkeley *do* seem like opposites. However, having marinated in each environment, I believe that both schools share essentially the same defining characteristic: a ferocious grip on ideology. Their ideologies happen to be at different ends of the cultural spectrum, but in all the ways that count, BYU and Berkeley might as well be twins.

BYU epitomizes traditional and official Mormon culture. The school's mission statement, which has been in effect since 1981, reads:

The mission of Brigham Young University—founded, supported, and guided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life. . . . All students at BYU should be taught the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Any education is inadequate which does not emphasize that His is the only name given under heaven whereby mankind can be saved.¹



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Hence its nickname, "The Lord's University." However, administrators don't seem to trust students to agree with this agenda, so they have legislated righteousness in the form of the Honor Code. This document, which all students must sign and date to indicate their acceptance, mandates honesty, chastity, virtue, the use of clean language, abstinence "from possessing, serving, or consuming alcoholic beverages, tobacco, tea, coffee, or harmful drugs," avoiding any clothing that is "sleeveless, revealing, or form-fitting," and "encourage[ing] others in their commitment to comply with the BYU Honor Code." So, if your roommate has an illicit stash of English breakfast tea or possibly a tank top under her mattress, you're supposed to "challenge and council" [sic] her "in the spirit of love,"² then narc on her to the Honor Code office.

Berkeley, on the other hand, brings new meaning to the idea of wild-eyed liberalism. Here is how one booklet describes the city and school: "Berkeley has a long history as one of the most lively, culturally diverse, and politically adventurous communities in the country."³ To say the least! Political activism is a way of life at Berkeley. It often seemed to me that students were happy only when they had something terrible to protest, and if they couldn't find something horrible, any old thing would do. In 1992, a student named Andrew Martinez led one of these demonstrations: a "nude-in" protesting "social repression." Martinez began attending classes in the altogether and became known as The Naked Guy. We have him to thank for Berkeley's version of a dress code: students must now wear clothing on campus.⁴ As for coffee, tea, alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, students at Berkeley possess, serve, and consume these with the joyful abandon of the Relief Society handing out mint brownies and sparkle punch at a BYU fireside.

SO the two schools seem completely and utterly different, right? Well, try finding clean air to breathe on either campus. BYU students are supposed to avoid the very appearance of evil, but many go the extra mile by avoiding the very odor of evil with the help of an arsenal of personal hygiene products. One day in the BYU library, I opened the door to the women's bathroom and a choking cloud of atomized perfume and hairspray boiled out over me. I should have simply stopped, dropped, and rolled to make it safely to the toilet. Instead, I slammed the door behind me and hurried off to find an empty women's room in the engineering building.

Berkeley smells just as strongly—in a different way. Washing one's hair before class shows a pitiable slavery to convention, and as for deodorant, well, how Republican can you be? One summer day in English 15, a warm breeze from the window wafted over me, carrying with it the conversation and aroma of two classmates, who seemed to have rejected the societal boundaries imposed by soap.

"But do you think you're *brilliant*?" the one who appeared to be male said through the haze of body odor (we should note here that leg hair is not a conclusive gender indicator at Berkeley).

The other, who I would almost bet was female, tossed back some short oily hair and said, "I truly believe that one cannot know one's own brilliance."

I guess one cannot know one's own bouquet, either.

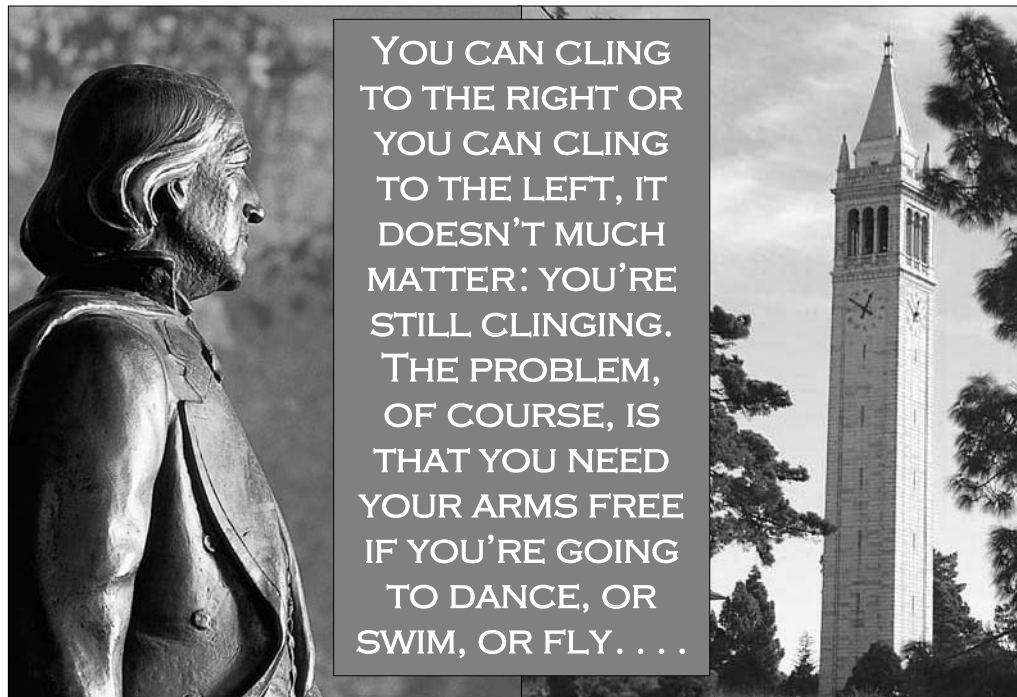
BYU and Berkeley both have a distinct party line which students are well advised to toe. Teachers look for the right attitudes and opinions, and they don't want to hear dissenting viewpoints. For example, at BYU, the final project in my creative writing class was to be a personal essay, so I submitted a paper on a topic that had occupied my thoughts for several months: my growing certainty that I did not want to get married.

Keep in mind that marriage is a *huge* part of the BYU culture. A constant chorus of propaganda bombarded me.

IN THE DORMS: "What kind of husband are you looking for?"

AT SCHOOL: "You don't intend to work after you get married, do you?"

AT CHURCH: "We sisters of Zion are so lucky to have the privilege of supporting our future husbands in all their endeavors!"



YOU CAN CLING
TO THE RIGHT OR
YOU CAN CLING
TO THE LEFT, IT
DOESN'T MUCH
MATTER: YOU'RE
STILL CLINGING.
THE PROBLEM,
OF COURSE, IS
THAT YOU NEED
YOUR ARMS FREE
IF YOU'RE GOING
TO DANCE, OR
SWIM, OR FLY. . . .

AT WORK: "Getting closer to that MRS. degree? Heh, heh."

However, no one would tell me what vows I was supposed to take in a temple marriage. It seemed perfectly reasonable to me—and still does—that if you intend to make and keep a promise, you should get to know in advance what that promise will be. Because of the questions I was asking, a stake high counselor invited me into his office. The ceremonies, he said, were sacred, not secret. I shouldn't question these things; I should be humble and have faith. Everything would be fine once I found a husband.

I finally began to understand: as a single woman within Mormon culture, I would never feel as though I really existed. What's more, an acquaintance of mine who had gone through the temple ceremony told me that wives not only had to promise to obey their husbands for time and all eternity, but husbands made their covenants with God and wives made their covenants with their husbands. Small wonder no one would tell me about the temple ceremony. All my uncertainty vanished, about marriage and about the Church. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that a God who likes his sons so much more than his daughters does not exist, and I knew it would be wrong, an immoral negligence, to sign my soul away to the Mormon priesthood. With my eyes on the horizon for the first time in my life, I left the project in patriarchy that is Mormonism.

So, back to creative writing class. I turned in my paper, a light-hearted cost-benefit

analysis of marriage, which concluded that gaining companionship and sex did not justify the loss of freedom and identity. Unfortunately, the instructor did not laugh. She wouldn't even give me a grade. She told me to forget writing about that subject until I turned twenty-five. On the cover sheet, she wrote, "You're trivializing the whole issue and probably at just nineteen, too young to think it through the way another older young woman might." Hmm. Too young to think through the issue, but plenty old enough to get married. The funny thing is that here I sit, thirty-two years old, resplendent in all my post-twenty-five wisdom, and my mind hasn't changed on this one.

THE same sort of thing happened at Berkeley, just not about marriage. For example, one day, my Chicano literature professor began his lecture with a five-minute sermon about a proposition before California voters in the coming election which would restrict state benefits for immigrants. He explained that the correct vote—i.e. the liberal vote—would be against this measure. He finished by saying, "OK, so everybody who is going to vote 'no,' raise your hand!" Freaky enough in its own right, to have to tell the man who issues your grades whether or not you're going to vote the way he wants you to, but what really got me is that almost everyone in the class actually raised their hands. I sat stunned. We knew what we're supposed to think, and that's damn well what we thought!

ALSO in support of their party lines, each school offers a special curriculum for female students. At BYU, it's a major called "Family Life and Home Economics," and at Berkeley, it's "Women's Studies." To be fair, BYU's schedule of classes for Fall 2002 did include English 396, "Studies in Women's Literature," but that class had been canceled for unknown reasons. No Home-Ec classes had been canceled, though, and the courses available included such gems as "Basic Food Preparation," "Clothing the Family," and that perennial favorite, "Fashion Strategies."⁵

Now, I can scarcely believe that an accredited university offers a course in chopping vegetables, but at Berkeley, I kept my mouth resolutely shut about the fact that cooking is one of my favorite hobbies. As we learn in Berkeley's Women's Studies courses, liberated women sneer at any who persist in such outmoded

gender roles, and besides, we are too busy throwing off the bonds of oppression to take pleasure in anything as transient and meaningless as the smell of homemade bread. Berkeley can teach you more about the subjugation of women than Gloria Steinem would care to know. Thanks to my Women's Studies education, Berkeley style, you can give me a movie, any movie, and I can write a paper for you about the film's misogynistic undertones and female objectification, which clearly betray the filmmaker's deep fear of feminine power. BYU trains docile poodles, and Berkeley whips angry pit bulls into a fighting frenzy. I find both of these programs completely inapplicable to normal life.

ON the bright side, BYU and Berkeley each gave me one of my two favorite classes in the world. At BYU it was English 391, "Introduction to Folklore." Professor Poulsen wore jeans and flannel shirts to class, bless him, when all my other professors seemed unthinkably uptight in their Sunday best. Better still, he read Joseph Campbell to us, the mythologist who interprets religious stories symbolically, not literally, who finds a transcendent unity in the myths and religions of all human cultures, and who suggests that a full life begins with killing the dragon named "Thou shalt."⁶ I adore Professor Poulsen for that gift.

Similarly, Berkeley's English 118, taught by Professor Turner, focused on John Milton and *Paradise Lost*. At a time when every other one of my teachers was busy training me to

ferret out the misogyny, racism, and capitalist-pig-ism in great works of literature, Professor Turner explicated the Adam and Eve story from Genesis in one of his lectures. Except he didn't mention feminism at all, or why we must break down social barriers. Instead, he spoke about how the story celebrated the power of two lovers embracing life together in all its joy and suffering, how experience and knowledge enrich existence, and how disobedience can be an excellent thing. I didn't take a single note in class that day; I sat perfectly still, drinking in those ideas like cold lemonade in the heat of summer.

But the single best thing about BYU and Berkeley is the lesson they both taught me: you can cling to the right or you can cling to the left, it doesn't much matter: you're still clinging. The problem, of course, is that you need your arms free if you're going to dance, or swim, or fly, if you're going to live actively and nurture the spark of divinity that animates your existence.

One of the Book of Mormon lessons I remember from my teenage days is that denying the Holy Ghost is an unpardonable sin (Alma 39:6) and results in being cast into outer darkness for eternity. I have since come to believe that the Holy Ghost is a metaphorical spirit, the spark of divinity within everyone on Earth. I believe that if we deny our own divine powers, we snuff out our spark and float our lives away in a figurative outer darkness. I can think of no better way to make that happen than to keep a death grip on ideology.

BYU and Berkeley showed me that letting go of the Establishment's rules and living fully can fan your spark of divinity into a flame that lights up the lives around you, the way that Professors Poulsen and Turner seemed like beacons to me, shining over dead seas of conformity. Perhaps that's a lesson I couldn't have learned better at any schools other than BYU and Berkeley, together in all their wacky glory. ☺

NOTES

1. A copy of the mission statement can be found at: <http://www.byu.edu/about/factfile/missionp.htm>.

2. The Honor Code can be viewed at: http://campuslife.byu.edu/honorcode/honor_code.htm.

3. "Introducing the University, 1993–1994," Student Academic Services, Office of the President, University of California, May 1992.

4. *Time*, 8 Feb. 1993.

5. *Schedule of Classes*, Brigham Young University, Fall 2002.

6. *Reflections on the Art of Living: A Joseph Campbell Companion*, ed. by Diane K. Osborn (New York: Perennial, 1995).



CHOIR, FIRST SUNDAY OF THE MONTH

We drive up, insured, in late-models, riding soft
on low-crowned asphalt. The sopranos and altos
joke about arriving again in matching "Sunday best."

The music wraps me here,
where we may swing with a spiritual
or bounce eight-part fugues with Bach,

and, middle, old and young, we kneel,
siblings in millennia of
baked meal and pressed grape,

blood kin to the sisters widowed in hymnody
pedaled from an organ
by the man with the hand-whittled leg

in that teak-plank-and-bamboo sanctuary,
the orphans with one-T-shirt wardrobes
swept with jungle-brush brooms, cleaning

for the service we shared that quiet Sunday
just two weeks before the refugee camp
shattered under 130 millimeter shells,

survivors scattering inland, hoping to outrun
the patrols roving for loot and rape,
shooting anything

that moved,
even bayoneting shadows
in every thicket of bamboo. . .

I take the cup with both hemispheres of my brain.
I am comfortable here in my world,
yet blood kin to hands I cannot pass the peace.

—R. S. CARLSON