

## A MISSION TO HEAL

RECOVERING FROM THE TRAUMA OF EARLY RETURN

# MATTERS OF THE HEART:

## REACHING OUT TO ONE OF THE FEW REMAINING MORMON MINORITIES

By Thom Duncan

I CAN'T REMEMBER HIS NAME, BUT I REMEMBER HIS face. He was tall with flowing brown hair. As he spoke, his eyes were filled with that bright light of enthusiasm common to others like him. His smile was as wide as all eternity, the great secrets of which he was pledging the next two years of his life to reveal to the world—or at least to that part of the world where he would soon be serving his mission.

As a young priest and convert of just two years, I considered him one in an ever-expanding pantheon of heroes whose great example I one day hoped to follow. In the great tradition of Alma the younger, or Parley P. Pratt, this young man with shining hair was going on a mission!

I don't remember his farewell, but I'm sure it was marvelous. In those days—in Southern California, at least—a departing missionary was treated like a Favorite Son with specially printed programs with a portrait on the front, announcements from the pulpit inviting everyone over to the parents' home for a feast, and a sure-to-be-stirring farewell testimony by this latest member of God's Army heading to the front lines.

No, I don't remember the farewell, but I do remember the distinct lack of celebration when he returned about six months later. Quite suddenly, one day, he was just *there*. In contrast to his going, there had been no months-long announcements from pulpit or parent to mark his return. One Sunday, he just sort of showed up in the foyer.

Though there was no official announcement of his return, there was certainly enough gossip—especially among us priests, who reacted with consternation and confusion at one of our idols falling from grace. Had he lost his testimony? He seemed healthy enough, so if it were for medical reasons, didn't they let sick missionaries complete their missions at home? Or, God forbid, had he been sent home because of that most heinous of sins, the loss of virtue, which had caused at

least one General Authority of that time to bemoan in print that he would rather his son return from a mission in a body bag and virtuous than alive and stained with the sin of fornication. We never really found out why he had come home early. And, quite frankly, I soon forgot all about it. At least, I thought I had.

YEARS LATER, AS I contemplated how to structure a play I was working on, this young man's predicament came back to me. It seemed just the hook I needed upon which to hang my dramatic exploration of the problems involved in the relationship between an "Iron-Rodder" father and a "Liahona" son. But it was only a hook—or so I thought at the time. The play, eventually entitled *Matters of the Heart*, was really my attempt to suggest a middle ground of tolerance where intellectual extremes could peacefully co-exist.

But, as has often been the case with my plays, the audience had a different idea of what the story was about. The first production of *Matters of the Heart* took place in 1986 in a tiny basement of the Provo Town Square. It was directed by Tom Rogers, and he decided to follow every performance with an audience discussion. What I learned from those discussions has so profoundly affected me that I continued the practice in a later production of *Matters* and will continue to do so.

I had written what I thought was a diatribe against the damaging constraints of a too-fundamental religious worldview. I was certain I had made such blindingly logical arguments as to why liberalism was the better way that everyone would leave the theatre with their lives changed forever (if they were Iron-Rodders), or with their values vindicated (if they were Liahonas). Apparently, my audiences saw a different production.

Oh, they had an occasional artistic question such as, "What is the symbolism of the blanket hanging at an angle over the arm of the sofa?" But what amazed me, and stayed with me to this day, is how many members of the Church, feeling themselves disenfranchised in some way, found the play therapeutic, if not cathartic. One woman, a recent divorcée, said with tears in her eyes that not only had she felt "left-out" of the Church but she and her father had also had arguments similar to the ones in the play.



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And then there was a young man—one of many, as it turned out—who had been only six months on his mission before coming home (like the character in the play) for ideological reasons. He said that this had been the first time since his return he had felt that someone understood his agony.

**T**HESE EXPERIENCES listening to audiences were the beginning of my education in the plight of missionaries who return early, that subclass of Mormons which the main character in *Matters* calls “just one step above divorced women in the hierarchy of Those With Whom It Is Not Wise to Associate.”

Why is that? What is it about an early returning missionary that causes some of us to think less of them? Unless the early release is for medical reasons, we tend to think (either to ourselves or aloud to others) that something went wrong. The work was too hard, and Johnny couldn't take it. Did Allan get a Polynesian girl pregnant? Did Dan start reading the *Journal of Discourses* and thus lose his testimony?

Even if a missionary is released for medical reasons, some always have a nagging concern that maybe the illness was merely psychosomatic. (This very suggestion was given to me by an overzealous assistant to the president upon learning of my one-week bout with severe hay fever at the beginning of my mission: “You know, Elder Duncan, some missionaries don't really want to be out here, so their minds make them sick.”)

**W**HY MIGHT SUCH thoughts exist in our culture? I don't have a sure set of answers, only opinions drawn from my own experience, yet I believe they may have some relevance.

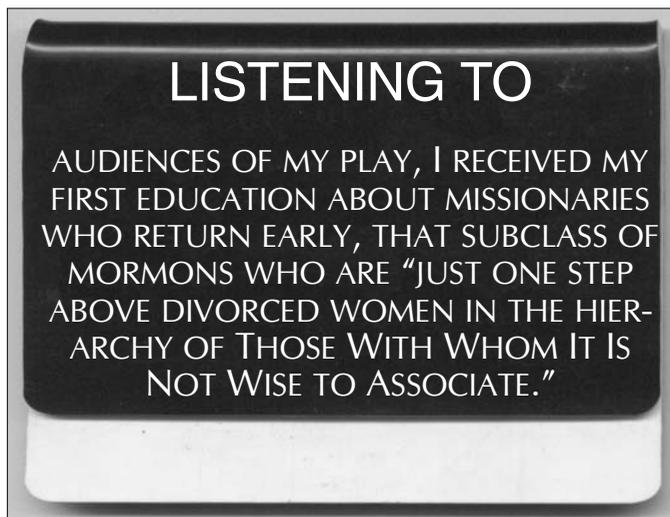
• In a previous stake, my then-young son and I went to the fathers-and-sons outing at which our stake president spoke about young men going on missions. He said recently a young man had been in his office who had said he didn't want to go on a

mission. The stake president chose to characterize this as, in his words, “Satan entering the heart of this young man.”

- Another time I was at a stake conference at which a General Authority, a member of the Seventy, was the main speaker. At one point, I saw his whole frame begin to shake in what I took to represent the Spirit of the Lord as he proclaimed in stentorian tones: “To you young men who don't want to go on missions, I have this to say: ‘What makes you think you have a choice?’”

I believe statements such as this, and others from even higher pulpits, may put an unrealistic perspective on missionary service, reinforcing the idea that every young man is suited for missionary work. My experience is that not all are. At least not all are capable of doing the door-to-door thing—a spiritually draining activity if there ever was one.

What would we lose if, for example, we suggested missionary work as something purely voluntary rather than expected? Certainly, we'd have fewer missionaries in the field. But wouldn't we have *better* missionaries? Any returning mission clerk will testify that seventy percent of the most successful work is performed by thirty percent of the missionaries. The emphasis on the voluntary nature of mission service would most certainly cut down on the gossip and heartache that encircle missionaries who come home early, or haunt



"WE CAN COME BACK LATER IF THIS IS AN INCONVENIENT TIME."

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those who never go. How many of you would think ill of Brother Smith if he were never called to be Sunday School president?

Or maybe all that is needed is to change missionary-related rhetoric. Maybe we can still encourage every young man to serve while reminding people how to treat those who chose not to go or who, for whatever reason, don't remain in the field for the full term of their call.

An example. Recently, my bishop read a letter to the high priests group about the Church's encouraging mothers of children born out of wedlock to put the babies up from adoption. The letter was signed by the First Presidency, but what my bishop said after reading the letter was the most inspiring. He cautioned us against adversely judging those in the Church who chose not to follow the First Presidency's admonition.

I believe there should be more of this attitude. I would love one day to hear a speaker in general conference say something like: "To all young people desirous of going on missions, the Lord is proud of you. He will be by your side at all times. A mission is a wonderful experience. And might I add a few words of caution to you, concerning those who may choose not to go or who may, for whatever reason, come home early.

Do not judge them. Do not think they are spiritually inadequate. Do not think they are cowards. Do not think they don't have a testimony. You don't know why they have come home early, and unless they want to tell you, you may never know. Don't ostracize them from your activities. Love them. Reach out, and include them."

I DON'T LIKE the fact that, while I still can't remember the name of the early returning missionary of my youth, I still see his embarrassment as he stood in that foyer in 1965. Not so long ago, a young man in our ward returned home six months early. I asked him why. "Medical reasons," he said. Actually I knew why, and it wasn't for medical reasons. The stigma attached to those who appear to fail in the "Lord's errand" is so strong that this returned missionary felt he had to lie to be accepted back into the fold of Christ.

I would love to live long enough to see the tragedy of an early returning missionary such as my play expresses become a thing of the past. I want nothing more than to see *Matters of the Heart* become a quaint literary oddity. I pray for the day when an audience engaged in a post-production discussion finds nothing more interesting to talk about than the symbolism of a blanket spread across the arm of the couch. 

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## FOR SLEEP

Into evening, after the swallows flew vespers  
for the deaf by writing their prayers on the pink  
and gray surface of the slippery dusk,  
two sat, again, staring into the night  
eye of New Hampshire. One held the other  
(but it does not matter whose soft hand cupped  
the shoulder of whom). The cry of patient birds  
withdrew into the lilac. A cricket chirped  
once, easily mistaken for the screen  
door spring.

This could be a story unfolded  
to illustrate a point, or just be a story,  
but only the couple could really tell it.  
Young Wittgenstein suggested words as pictures  
to nibble at truth, to frame it briefly.

They sit, these two, in the barest moonlight  
and talk so softly we cannot hear what they say.

We see them, though, and know them, and one word  
slips through. "Enough," one of them says, "enough."

—ROBERT PARHAM