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UPDATE
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Godwrestling: Physicality, Conflict, and Redemption in Mormon Doctrine by Rick Jepson
“Proving Contraries”
A Collection of Writings in Honor of Eugene England

Robert A. Rees, editor

In honor of the late BYU Professor Eugene England (1933–2001), friends and colleagues have contributed their best original stories, poems, reminiscences, scholarly articles, and essays for this impressive volume. In one essay, “Eugene England Enters Heaven,” Robert A. Rees imagines his friend in the next world “organizing writing contests between the Telestial and Celestial Kingdoms, setting up a debate between B. H. Roberts and Bruce R. McConkie, leading a theatre tour to Kolob, and pleading the cause of friends still struggling in mortality.” Rees also imagines England’s being welcomed by the Savior. Rees concludes, “This, is the image I have of Gene entering heaven that I hold in my heart.”
This copy of the magazine is a reprint of the issue mailed 1 December but which had several printing defects that we at Sunstone deemed to be unacceptable. This version represents the way the magazine was designed to look. Please discard the earlier one. We express our great thanks to the press representatives we worked with in Salt Lake City as well as to the Las Vegas printing facility who responded to our concerns in a very forthright and professional way.

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Cover Image: “Battle of Jacob and an Angel” by Jan Spychalski, National Museum, Poznan, Poland
MISSIONARY DISCOURSE

Kudos to John Charles Duffy on another sold contribution to the pages of Sunstone (The New Missionary Discussions and the Future of Correlation, September 2005). This is a very perceptive essay, and its interpretations are probably quite correct in general.

Starting at the top of page 33, he considers whether the new missionary approach signals a “retreat” from our recent Christ-centered discourse, which we share with other Christians, in favor of a “Restoration-centered discourse (underscoring our) difference and uniqueness” (as per my own notion of “retrenchment”). He thinks such is not the case, seeing instead “an effort to integrate” Christ-centered (or “evangelical”) discourse “with a relatively stronger focus on the Restoration” (page 34; see also notes 30–31). His alternative interpretation and mine are both reasonable. However, as I explained in The Angel and the Beehive (University of Illinois Press, 1994, 85–87), the retrenchment motif has always included re-nuement both on the divinity of Jesus and on the unique LDS claims of Restoration through modern prophets. Such convergence as one might see in recent decades between the LDS and the Protestant evangelicals has taken the form mainly of a Christology that makes much more room for “grace” (as contrasted with “works”), manifesting an unofficial drift toward Protestant neo-orthodoxy (see 177–78; but especially O. Kendall White’s book, Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology (Signature Books, 1987). A major oversight in my Angel and Beehive was my failure to make completely clear that there are always two “audiences” for official LDS discourse: (1) the inside audience that is the main target of retrenchment discourse, with its emphasis on the uniqueness of LDS claims, including Restoration and exclusive truth; and (2) the outside audience that is the main target of the more “ecumenical” message that the LDS are really not the case, seeing instead “an effort to integrate” Christ-centered (or “evangelical”) discourse “with a relatively stronger focus on the Restoration” (page 34; see also notes 30–31). His alternative interpretation and mine are both reasonable. However, as I explained in The Angel and the Beehive (University of Illinois Press, 1994, 85–87), the retrenchment motif has always included re-nuement both on the divinity of Jesus and on the unique LDS claims of Restoration through modern prophets. Such convergence as one might see in recent decades between the LDS and the Protestant evangelicals has taken the form mainly of a Christology that makes much more room for “grace” (as contrasted with “works”), manifesting an unofficial drift toward Protestant neo-orthodoxy (see 177–78; but especially O. Kendall White’s book, Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology (Signature Books, 1987). A major oversight in my Angel and Beehive was my failure to make completely clear that there are always two “audiences” for official LDS discourse: (1) the inside audience that is the main target of retrenchment discourse, with its emphasis on the uniqueness of LDS claims, including Restoration and exclusive truth; and (2) the outside audience that is the main target of the more “ecumenical” message that the LDS are really not...
from Church members or leaders at the time confirmed this belief. I was convinced that I would be automatically excommunicated if Church leaders ever learned of my sexual orientation—whether or not I was a “practicing” homosexual. (Priesthood leaders had told me so.) I had already been disciplined (denied callings, a temple recommend, and the sacrament) for admitting to my bishop that I masturbated. Homosexuality seemed much worse in my mind than that. I believed that without my Church membership and without the love of God, I had no reason to live and had decided to end my life.

Fortunately, I encountered a more loving, grace-filled conception of God among Protestant and Catholic friends, and as I came to embrace that God, I found hope and a reason to live. Based on the assurances and testimony of these “gentile” friends, I began to pray again and through prayer, experienced a God who “knew me in my inmost parts,” who knew that I was gay because he had created me that way and who accepted me and loved me as I am. I actually had a pretty dramatic “conversion” experience, receiving a vision in which I saw the throne of God and hearing his voice assure me that he and loved me as I am. I actually had a reason to live and had decided to end my life.

I deeply appreciate Mike Quinn’s essay on doubt in the May 2005 SUNSTONE. The Paul Edwards quotation he cites in particular moves me deeply: “The church is a shell waiting to be opened in search of a pearl. If the shell turns out to be empty, and nothing other than a shell, remember that it has drawn us together...” I also extend a heartfelt thank-you to Frances Lee Menlove for her devotional in the September SUNSTONE. For so long, I was convinced that the only role Latter-day Saints might have in my journey of faith was in my experience of the crucifixion. Now to my delight at symposiums and in the magazine, I find Latter-day Saints with me on the Road to Emmaus.

I enjoyed Blake Ostler’s essay in the May issue as well. Though it would be dishonest not simply to admit that for me, accepting Brent Lee Metcalfe’s view of the Book of Mormon as “American Apocrypha” requires many fewer intellectual gymnastics than trying to conceive of how a literate people would never even write down the name of a single other Native American tribe encountered over the course of a thousand years: I think Latter-day Saints are not only “entitled” as Ostler states, “to read the Book of Mormon in light of the best scientific evidence we have available,” but also not to have to accept a proposition that violates our basic sense of reason or conscience, and that our honestly achieved convictions deserve to be honored. I believe as human beings, we have the right and responsibility to “test all things,” and
doubt all things, and hold only to that which honest trial has proven. I hope that all of us who have been marginalized in one way or another will extend to others the grace we want for ourselves, and learn to disagree in the context of a grace-filled community where we are all loved and respected. I am glad there are Latter-day Saints such as Brother Ostler who are working so hard to help all of us remain open to all the possibilities. I pray I will never refuse to listen, even when I find it hard to believe.

I’m not sure exactly where God is leading me in relation to the Church. I don’t know if, as a “self-avowed, practicing homosexual” who has just celebrated the thirteenth anniversary of my loving relationship with my same-sex life-partner, it is even realistic to think that there will ever be an LDS home for me outside of occasional Affirmation conventions and Sunstone symposiums. And, of course, outside of whatever of community arrives in my mailbox with future issues of SUNSTONE magazine. I’m not quitting my course, outside of whatever of community.

I am grateful for those of you who have extended a long-exiled brother a welcome-back hug, and I look forward to embarking on some kind of new journey with you all, whatever that turns out to be.

JOHN D. GUSTAV-WRATHALL
Minneapolis, Minnesota

HISTORICAL OR BUST!

I N THE SEPTEMBER 2005 SUNSTONE, Dan Vogel’s letter (5–6) and Simon Southerton’s essay (70–73) discuss the possibility of Latter-day Saints coming to view the Book of Mormon as inspired but non-historical. Southerton even suggests that the “false dilemma of a ‘historical-or-bust’ view of the Book of Mormon” is an “extremism” that is “forcing many Latter-day Saints out of the Church” (my emphasis). Vogel and Southerton both raise this issue in the context of discussing DNA, but, of course, the idea that the Book of Mormon might be inspired or even “true” without being historical appeared well before the current DNA hubbub.

I believe, however, that such an approach to the Book of Mormon strikes at the very heart and soul of the Restoration and is entirely unacceptable. Joseph Smith made it clear right from the start that an angel had appeared to him and announced that “there was plates of gold upon which there were engravings which was engraven by Maroni & his fathers the servants of the living God in ancient days and deposited by the commandments of God and kept by the power thereof and that I should go and get them” (1832 account). The Three Witnesses saw the angel and the plates, heard the voice of God, and specifically testified that the Book of Mormon is “a record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites, their brethren, and also of the people of Jared.” The Eight Witnesses testified in concrete language that they saw the plates and heeded and felt them with their hands and examined the engravings, “all of which had the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship.”

Just as the divine delivery of the plates was a historical event that occurred at a specific time and place, the plates themselves relate historical events—most particularly the visit of the resurrected Christ to Lehi’s descendants. By relating Christ’s actual appearance, the Book of Mormon bears powerful testimony of his mission and of his atonement and also confirms the truth of the New Testament. Therefore, the claim that the Book of Mormon is not historical is first of all a denial of Christ. A fictional Christ appearing to fictional Lehetes hardly testifies of a real atonement. Secondly, it’s a denial of Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling. For what could it possibly mean to call him a prophet if the key event in his ministry—the event for which the Lord called not two or three witnesses but four or five times that many; the event that ushered in the restoration of all things and was accompanied not by one but by several ancient artifacts; the event canonized and accepted by the Saints as scripture—turns out to be bogus? I find it interesting that Southerton can devote four pages to the Book of Mormon and the issue of prophetic authority without once mentioning the plates.

Certainly, thoughtful individuals have reached many different conclusions about Joseph’s story of the angel and the plates. Religious belief is an extremely personal thing, and we must all decide for ourselves what we want to believe and what we are capable of believing. I have chosen to believe Joseph’s account and consider that belief an article of faith, not a proven fact. If Southerton experienced a crisis of faith when his scientific knowledge collided with his testimony, I empathize with that, just as I empathize with all who question their faith in the face of personal trials: illness, the tragic death of a loved one, or apparently unanswered—or unheard—prayers. But such empathy does not require me to compromise my own belief.

I am open to the possibility that the statement that the Lamanites are “the principal ancestors of the American Indians” (a claim that seems to be the main target of attacks by both Southerton and Thomas Murphy, even though it was never included in the Book of Mormon text itself) can be revised and rethought. I am not open, however, to jettisoning 3 Nephi 11:10–11. A fictional Book of Mormon is the LDS equivalent of cheap grace—having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof. Historical or bust? Absolutely.

LARRY MORRIS
Salt Lake City, Utah

SIMON SAYS, BUT THAT DOESN’T MAKE IT SO

“Back off man, I’m a scientist.”
Dr. Peter Venkman, Ghostbusters

I N HIS SEPTEMBER 2005 SUNSTONE article, “DNA UBER-Apologetics: Overstating Solutions—Understanding Damages,” Simon G. Southerton, a plant geneticist who was once an LDS bishop, purports to respond to my articles regarding DNA and the Book of Mormon (and also to a letter by Michael Quinn published as a sidebar within my article, “DNA Strands in the Book of Mormon,” SUNSTONE, May 2005). I am glad for the opportunity to respond, because it provides a chance to demonstrate quite definitively that our real disagreement is not about the DNA evidence at all, rather, it is about Southerton’s insistence on what I regard as an untenable and naive interpretation of what constitutes doctrine.

I believe Southerton correctly demonstrates an important point on one issue: DNA evidence is a challenge to a certain kind of faith some Church members still harbor. It is a faith easily upset and challenged by scholarship and science because it’s based on false assumptions and unrealistic expectations. It’s the kind of faith that Southerton insists must be adopted by Latter-day Saints or they are heretics. It is precisely this narrow view of faith—or more precisely the status of assumed cultural over-beliefs not based on a sound view of scripture—that I intend to challenge so that I can suggest that there is a more workable and mature view of faith that doesn’t fall prey to such naive expectations.

WHAT SIMON DOESN’T SAY. It is first imperative to understand what the real disagree-
Southerton's assertion here is interesting because he doesn't disagree that it is quite consistent with the DNA evidence that a group the size of Lehi's could land in the New World somewhere and leave no genetic trace! Indeed, in his response to these issues on the Signature Books website, and to which he points readers in his article, Southerton expressly recognizes that this is the case in his response to so-called apologists for the Book of Mormon:

[Apologists for the Book of Mormon claim that] the bottleneck effect, genetic drift, and other technical problems would prevent us from detecting Israelite genes. In 600 BC there were probably several million American Indians living in the Americas. If a small group of Israelites, say less than thirty, entered such a massive native population, it would be very hard to detect their genes today. However, such a scenario does not square with what the Book of Mormon plainly states and with what the prophets have taught for 175 years (http://www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/Losing2.htm, emphasis added).

Southerton's SUNSTONE article omits what he acknowledges here, that it is entirely consistent with DNA science that a small group of Lehi's could assimilate into a larger population (as I and the vast majority of LDS scholars who write about the Book of Mormon geography and populations agree) and leave no trace of DNA at all. In fact, the founder effect, genetic drift, and genetic bottlenecks are all recognized to have occurred among Amerindian populations at various times. So I am not the only one to throw in with Whiting—so does Southerton! What Southerton disputes is not the DNA evidence but how we read the Book of Mormon. He insists that any reading that doesn't affirm that all Native Americans are descendants of Lamanites is heresy—but not because of what the Book of Mormon actually says. No, it is heresy because that is supposedly the "doctrine" LDS prophets affirmed for 175 years. I will discuss shortly why I regard his approach to "doctrine" and scripture in general as naive and entirely untenable.

It is also important to note that Southerton doesn't address any of the textual arguments from the Book of Mormon itself which I give to show that it speaks of others, non-Israelites, who were already present when Lehi landed. He ignores all of these arguments. He doesn't deal with any Book of Mormon text at all (indeed, his article contains only one citation to the Book of Mormon).

However, if one reads the Book of Mormon as I do (and as do the vast majority of LDS scholars who deal with issues of population and geography), then the DNA issue is not very enlightening. Given that any trace of Lehiite DNA could just disappear is consistent with the genetic evidence: we don't even know if we should expect to find any traces of Israelite DNA had there been Nephites and Lamanites. Yet without knowing what the probability is that we should expect to find such mtDNA traces, we have no basis for judging the probability that the lack of such DNA counts for or against the Book of Mormon. End of argument—and Southerton does nothing to respond to my argument except to agree with the assessment of mtDNA evidence on which it is based. Far from being the "smoke screen" about DNA science that Southerton accuses "apologists" of adopting, it is Southerton who engages in a smoke-screen by failing to address the real issue.

WHAT SIMON SAYS. Southerton claims that the DNA evidence and the conclusions that we can draw from it are all well established and entirely in accordance with what other scientists, linguists, anthropologists, and archeologists have been saying for decades:

[It is the LDS scholars, not scientists, who have changed their views dramatically. For most of the past century, there has been a virtual consensus among scientists that the ancestors of the Amerindians migrated out of Asia more than 14,000 years ago (71). This assertion is wildly untrue. There have been radical changes in New World an-

thropology and specifically regarding the origin of the "first Americans." For the entire last century, scientists maintained that Asians migrated in a single migration over the Bering Strait about 11,600 years ago and that the first settlement was in what is present-day Clovis, New Mexico, (reached by a break in the ice flow of the last ice age). Now researchers fairly well agree that earlier migrations occurred from 40,000 to about 14,000 years ago and that they may have been by
boat along the California and South American coasts. Instead of Clovis, the first settlement now appears to be near present-day Monte Verde in southern Chile. The evidence also now seems to support the possibility of multiple migrations, and, as Southerton admits, evidence also points to European and African lineages that scientists merely assume must be post-1492. Southerton is far more conclusory and certain about what DNA evidence means than are scientists who deal with human anthropology. And he expresses that certainty in a way that is simply unwarranted by the evidence and state of the DNA science.

But, of course, as I’ve shown above, the DNA evidence is not the real issue. Southerton admits that a party the size of Lehi’s could become genetically lost in the pre-existing population and leave no trace of DNA. So I believe that the real issue is about what the Book of Mormon says—except that DNA evidence is not the real issue. Southerton also suggests that High Nibley interpreted scripture differently than I did—or how Nibley did.

There is strong textual evidence that the Lamanites were intermarrying, marked by Nephi’s charge that the followers of Laman had breached the covenant and as a result their skin had become darker—and all those who “mix seed” also had the same darker skin. However, there is no reason to believe that the Nephites or those who followed Nephi intermarried and remained among the Nephites. Jacob expressly states that the Lord led the people out of Jerusalem so that he could “raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph . . . . Wherefore, my brethren, hear me and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none” (Jacob 2:25-27). Jacob argues that God wants the Nephites to remain a pure line of descendants. Thus, they are prohibited from marrying other wives at a time when the only other available wives would be Native Americans.

The fact that the Nephites do not intermarry, though there are Native Americans who live among them, explains why the Lamanites always outnumber the Nephites in virtually every battle between them for six hundred years. The Book of Mormon is replete with references to the fact that the Lamanites vastly outnumber the Nephites—even when the Nephites are fighting a defensive battle in their own lands. The Lamanites intermarried freely, and so their population grew faster. If a Nephite violated the covenant, say by intermarriage, then such as act would have been tantamount to being shunned by the Nephites and becoming a dissenter who joins the Lamanites. The Book of Mormon is replete with references to Nephite dissenters who go over to the Lamanites. So the Nephites remain white because they rejected intermarriage as a breach of covenant.

Southerton also suggests that High Nibley is wrong to argue that the Jaredites traversed the steppes of Asia on their journey to the New World. Southerton argues that Nibley bases his entire view on the assertion that the Jaredites traveled to that quarter “where there never had man been” (Ether 2:5). Well, that isn’t Nibley’s entire argument. He shows that the movement into the “valley of Nimrod” by the Jaredites would take them in a northeasterly direction into Asia (Ether 2:1). When they continue in their journey, they continue in the same direction (Ether 2:4) which would take them into Asia. Nibley also points to the cultural similarities between the Asiatic nomads of the steppes region and the Jaredites. Southerton asserts that the Book of Ether “gives no details of this lengthy migration” (72). I agree that it doesn’t give us “details,” but it gives us enough to suggest that the people of Jared traveled eastward toward a “seashore” and the “great sea” that would bring them to the New World (Ether 2:13). A simple glance at the map shows that travel through Asia is the only candidate for such a trip.

Southerton also argues that Nibley is wrong to associate Asia with what is described in the Book of Ether because “Nibley’s claim about the steppes of Asia being a place largely uninhabited by man prior to the Jaredite migration is wrong; humans have inhabited large portions of central Asia for more than 20,000 years” (72). I am glad that Southerton raised this issue, for this assertion points to a vital fact about how Southerton reads scripture differently than I do—or how Nibley did.

Southerton sees scripture as if it were written from a God’s-eye point of view so that if it says there is an area where no man had been, it must mean that no person had ever been in the whole of central Asia before. Since God would know whether anyone had ever been there, if the Book of Mormon asserts that no one had ever been there, it means that if anyone was there, then the book is wrong. However, Nibley and I see scripture as written by humans from a human point of view, though inspired by God. Even today, one could easily travel through the entirety of central Asia without encountering another person. The mere fact that there were small villages located within a vast region of uninhabited area doesn’t negate the assertion made by the brother of Jared, because, from his perspective it was true.

What BEST SERVES FAITH? In the concluding section of his SUNSTONE article, Southerton joins what has become a small cottage industry of ex-Mormons who have lost their faith who want to give advice to Mormons about how they can best maintain their faith and also about the shape that such faith should take. Brent Metcalfe, Dan Vogel, Tom Murphy, and Southerton are all ex- or disaffected Mormons who argue that giving up on the historicity of the Book of Mormon will serve Mormons better than believing that it is what it claims to be. Such suggestions sound absurd to me. It takes more than a little arrogance and self-deception to argue that what would not work for them is what would work best for those who maintain their faith. My question to them is: If giving up on the historicity of the Book of Mormon has not proven sufficient for you to maintain your faith, what makes you think that it would
work best for someone else?

I believe Southerton’s experience is a very good case study to see whether his suggestions have merit. Southerton was a bishop in Brisbane, Australia, when he ran across an article by a BYU professor who suggested that members who didn’t believe in a worldwide flood were deficient in faith. That article upset Southerton because he didn’t believe in a worldwide flood (presumably because such a belief is scientifically untenable). So he began to search on the internet about what other Latter-day Saints believe on that issue. While researching, he found the DNA results about Amerindians. As he tells the story, he went to bed one night in August of 1998 a believer and woke up the next morning a dissident critic. He immediately abandoned his post as bishop and became inactive. (See http://www.exmormon.org/whylft125.htm.)

Southerton’s experience is instructive to me for several reasons. First, I would expect a scientist to rigorously look at various possibilities and assess them after extended, careful study, thinking, and analysis. Apparently all of Southerton’s critical thinking, research, and hard work occurred one night while he was sleeping. I am puzzled by his response to such evidence. Had he looked a little harder, he would have seen that many of us who consider ourselves faithful Latter-day Saints don’t believe in a worldwide flood and even question the authorship of the Pentateuch. Many of us, I included, accept the JPED theory of the Pentateuch (or some version of it). We believe there very likely was a flood but that it wasn’t worldwide. It could appear that way to those involved in the flood, however, since there was water as far as they could see.

Now if it was okay as a bishop to believe that the flood was not worldwide, despite the fact that earlier LDS prophets clearly believed in a worldwide flood, why must we believe that LDS prophets’ opinions about the Lamanites have the status of “scripture”—something that must be believed if one is to avoid being a heretical Latter-day Saint? I wrote my 1987 article, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Text,” to address just such nonsensical notions of revelation and scripture.

Southerton follows this by nonsensically arguing that we must reject the historicity of the Book of Mormon not because of what the text says, but because of what many Latter-day Saints have believed about it. I acknowledge that for those who have unrealistic expectations about what a person who becomes a prophet knows, my suggestion that a prophet could err must be unsettling. Yet such faith should be challenged because it is not realistic. Perhaps challenging it should be done more gently than I have sometimes done, but that’s a question of temperament, not logic. Southerton’s approach puzzles because it is standard LDS doctrine that prophets can err; that a prophet is a prophet only when speaking as a prophet, that we don’t know it all already because there is still a lot to be revealed, that “doctrine” is what is contained in scripture accepted by common consent of the Saints, and so forth. Thus, Southerton’s assertions that the Church faces “a major contradiction in doctrine and scientific finding” arises only because he includes in “doctrine” what just isn’t doctrine but prophets’ personal views that change over time.

In this regard, a wise statement made by Wendy Ulrich at the August 2005 FAIR conference seems quite appropriate:

I am particularly interested in the impact of betrayal on religious belief, because it seems to be at the heart of matters that cause people the most grief about the Church. I have noticed that many of the people I have known who have left the Church did not do so because they believed too little, but because they believed too much. In their excessive idealism, they have held Church leaders or God to expectations which were inevitably disappointed, and they have felt betrayed. They have not believed God when He told them that ours is a lonely, dreary world where we will surely die, and they have chosen instead to believe another version of reality, one which claims that they can be protected from being molested, disappointed, or made afraid. They have been angry at God or other Church leaders for not keeping promises which God has not, in fact, made. I note with interest that of all the names for the Savior in holy writ, He is never called the Preventer. Agency is the plan, and this means that all of us, including Church leaders, learn by our mistakes and are subject to misinformation, blindness, hubris, and error. The old joke is too often true: In the Catholic church everyone says the pope is infallible but nobody believes it; and in the Mormon church everybody says the prophet is fallible but nobody believes it. (To read Ulrich’s full remarks, see http://www.fairlds.org/pubs/cons/2005/JltW/html.)

I suggest that faith is best served by reasonably distinguishing between scripture or official doctrine and merely cultural overbeliefs accepted by the Saints. Rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater—in Southerton’s case, throwing out the historicity of the Book of Mormon along with erroneous views of some Latter-day Saints—I suggest that Latter-day Saints are entitled to have their beliefs informed by science but must always realize that scientific findings and theories are always tentative and subject

MORMONISM and the
CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Topics will include: Theses in Eastern Orthodoxy, Authority in Roman Catholicism, Works in Western Theology, and God’s Power in Process Theology.

Keynote Speaker:
ROBERT L. MILLET, Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding, BYU

MARCH 30–31
Utah Valley State College

For more information contact:
DENNIS POTTER
potterd@uvsc.edu
801.863.8817
to revision. I suggest that Southerton's position will not work because it ignores that DNA evidence cannot tell us about a small group of Leites who arrived in a New World already populated by Amerindians. Southerton's argument commits the logical fallacies of "hasty generalization" and the "undistributed middle," in addition to the fact that the argument doesn't have a logically valid structure. This is the argument I made in Part I of my series. That Southerton fails to address it suggests to me that he realizes he jumped off the ship of the faithful too early and abandoned his post as bishop based on poor thinking done in his sleep.

My final gripe with Southerton is his assertion that apologists are forcing people like him out of the Church. He asserts that "many apologists are not only misrepresenting the molecular research but also creating a climate that is forcing many Latter-day Saints out of the Church." (70) And later, "But wouldn't it temper the damage to prophetic authority if today's prophets were to act boldly in reiterating strong faith in a miraculous Book of Mormon without forcing a particular interpretation of what that might mean?" (72). The notion that Southerton and others are being forced out of the Church is a remarkable example of a refusal to accept accountability for one's decisions. The Church hasn't forced any interpretation but has followed Joseph Smith and his revelations which assert that the Book of Mormon is the record of ancient peoples. The Church didn't force me to take any position on the Book of Mormon, I do so freely, by choice. And so does Southerton and those he claims are being "forced" out of the Church. The reality is that I know several faithful Latter-day Saints who hold temple recommend books attacking the Church and the Book of Mormon. Even now, Southerton does not affirm what he says that he wants the prophets to affirm. He doesn't say that the Book of Mormon is miraculous or inspired. On the blogs for ex-Mos, Southerton puts on quite a different face. He is two-faced on this issue, presenting one face for those who attack the Church openly (and often in the most vile language imaginable) and yet another face for the readers of SUNSTONE. How can Southerton say that he should be excommunicated for attacking the Book of Mormon because his work on that is so much more damaging to the Church than is his admitted adultery, and then turn around and claim that the Church should change to allow people like him room to remain in the faith. This is a man who was begging to be kicked out of the Church so he could publicize his position to wrench a change out of the Church. He was begging to be kicked out because he is dangerous to the faith of the faithful, and yet he turns around and purports to give spiritual advice to faithful Saints, telling them they are best served by throwing out the Book of Mormon for what it claims to be. Is such a view really something that can be asserted in good faith and without massive doses of self-deception?

BLAKE T. OSTLER
Sandy, Utah

If you wish to write letters to editors, address them to that author, care of SUNSTONE, 343 N. Third West, Salt Lake City, Utah 84103. We will forward them unopened.
FROM THE EDITOR

HOPEFUL

By Dan Wotherspoon

SYMPOSIUM NORTHWEST!

THE 2005 SYMPOSIUM NORTHWEST was among the best regional symposiums ever. On 15 October, some sixty attendees were once again welcomed into the home of the Roy and Molly Bennion, where they were treated to a program that led with Margaret Starbird’s presentation, “Mary Magdalene: Bride and Beloved. Reclaiming the Sacred Union in Christianity.” She was followed by Phil McMorrow, who gave a wonderful introduction to the transformative nature of meditation. John Dehlin came next, presenting a whirlwind overview of the emergence of blogs, podcasting, and Wikis in the LDS cyberuniverse and offering an inspiring vision for their future role in Mormon studies.

In the afternoon, Martha Sonntag Bradley drew on material from her new book, Pedestals and Podiums: Utah Women, Religious Authority & Equal Rights, in a fascinating paper, “The Right Fight: The LDS Campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment.” Bradley was followed by a music-filled, affectionate presentation on “The Vitality of Mormon Hymns” by Tom Pixton of West Linn, Oregon. Moving from podium to piano, and presenting and encouraging the audience to join with him in a cappella renditions of favorite hymns, Pixton delighted all. His daughter Skye also attended and gave a moving guitar and voice performance.

The day ended with a part-planned, part-spontaneous session, “The Best Idea in Mormonism,” that can only be described as a testimony meeting: but one that didn’t include a single cliche!

Recordings of the symposium sessions, except for Starbird’s, are available for purchase at www.sunstoneonline.com.

M Y DELIGHT OVER my recent trip to attend this year’s Symposium Northwest was tempered by sad news I received during the event. Between morning sessions, a shaken, teary-eyed Tom Kimball passed along a message he’d just received that the health of our good friend Bron Ingoldsby had taken a dramatic turn for the worse and that Bron would likely be gone before we would be able to visit him after our trip. His liver cancer, in remission for too short a season, had come back with a vengeance.

Most SUNSTONE readers will not have been lucky enough to know Bron. But you deserve a glimpse, for Bron was one of those Latter-day Saints who managed what many of us are trying to do: comfortably marry our heads and our hearts, without having either feel lessened. And remarkably, Bron managed to do this while teaching in the Marriage, Family, and Human Development departments at LDS schools—first Ricks College (now BYU-Idaho) and, for the past several years, at BYU.

Bron’s “vocation”—in both the word’s professional sense as well as in the life one is “called to”—was teacher. But his teaching extended far beyond the classroom. His impact at Church schools and among friends wasn’t flashy. His way was quiet and unassuming—but courageous.

Perhaps one of the best examples reflecting Bron’s way of being in the world was his visible support for the right of Gary Horlacher, one of his graduate students, to remain at BYU while choosing to be open about his homosexuality. The ensuing battle involved four different investigations over two-and-a-half years. Of it, Gary writes: “Bron was there by my side through it all . . . . He was able to tolerate ambiguity and was so effective, whether it be interacting with highly religious LDS extremists or militant feminists. He was able to mesh with everyone.”

When Gary put the word out that I was planning to write a reflection on Bron and would welcome any remembrances, I immediately received a slate of emails from others of Bron’s students. Echoing Gary’s sentiments, Brooke Wilkins writes: “I will always remember him as a kind, understanding person who was everyone’s friend and never judged anyone.” Another student, Princess Caratoo, writes: “He was one of the greatest optimists I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. He saw light where there was none.”

I FIRST got to know Bron through my friendship with Tom Kimball, whose brother is married to Bron’s sister. For years, Tom had spoken of him as this really cool Ricks professor who always comes to Sunstone symposiums, but I didn’t catch on to the terrific he really was until he moved from Idaho to take his position at BYU. He quickly became a favorite regular at our “card nights”—so called because a game of Hearts is occasionally involved, but really they are just six or seven friends gathering for a theological free-for-all.

When Bron was diagnosed, his and my friendship deepened, growing in ways that perhaps only can be triggered by the serious matter of dying. Throughout our discussions that ranged from alternate therapies and the mind-body connection to fresh examinations of our beliefs about life after death, Bron’s light and courage burned bright. I’m not exactly sure where he and I landed on that subject during what turned out to be our last visit together, but I know that we felt hopeful. But what else could Bron be? It’s who he is.

I’ll see you again, good friend.

If you knew Bron and want to share a remembrance, please visit the Sunstone blog: www.SunstoneBlog.com.
**'Tis the Season**

**A COLD DECEMBER MORNING**

Faith. The concept has always been a bit of a sore spot with me. Back in my religious days, it was the main thing I was always trying to understand and get a handle on. Something I always knew I lacked. If all of Christianity were operating on faith, why did it seem such a hard thing for anyone to talk about, or to explain in any way that I could incorporate, or practice? It seemed like the people who had it couldn't tell me at all how they got it, which made me wonder if they had anything at all. Honestly, there towards the end, the mere mention of the word would bring me to near-rage. I was sure I'd never had it. Sure I never would.

It was nearly Christmas time. Fresh snow. Not a lot, but enough to cover the world. As I sat up in bed, my first glimpse outside was a still white blanket over the cars in the parking lot beneath the street lights. I crawled from the warm sheets and shut the cold bedroom air behind the door, the heat of the hallway feeling nearly as good on my skin as the sheets had. My daily ritual. I stepped into the bathroom then into the hallway feeling nearly as good on my skin as the sheets had served—I turned and stepped up on the curb. She was bigger than life-size, standing up on a pedestal. Startling. Holding a heart in her hands. Only it wasn't a real, anatomical heart. It was more symbolic, a valentine-shaped kind of heart, and although her face was turned down towards it, her eyes looked upwards—heavenwards, I guess. Mary holding a heart like this, in the still silence of the morning, seemed weird to me. Almost morbid in a way. But also kind of touching, as if I knew more about it, maybe I could find it kind of peaceful.

My side-vision saw something else in the background. More sculptures—people, all in color. It took only an instant to recognize them. The Nativity. The full scene, life-sized, made of some kind of molded plastic. Standing together in a group off to the side of the double-door entrance to the chapel. The area was covered, protected from the snow, and a dim light fell on them from above. Except for the soft distant whirr of cars passing on the far end of the lot, the morning was still silent. It had been a lot of years since I've felt comfortable in a church, and walking up the porch there I felt uneasy—that I was in someone else's sacred spot and since I didn't know the proper way to feel or behave, I probably ought not be there. Slowly I stepped forward.

They were all there. The three wise men. Camels, sheep. All of them full-sized, looking quite real, silently standing and looking forward towards the same spot. With a look on his
face of unbelievable tenderness, Joseph was kneeling near to his wife. Mary's hands were clasped at her breast, as if in utter awe at the beauty of what lay before her. I felt a pull, as if I were a member of their group. I felt the desire to look forward with them, follow their eyes, and see what they were seeing. I felt like they were alive, real people who knew I was there but would not interrupt their gaze long enough to turn and acknowledge me. They were all so still, so silent, so intent.

I stepped around the rock pillar that had been blocking my view, knowing full-well what they were looking at and what would lie before me. I stopped short. The manger was empty. The box with straw and all was there, but no baby. Jesus was gone. Incredible! Someone had stolen the Jesus, I thought, and immediately, I chuckled, even out loud a little bit. Imagine someone with guts enough to steal the Baby Jesus right out of a nativity! Then some philosophical irony hit me as well. Isn't that just perfect? Isn't that exactly how it is? Everybody always saying Jesus is there, but when people go to look for him, he really isn't. No sign at all. Nothing more than everyone's imagination or desire to believe in something.

I looked back at the Wise Men. Suddenly, I regretted the echo of my laugh. The faces of the Wise Men hadn't changed one bit, neither had Joseph's or Mary's. What was the deal? They knew the baby wasn't there. They could see that. Yet they still stood watching, waiting. Hoping maybe. With absolute humility and adoration on their faces. And honest to god, for the first time in my life, standing there with the Wise Men and Joseph and Mary, I caught my first-ever glimpse of Faith. I stood several minutes with them all, none of us saying anything, just looking. Hoping mostly. Eventually I turned, walked, then jogged over to my apartment to get on with my day.

It didn't change my life. Didn't get me back to church or anything. But when I hear the word faith now, or when I think of it, I have an idea of what it is. What it feels like. And I think I understand the reason no one ever explains it decently is because it can't be explained in words. It's something you just feel or don't. And one Christmas season, in silence and stillness, I felt it.

DARLA GRAFF THOMPSON
Los Alamos, New Mexico

This side of the tracts

MY ADVENTURES AS A COFFEE ABSTAINER

I HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE OF GROWING UP IN AN orthodox but fairly relaxed Mormon home. My brothers, sister, and I were nurtured in an environment that just assumed we would follow all the teachings of the Church. None of us went through a particularly rebellious stage, and I don't recall our parents working very hard to keep us in line. Of our two parents, mother was the main disciplinarian—and more doctrinaire. We never had face cards in the house, contenting ourselves to play Rook. Likewise because of her, we never had cola drinks. As for coffee, I don't remember it ever being discussed. We were never exposed to it and never had any particular desire to try it.

Temptation first struck when I was a deacon. A close friend, whose father was our bishop at the time, invited me to his house one evening when his parents were gone. He led me to the kitchen and displayed a forbidden can of coffee. (It was used by his grandfather, a respected, even revered, BYU professor who had drunk coffee all his life. He was one of a great many who could not give it up when President Grant finally got serious about enforcing the Word of Wisdom.)
I was mesmerized as my friend prepared two cups of coffee. Like the forbidden fruit, it was suddenly there, and the pungent aroma was enticing. He handed me my cup, and for the first time, I faced an opportunity to experience the dark side. After taking the tiniest of sips, I made a hasty exit.

After that narrow escape, I managed to stay away from coffee until I was drafted during the Korean War. On my second week in the army, I ended up on KP duty. The head cook, a sergeant, told me to go make the coffee for the entire company. There was a huge coffee urn and a set of instructions outlining the procedure. The final step was to taste the coffee and adjust the strength as needed. I went to the sergeant and told him I couldn't complete the final step because I didn't know what coffee was supposed to taste like. I suspect that during his army career, he heard every possible excuse by those trying to get out of work. The gist of his reply was that unless I wanted to spend the rest of a miserable lifetime on permanent KP, I would get out of his face and finish making the coffee. I went back and decided just to skip the final step.

About midway through the morning, our company commander, a captain, came in for his usual coffee. He walked over to the urn, filled a cup, and then sat down. Suddenly I heard him bellow, "Who the hell made the coffee today?" As I meekly approached, he informed me that his wife, when totally drunk, would ask him bellow, "Who the hell made the coffee today?" As I meekly approached, he informed me that his wife, when totally drunk, made better coffee than I had.

Following my army experience, I served a two-and-a-half-year mission in Sweden. Whenever we managed to be invited in, we would almost immediately be offered a nice hot cup of coffee. Coffee is a major part of social life there, and if you turn it down, no one knows quite what to do. We soon learned that in Sweden, you are expected to drink coffee. I went back and decided just to skip the final step.

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So there it was: the absence of coffee machines in Utah's public high schools was apparently based only on religious grounds, and discriminating on those grounds would be indefensible in a public school. I knew better than to ask the district for permission, so I quietly had a machine installed, making certain that it also dispensed hot chocolate and soup.

Everything seemed to go fine for about a month. I made no announcements, letting word spread as students saw the machine themselves. Then one morning, I got a phone call summoning me to meet with the district superintendent (who was also a stake president) "right away." I got to his office quickly, where he delivered an ultimatum from the president of the school board: "Either that machine goes, or you go! You have 24 hours." I unwisely suggested that he only preach free agency while I was trying to practice it.

Early the next morning, an assistant superintendent came to the school to make certain the machine was gone. The crews hadn't arrived yet to pick it up, so he instructed me to keep the cafeteria locked until they did. Thinking this still might not be enough of a foolproof plan, he had me unplug the machine and turn its face to the wall, then lock the cafeteria.

Unlike the machine, I was not removed from Cottonwood High School immediately but was ultimately demoted to an elementary school with a pay cut. My aspirations to be a superintendent someday withered and died. Board members gave crazy reasons for my removal, but everyone knew the coffee machine had been the beginning of my end.

So there is my story. A lifetime of avoiding the coffee bean with all its attendant evils was not sufficient to save me from disaster. At this late point, however, I'm not going to take up coffee drinking. I'm perfectly content to go right on abstaining—and getting ready for my next game of Rook.

—Reed Wahlquist
Salt Lake City, Utah
PRIESTHOOD HOLDER ASKS, “WHERE’S THE SIZZLE?”

By Christopher Bigelow

SANTAQUIN, UT—On a recent Sunday, area priesthood holder Dave Bons felt “a major disconnect” when his elders quorum president invited the brethren to attend a 7:00 a.m. stake priesthood meeting the following Sunday.

“All he did was stand up and state the time and place of the meeting,” said Bons. “His voice was monotone, and he said nothing about any features or benefits of the meeting. I couldn’t help asking myself, ‘Where’s the razzle-dazzle? Where’s the sizzle?’

Bons said he might have considered attending if any tantalizing teasers had been provided. “Was there going to be a special guest speaker? A dynamic new gospel program? Some key piece of revelation for our particular place and time? A new look and feel for the stake newsletter? A new pill that cures pornography addiction?

Bons says that he considers himself a gospel consumer. “I pay a lot of money into the Church, and I want a little romancing in return.”

In apparent response to his concerns, on Saturday afternoon, Bons found a postcard-sized piece of goldenrod paper taped to his front door that said, in 12-point Times New Roman italic font:

Come to stake priesthood meeting tomorrow morning at 7:00. It will strengthen your family.

“I suppose that’s a start,” Bons said, “I dunno—I guess I just want to be targeted by a real Church marketing campaign for a change.”

“TECHNICALLY A VIRGIN” MOVEMENT TAKING OFF

By Roy Thorne

OREM, UT—A new movement intended to promote chastity and virtue has become the new “hip thing” among LDS youth. Promoters say the “Technically a Virgin” movement is a “realistic answer to the vexing problem of teen sexuality.”

Tiffany Bingham, a junior at Mountain View High School in Provo says she feels “way better about myself” ever since joining the movement. “It used to be, I’d be out with Jared, my boyfriend, and we’d start fooling around, and I’d feel all icky and sinful afterwards. But now I think, ‘Hey, technically, we didn’t break any, like, major-type commandments.’ So it’s all cool.”

And Heather Hanson, a senior at Timpview added, “It’s like Sister Reeves, our awesome new YW leader says, ‘There may be a stain on your skirt, but there’s no stain on your soul.’”
2005 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest Third Place Winner

WINTER LIGHT

By Stephen Carter

Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?
The watchman said: the morning cometh and also the night.
—Isaiah 21:11-12

backs. Sometimes they did unspeakable things in the bathrooms. But only because they didn’t know any better—the very reason why people who got off the train and went back to the waiting room were in such a pickle. After all, they had eaten in the dining car, received their complimentary engineer’s hat and contemplated their glorious destination, but now they were sullying themselves. They could do exactly the same things the unenlightened could do, but they were losing something they could never get back. Their original purity.

May was a lost sheep. One who had strayed.

Poetry was more important than church. She always wrote fond poems about her family after her visits yet May couldn’t communicate with them. They spoke across a chasm. You can see that separation in a picture of May and her parents when her first book was published. May, taller than her parents, stands in the center, her usual deadpan understating the glee any poet must feel at being bound between two boards. Her mother and father stand on either side, with identical expressions. They still wear their coats, a fedora perched on dad’s head, as if they’re just about to leave. None of them is touching another. Three pillars. Three cardboard cutouts.

May’s brothers and sisters never stopped trying to bring her back—if not to Utah, to the Church. Knowing that May had a scientific turn of mind, my grandfather once sent her Faith of a Scientist, by Henry B. Eyring, and Evidences and Reconciliations, by John A. Widstoe, hoping that a rational approach to religion would change her direction. Widstoe, she wrote back, was interesting, a mind worth encountering. Eyring was a bore.

I spent about six months preaching the gospel in Belleville, Ontario. I missed the mountains of Utah Valley; they had always given me a sense of direction, literally. The mountains always ran north and south. A corridor, a demarcated track. In Belleville, Lake Ontario gave me the same sense

Stephen Carter is a founding member of The Sugar Beet, Mormonism’s premiere satirical newspaper. A collection of new and used Sugar Beet articles will be published under the title, The Mormon Tabernacle Enquirer by Pince Nez Press in April 2006. Stephen can be reached at ftsrc@uaf.edu.
of direction (lake is south), a place to look for if I was ever lost. Belleville had that whiff of the pastoral town that saturates Norman Rockwell paintings, as if Winesburg, Ohio, had been moved north to Ontario for historic preservation. I loved the fact that the Via Train could zip through miles of cornfields, that mist covered the ground during autumn evenings, that Church Street, by gum, had churches on it! Really swell ones, too, with high-collared Victorian architecture. And I loved to drive across the bridge arcing over the lagoon to the island of Prince Edward County.

But one of my very favorite places was Bob Cottrell's home. It was a brown-and-red brick house that sat comfortably on a street lined with two-story maples, leaves almost buzzing with red energy. Bob was about half finished remodeling the house. The main floor was complete with a white fireplace, wood-paneled floors, and track lighting. Stairs was still in progress.

To us, Bob was like his house—almost converted. He had been on the teaching list for about six months when I arrived. He had attended a baptism; he had heard most of the lessons; he even came to church sometimes. We were always saying to ourselves, “This week Bob’s going to get wet.” I wanted Bob baptized for two reasons. First, I hadn’t baptized anyone yet and I wanted to see what it was like. Second, I really liked Bob. He was a theater guy, and having just finished high school where I had played Polonius, so was I. He was also uncommonly classy. From his perfectly disarranged ivy, just starting to reach its tendrils to the first rung of the latticework. “That plant is a lot like me,” he said. “It’s just starting to grow. And I’m not sure where it’s going yet. In fact, let’s make that my spiritual plant. Let’s see how it grows.”

The missionaries bought a bag of fertilizer that night. By the time I arrived, the ivy, just taking on its fall hue, was making its way up the lattice, but Bob still wasn’t baptized. Finally, one evening while we were teaching Bob one of the missionary lessons, I entered the zone. I could feel the Spirit rolling through the room like a tidal wave as I testified of the truthfulness of the gospel. I was almost getting a headache from it. While I testified, I watched Bob, sitting with one leg folded beneath him, the other over the arm of his chair, his fingers poised at the side of his face—the thoughtful posture. He was listening; surely he was feeling this. I stopped.

“Bob, you feel that? That sense of peace and goodness? It’s the Spirit telling you that what I’m saying is true.”

Bob thought for a moment and then nodded, mostly to himself.

“So I took the next step, the one you take while the momentum is fresh and strong. “Bob, will you be baptized?”

I went home disappointed. But in the car Elder Mecham said, “I felt the Spirit in there, Elder Carter. There’s no way Bob could have missed it.”

I had to agree.

Finally I received a transfer out of Belleville. I hadn’t seen Bob for a few weeks, but before I left I called him to say goodbye. He invited us over for dinner, which surprised me—goodbye. We were eating, the train pulls in. Next stop, the baptismal font.

Actually, helping Bob feel the Spirit wasn’t my real job because we knew Bob was already experienced. The first time my missionary companion and I visited him, he had told us that whenever he prayed, he felt a sense of peace. He also enjoyed our company for the same reason. What he was describing was the Spirit working on his soul, no two ways about it. We had pointed that fact out to him, but he just didn’t seem to grasp it. It was strange that he hadn’t—Bob seemed to be the prime baptism type: he was spiritual and thoughtful, he was generous, and he kept letting us in the door.

But Bob had an unpredictable turn of mind, and it always seemed to keep him an unknown variable in our spiritual equations. For example, during his early days of investigating the Church, the missionaries had challenged him to be baptized. Bob had thought about it for a moment and then took them out onto his front porch. He showed them his newly planted ivy, just starting to reach its tendrils to the first rung of the latticework. “That plant is a lot like me,” he said. “It’s just starting to grow. And I’m not sure where it’s going yet. In fact, let’s make that my spiritual plant. Let’s see how it grows.”

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The dinner was great. Bob had made it himself. He lit candles, turned off most of the lights in the house, and cranked up the Chopin. When we finished eating, Bob went out of the room and came back with a gift for each of us. They were wrapped in tissue paper with oval pieces of paper each bearing quotations from a Romantic poet. Mine was from Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It said, “If there were no God, we would have all this beauty and no one to thank for it.” I opened my gift. It was a tape recording of Glenn Gould’s rendition of the Goldberg Variations.
“He’s an odd musician,” Bob said, “because he hums along with the music—and not always on key. You can actually hear it in the recording. That’s one of the reasons I like him so much.”

CRYSTAL WAS ONE OF THOSE MIRACULOUS FINDS. THE kind that come after a hot day of knocking doors—the kind of door you have given up on until, of course, a kid in a diaper comes tearing around the side of the house.

Crystal and her four children lived in an old, two-story saltbox-style house. It was a dark place. Despite the windows, the wood paneling and gray walls drank the light insatiably. The furniture looked as though it were an organic part of the house, sinking into the 1960s wallpaper, melting into the sagging floors. In a small room just off the living room, an inexplicable white man lay in a hospital bed, his beard flaring like the sun, his eyes like awl points. Crystal never introduced us to him. And he never spoke.

I think the old man was a relative of Crystal’s, because she had the same sharp eyes. The kind you find on a girl you had ignored through school until you one day see past her self-consciously feathered hair and cheap clothes to a soul that startles you.

The road to baptism was a rough one for Crystal. The poor girl had to give up smoking, alcohol, coffee, and tea—part and parcel of the whole Mormon gig. Her husband threw us out of the house once, convinced that we were changing her for the worse: she wouldn’t let him smoke in the house anymore and had avoided a certain marital act because, well, it’s a cigarette trigger. I couldn’t really blame the guy. Then a well-meaning but overbearing cousin threw the whole anti-Mormon spiel at her one afternoon, causing Crystal to break a few bright red press-on nails as she clenched the counter edge, waiting for the onslaught to end. The principal at the Catholic school her girls attended threatened to kick them out if Crystal became a Mormon. Crystal also owned up to the real reason she’d let us in the door that first day. “You was cute,” she said—referring to Elder Mecham.

But it all came, and passed. Crystal somehow managed to get her children to church every Sunday. She had even convinced her husband to come listen to us a time or two. Her blood ran free of nicotine for the first time in years. And then, one brisk autumn Sunday, all her sins were washed away.

Naturally, to remember the moment, we took a picture of the three of us together in front of the font: Crystal dressed in white, twiggy elbows poking through her dress, preparing to be purified. Ticket about to be punched.

A LITTLE WHILE BEFORE HER MOTHER DIED, MAY WROTE to her about her own life on the east coast, so far away from home. May told her mother how much she admired her. She could do what May could not, raise children, place herself on a strait and narrow path and follow it. “I do not know whether I am making a big circle with my life (I hope it is not a zero!) simply in order to arrive, in the end, where I started.”

2001. SALT LAKE CITY. I GOT ON A BOEING 747 WITH my wife and two children. Nonstop 2600 miles to Anchorage, Alaska, and from there, another 362 miles northeast to Fairbanks. As we flew north, the sun hung on the horizon, never quite moving, even though we travelled until midnight. It was almost as if we were following the sun. Tracking it to its home.

As I’ve found out, light is an important element to factor into the average Alaskan’s life. Living in Fairbanks, 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle, I don’t get the full brunt of northern darkness. The folks who live on the north coast go a few weeks completely without the sun, and many more with it merely
peaking over the horizon, a smoky red eye. Nevertheless, we in Fairbanks can claim our share of Sunlight Affective Disorder sufferers. At the deepest of winter’s dark the sun visits only between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. It just sort of lolls over the Alaskan range, and as Fairbanks is covered with tall spruce and birch, we’re lucky to see the sun at all most days. It refuses us any heat.

However, I feel sorry for anyone who dies without seeing the aurora. LSD has nothing over it. But most of the time the northern lights are no relief from the Alaskan night. Witnessing them is like watching a dress rehearsal for the apocalypse. Great and terrible. Whirling coils of light. The contrails of avenging angels. Especially because the lights are so large, so untouched, a towering inferno, but speak only in whispers. It would be a relief to hear the voice of the aurora; it would give one’s mind something to distract itself with, something that would lessen the abstract impact of the spectacle. The explosion of a firework or the thunderclap following a lightning strike can convulse our bodies with a primal fright. A guttural instinct wakes for an instant to engage the mind in thoughts of escaping bodily harm. But the aurora does not approach with force, it seduces. It flirts with its veils, moving like the helix of the surf or the muscles of a horse, promising a revelation. And you watch as if you were in the presence of gods. But when the veil is removed, all you see is vast, starred emptiness. The joke is on you. The veil was removed not to reveal its source, but to reveal you.

That’s what heaven’s like. Revelation in one hand, a knife in the other.

Getting lost is becoming easy for me. Coming from a valley walled off by mountains 11,000 feet high, I feel as if I am at sea in the midst of the undulations of the Fairbanks land and sky-scape. The hills run in no discernible pattern. The Alaskan Range is too far away to steer by. The sky transforms second by second. I can’t tell which direction I would walk if one day I decided to go home.

MAY: ONE ARM AKIMBO, DEADPAN, A VIEW OF SOME anonymous bit of New York City behind her. She had just finished her life. I was only fourteen years into mine. The grainy obituary photo seemed appropriate, as did the backdrop. May was famous, sure. But I imagined her in the next life, blinking in the midst of the undulations of the Fairbanks land and sky-scape. The hills run in no discernible pattern. The Alaskan Range is too far away to steer by. The sky transforms second by second. I can’t tell which direction I would walk if one day I decided to go home.

TOWARD THE END OF MY SERVICE IN TORONTO, I MET a missionary who had just come out of Belleville. Excited, I asked him if he had known Crystal. He thought for a moment and said, “Oh yeah, the crazy lady who ran out on her family.”

As I look back now at the picture of Crystal’s baptism, study her dark eyes, she looks as if she’s standing in front of a firing squad, or perhaps the edge of a cliff. Her hands clamped behind her back, head cocked to one side. Squinting as if into a hard wind.

2003. SUNDAY. A VISIT TO UTAH. THE CHAPEL IS FULL, the loudspeakers in the lobby aren’t working. It’s testimony meeting. People from the congregation go to the pulpit and tell the gathered saints what they know to be true. Sometimes they relate miracles. Sometimes just gratitude. Sometimes they try to sell real estate. But since my wife and I can’t hear anything in the lobby, we leave. We don’t realize my mom has reserved some pew space for us. She waits the whole meeting.

Mom sits across the table from me, her son from Alaska. “How are you keeping your testimony strong?” she asks. It’s such a simple question in Mom’s language. I used to be able to answer it easily, such as on the day she and my dad picked me up from my mission and I answered over the space of four hours. Now I need another four, most of it to spend on translation. There are too many words that don’t have a single meaning. Too many mountains have been moved. Too many constellations veiled.

Testimony meeting isn’t over for that Sunday. Mom has saved hers for me. I can tell that she loves me because she talks for a half hour straight. I don’t doubt anything she says. I know her story. I know her certitude. It’s palpable; an actual presence. The old language. The rising of the sun. But she weeps because she thinks she’s doing a bad job. “I can’t explain things these days. I can’t put them in order,” she says.

For that tiny moment, I hear her. No translation required. I wish I could talk back.

But she wants me to talk about the sun; the aurora’s voice fills me instead.

A YEAR AFTER MAY’S DEATH, HER SISTER MARGARET DID May’s temple work for her. Mormonism has a very merciful side to it. If you don’t accept the gospel in this life, you can in the next. So Mormons do baptisms for their dead relatives (and often for people they don’t even know). They also do the other, higher, ordinances: sealings, washings and anointings. But there’s an addendum to this loophole. If you had been the type of person who would have received the gospel, had you heard it in this life, the ordinances can be valid. Otherwise—you had your chance. And, as I figured it at the time, May had a lot of chances. She got off track. She became kind of famous in the waiting room, circling around in there. Falling in love with the vending machine. Ignoring the ticket office. Monochrome, anonymous, concrete.

BACK TO ALASKA, 2900 MILES FROM SPANISH FORK, Utah. My family and I sit in Dad’s Jeep, ready to go. Mom comes out to say goodbye. She kisses her grandchildren and daughter-in-law. Then she comes to my door. She hugs me and looks at me for a moment.

“It’s enough to make a mother cry.”

To comment on this article or read comments by others, please visit the Sunstone blog: www.sunstoneblog.com.
I am a wrestler of great enthusiasm and moderate ability. In traveling to tournaments and making acquaintances from all over the world, I’ve frequently been asked tongue-in-cheek what it is about Mormonism that produces such great wrestlers. The two standout wrestlers in recent Olympics, Cael Sanderson and Rulon Gardner, are both LDS. So is Larry Owings, who beat Dan Gable thirty-two years earlier in what many regard as the best college wrestling match of all time. Some say the second best was when Mark Schultz, another Mormon, beat Ed Banach in 1982. At a seminar I once attended, Schultz joked that if someone wants to be a great wrestler, he should join the Church.

A year ago, I began looking to see if there might be something connecting these athletes with the first renowned Mormon wrestler, Joseph Smith—and perhaps even to the obscure Old Testament story of Jacob wrestling all night with an angel. Because I wasn’t aware of the treasures hidden in the Genesis account, I wasn’t looking for anything particularly profound. My original focus in examining Jacob’s match was just on period wrestling styles. But that quickly changed as I came to better understand the key role his legendary wrestle played in transforming him from rascal to prophet. Some have even speculated that the way he proved himself in the match, both to himself and God, led to his having his calling and election made sure (see sidebar, page 20). Afterward, he limped away as Israel—the Godwrestler—father to a chosen nation.

Jacob’s struggle and tried to emulate it in dealing with their own trials.

A LEGENDARY STRUGGLE

Jacob’s story is familiar. After twice deceiving his brother, Jacob had fled for his life and taken refuge with his uncle. Two wives, two concubines, twelve sons, one daughter, and twenty years of servitude later, he was returning home. But word came that Esau was riding out to meet him with an army of four hundred. Fearing his brother’s revenge, Jacob remained behind but sent his family across the river Jabbock bearing gifts. Then a stranger appeared who wrestled Jacob through the night. Although his hip was dislocated during the bout, the soon-to-be prophet finally won and refused to release his opponent until he identified himself and gave a blessing.

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.

And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.

And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him,

By seeing Jacob’s all-night wrestling match through the lenses provided by other accounts of revolutionary grappling experiences and spiritual rebirth, we can learn much about the role of physicality in our spiritual lives.
Many biblical commentaries disregard Jacob’s story, assuming it’s either a fabrication or an adaptation from an earlier myth. The Genesis narrative is not unique in ancient literature, in which wrestling legends abound. The oldest known human writing includes the Sumerian saga of Gilgamesh, who changed from tyrant to hero after an epic wrestling match against the demigod Enkido. Both Hercules and Samson out-wrestled lions, which Brazilian grapplers commemorate with a devastating choke called Mata Leão—or “lion killer.” And Hercules went on to throw and pin several magical opponents. Early Christian writers describe Job as a wrestler who “threw his opponent in every wrestling bout.” Mohammed bested a disbeliever to prove his prophetic status. Even J.R.R. Tolkien’s modern creation myth, The Silmarillion—which some call an Old Testament to the Lord of the Rings—has a god who “delights in wrestling and in contests of strength.”

This ubiquity of ancient wrestling myths makes Jacob’s struggle hard to take at face value, but the story’s fairy tale qualities are even more problematic. His opponent’s plea for release before sunrise seems more appropriate for a haunting vampire than a wrestling angel. Mohammed’s modern creation myth, The Silmarillion—which some call an Old Testament to the Lord of the Rings—has a god who “delights in wrestling and in contests of strength.”

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 SPIRITUAL PHYSICALITY

I

I WAS A green missionary in Boston when the Church celebrated the 150th anniversary of the pioneers entering the Salt Lake Valley. Caught up in the prevailing sentimentality, I was surprised when a ward member downplayed the struggles of the Martin Handcart Company. “It’s not the physical trials that are hard,” she contended. “Anyone can cross the plains—what’s hard is keeping spiritual commandments.”

My calling prevented any arguing with her, but I disagreed with her then and still do today. I believe physical events are spiritual. Our doctrine suggests as much: “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter” (D&C 131:7). All of our “spiritual” experiences have physical components. And if our spiritual experiences are all physical, it follows that the reverse is also true—our physical lives are intimately connected to our spiritual lives. LDS notions differ from standard Christian vitalism, where the physical is something different and beneath the spiritual.

We Latter-day Saints have largely ignored the uniqueness of spiritual physicality in our theology. But it’s still there. It’s spelled out, and it’s supported by our scriptures, our history, and our daily affairs. It’s why we benefit spiritually from physical adherence to the Word of Wisdom. It’s why we go without food once a month. It’s why in preparing to meet God, the brother of Jared carried his sixteen stones up the tallest mountain he could find. It’s why Martin Handcart survivors never left the gospel. And it’s why Brigham Young said that prayer is great, but warm potatoes and pudding are better.

The scriptures contain many examples of spiritual physicality, and athletic skill has historically been a qualification for leadership. After the burly prophet Elijah beat Baal’s priests in a contest of Gods, he dishonored the pagan king by outrunning his chariot. Egyptian pharaohs demonstrated their fit-
Calling and Election

In a 1998 Ensign article, Andrew Skinner suggests that Jacob might have received assurance of his calling and election after the all-night wrestling bout. This claim piqued my interest because of my own uncertainty about this doctrine. A deeper investigation clarified for me that while it flies somewhat below the radar, the notion of having one’s “calling and election made sure” is a bona fide LDS doctrine, authenticated throughout our canon and literature. In fact, the month of my birth, the Ensign published a comprehensive article about calling and election. The author, Roy Doxey, draws extensively from early and contemporary Church authorities and develops a simple definition: “Although the process of obtaining exaltation continues even into the spirit world, the knowledge that one will become exalted with the privileges of continuing on to eternal life can be certain in this life. This is what making one’s calling and election is all about.”

Jacob’s experience after wrestling the stranger seems to fit quite well with the calling and election pattern. He claims to have seen Jehovah face-to-face and remembers years later the “angel which redeemed me from evil” (Genesis 48:16).

Other elements of the encounter are very similar to other sacred ordinances. He is reborn with a new—and much better—name. Instead of Jacob “the supplanter,” he becomes Israel, the Godwrestler. His wrestling clinch may have signified a ritual embrace. The angel’s injurious touch to Jacob’s thigh may have had special commemorative significance. It was an important part of the anatomy in Jacob’s world, a place where oaths were formalized. Abraham’s servant had put his hand under the patriarch’s thigh when making a promise (Genesis 24:2–4). And Jacob later requests the same of his favored son, Joseph (Genesis 47:29–31). In the Revelation of John, we read that Christ will return with “KING OF KING, AND LORD OF LORDS” written on his thigh (Revelation 19:16). While Jacob’s overall encounter may differ greatly from contemporary temple ordinances, a similarity in these basic elements is suggestive of an enduring experience.

It’s important to note that Jacob wasn’t perfect after his wrestling match and subsequent blessing. The very next morning, during the tearful reunion with Esau, he lies about where he is going and falsely promises to meet up with his brother again (Genesis 33:12–20).

Having a calling and election made sure does not make someone perfect. Brigham Young reminded the early saints that, “No blessing that is sealed upon us will do us any good, unless we live for it.” And more recently, Bruce R. McConkie clarified that recipients of this sealing are still imperfect and subject to the repentance process.

What is important with Jacob is that a great change was wrought by his ordeal. Though he was still an imperfect mortal, there is an obvious improvement in his character. He is no longer scheming or uncertain. He suddenly has the confidence and power of a prophet. He has become a figure worthy of grouping with his father and grandfather in the oft-repeated phrase: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

(Notes for this sidebar on page 30)
PHYSICAL PROPHETS

PHYYSISITY PUNCTUATED JOSEPH Smith’s life, and his legendary wrestling mirrors Jacob’s. Perhaps the best argument for Latter-day Saints reading the Genesis account literally is that we’ve had another strapping religious leader in our own time who also developed through physical ordeals.

Like Jacob, Joseph was the son of an aggressive mother and a visionary but withdrawn father: Father Smith was as debilitated by poverty as Isaac was by blindness. And like Jacob, Joseph grew up in the shadow of a favored brother—though their relationship was one of mutual admiration not envy. Joseph revered his oldest brother, Alvin, as uncommonly strong and the handsomest man since Adam. And more than anyone, Alvin believed in Joseph’s discovery of the plates and was even divinely called to attend their retrieval. At the bed of his untimely death, Alvin encouraged Joseph to fulfill his prophetic destiny. The Prophet commemorated his late brother’s legacy with a namesake child.

Jacob and Joseph were both powerful men, but I don’t think they always felt so. The young Jacob seems terrified of his rough brother. And Joseph must have felt impotent in the years following his leg operation, the first of many physical trials he would face. Treating a bone infection 120 years before the discovery of antibiotics required invasive surgery thirty years before the availability of anesthetics. So without providing any relief from pain, the surgeon bored three holes by hand through the bone and chipped off the exposed tissue with forceps. For years afterward, Joseph was either in bed, carried by a family member, or up and around only on crutches. He limped and was defenseless against bullying. He must have felt feeble compared to his hardy brothers.

How surprising to both men to grow into manhood and discover such physical strength. Joseph’s athleticism has become almost folkloric—exaggerated by followers and disputed by critics. He was tall and robust for his time, six feet in height and weighing more than 200 pounds, with a tapering torso and a musculature unhidden by clothes. He outwrestled nearly all comers. Even as a weakened prisoner after enduring months at Liberty Jail, he lifted and threw a challenging guard. He could beat stick-pulling champions using just one hand and could out-pull two opponents at once. When he retrieved the plates, he was accosted by three men, felling each. And when the first mobster rushed up the stairs at Carthage, Joseph sent him rolling back down with two quick punches. The man never reascended and later gave the prophet a grudging compliment, calling him a “damn stout man.”

According to the text, Jacob’s strength was also remarkable. When he fled Esau’s rage and arrived in their mother’s homeland, he encountered a group of shepherds stationed around a well. A huge stone was rolled over it to keep the water fresh, and every morning the men gathered until there were enough of them to remove it. When Jacob noticed a beautiful woman approaching, he quickly volunteered to move the stone by himself. If he was trying to show off, it worked. The woman, his cousin Rachel, immediately greeted him; the two kissed and wept (Genesis 29: 1–11).

Both Joseph and Jacob had to scuffle before facing God. Jacob wrestled the mysterious stranger and won despite the injury to his hip; Joseph grappled with a darker adversary. When he knelt in the grove, he wasn’t overshadowed by some menacing nebula but attacked by a real demon. He heard its footsteps approaching from behind and described it as “an actual being from the unseen world who had such a marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being” (Joseph Smith—History 1:16).

I have wondered if Joseph felt any special connection to Jacob. He was certainly aware of the ancient wrestling prophet. Once, in a playful match, Joseph accidentally broke a friend’s ankle, and the two of them joked that Joseph should at least have to bless him like the angel had Jacob.

Perhaps thinking of Jacob, Joseph used wrestling terminology to describe spiritual events. In the Book of Mormon, Enos writes, “I will tell you of the wrestle which I had before...”
God, before I received a remission of my sins” (Enos 1:2). And we read that Alma also “labored much in the spirit, wrestling with God in mighty prayer” (Alma 8:10). John A. Tvedtnes and Matthew Roper suggest that these Book of Mormon prophets were familiar with Jacob’s story and influenced by it. But maybe it was Joseph who identified with Jacob. Whatever the nuts and bolts of translating the Book of Mormon were, the translation was his—his vocabulary and phraseology played a part. Another translator might have written struggle or trial. In either case, Jacob’s physical ordeal was profound enough for later prophets to identify with and refer to in describing their own spiritual struggles.

WRESTLING FOR ONE’S LIFE

It’s hard to put a face on Jacob’s opponent, though many have tried. From the text, we gather that it could have been a man, an angel, or even God. One Jewish legend holds that it was Michael, who had been a guardian angel to Jacob since the womb. Another suggests that it was Esau’s guardian angel, Samael. But the match wasn’t just between two combatants; it was also Jacob’s personal struggle to correct an entire life.

Some of the best wrestlers struggle with personal demons. Their opponent becomes an embodiment of poverty, divorce, abuse, failure, or whatever haunts them—and they push all the harder because of it. That fixation makes them difficult to defeat because they risk losing more than the match; any loss is a submission to the monsters that plague them. Dan Gable was undefeated, 118–0, through his college career until he lost his very last match to Larry Owings at the NCAA championship. His face didn’t show disappointment; it was desolation. For all those years, he had been fighting the man who had broken into his boyhood home, then raped and killed his sister—and now he had finally lost.

When Ebenezer Scrooge could no longer stand the memories of Christmases past, he tried to wrestle away the spirit who controlled. This inconsistency and immaturity perplexes the believer. Why would God favor such a person to become the father of all Israel? So it seems necessary to clean up the text. The Jewish traditions go the furthest in redeeming Jacob from his own story. Every misdeed is couched in explanation: Jacob was criticized for seeking outside approval, for a lack of initiative, and for his duplicity.

This inconsistency and immaturity perplexes the believer. Like us, he is distracted by everyday affairs. We share his Promethean tendency to want to live as mere humans despite what makes his wrestling transformation resonate with us. But today many Christians and Jews recognize that a deeper understanding comes from recognizing rather than rationalizing Jacob’s full person. Jacob is the everyman, and that is what makes his wrestling transformation resonate with us. Like us, he is distracted by everyday affairs. We share his Promethean tendency to want to live as mere humans despite our godly potential. In his story, we realize our own need to be transformed by grappling with ourselves, our past, and before our God. Jacob did just that when the mysterious stranger appeared.

And this was no small contest. The thought of grappling all
night is staggering. Prime athletes are exhausted after just a six-minute match. Recent history has seen some similarly epoch matches, like Helson Gracie’s four-hour loss against Valdemar Santana and Frank Gotch’s two-hour victory over George Hackenschmidt. But these bouts took a huge toll on the competitors. Gracie retired after his loss, and Gotch, though victorious, complained, “It is likely I may never be as good a man again because of that match. Such a contest is a terrible shock to a man’s system, no matter how strong or well trained he may be.”

Jacob was certainly different after his match. He emerged from the exhausting and injurious night as a new person, changed emotionally and spiritually. After being blessed, seeing God, and receiving his new name, he confidently crossed the river to face Esau in repentant love (See sidebar, page 25). He became the father of all Israel, a prophet celebrated throughout our canon.

MAKING LOVE, MAKING WAR

There’s a certain catharsis that follows any physical exertion. Nerves from the brain and spine release endorphins, little chains of amino acids that function in the body much like a narcotic. The result is just what you would expect from taking an opiate, like morphine—a feeling of relaxation and euphoria. In fact, the word endorphin literally means “endogenous morphine,” or morphine from the inside body.

Besides that chemical high, any combative sport can give an additional type of exhilaration, that which comes from self-realization and bonding with an opponent. There’s something about attacking and being attacked that brings out your personality. You learn a lot about yourself: your fears, your abilities, and your resilience. And your opponent is just as exposed and self-conscious as you are. It’s traumatic for both, and that’s what makes it a shared, bonding experience.

Plato, who was an accomplished wrestler, said “we obtain better knowledge of a person during one hour’s play and games than by conversing with them for a whole year.” And it seems Joseph Smith may have agreed. He was often criticized for his unsanctimonious playfulness, sometimes even by family members or friends. Once Hyrum chided him for playing with a group of boys. But Joseph defended himself, saying, “It makes them happy and draws their hearts nearer to mine; and who knows but there may be young men among them who may sometime lay down their lives for me!”

Boxing, wrestling, “ultimate fighting,” and usually even street fights are just versions of the ritualized violence found everywhere in the animal kingdom. While there’s a winner and a loser, both parties can walk away from the fight. If one stag died every time there was a dispute over territory or mates, there wouldn’t be many deer left. So as they charge at each other, they carefully measure their attacking angles. If it looks like they might hit bodies instead of antlers, they quickly pivot out of their trajectories and start over.

A few years ago, the novelist Chuck Palahniuk got into his

Wrestling is hard. You can hardly breathe, your muscles burn, and you ache to give up. It takes soul to stay in the match—an internal drive not to quit. It’s enough to instigate the kind of change that we see in Jacob.

first fistfight. Afterward, he began reflecting on the "redeeming value to taking a punch under controlled circumstances" and started writing a best-selling novel, Fight Club. When the movie version hit theaters, people identified with its message: the liberating and integrating use of controlled violence to escape an affectless world.

In Utah, a phenomenon began. High school and college students all over the state started sneaking into parks, schools, and even church gyms to strap on boxing gloves and stage amateur fights. The press was negative—particularly when then-Governor Michael Leavitt’s son got arrested for his participation—but the bouts were controlled. Most groups employed some type of referee, and combatants were normally matched up according to similarity in size and skill. Most bouts were friendly, and most fighters left feeling euphoric, self-aware, and connected.

While any combative experience may produce this type of bonding and self-realization, wrestling is particularly suited to do so because a wrestler seeks to subdue an opponent without doing damage. No pure form of wrestling allows for serious striking. And while the domination of an opponent—by off-setting, immobilizing, or submitting—is the central aim of any wrestler, the obliteration of that opponent never enters the equation. A successful wrestler dominates his opponent without crushing him. Even in the aggressive submission styles of wrestling that employ painful chokes and joint hyperextensions (such as judo or jiu-jitsu), most practitioners pride themselves on causing only momentary pain and vigilantly avoid injuring other competitors.

Several years ago, the Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote a poem about Jacob’s wrestling match, building around a theme that while wrestling feels “a lot like making war” it also feels “a lot like making love” (See full text of poem, page 23). A strained relationship with his own brother uncovered for Waskow an important aspect of Jacob’s story: it tells us how to fight someone we love. We do it while embracing. This intimate aspect of wrestling is important to its symbolism. As one Torah teacher in Jerusalem explained, “To wrestle is to embrace. It’s a very intimate bodily encounter, legs around legs, and arms around arms, intertwined. . . . There’s an erotic element to it.”

As I face an opponent, one of the strongest positions I can obtain is wrapping both arms around his torso and hugging him in tightly. Then I can dump him, trip him, or throw him. But we’ll remain in that embrace. And regardless of whom or what I may be fighting, I can also choose this same approach.

I suspect it was the same with Jacob. As he wrestled all the hundred faces that met him, he tried to overcome but not obliterate them. He still loved his brother, his mother, his self, and his God. So he wasn’t kicking or eye gouging.

I’ve had that kind of encounter before. In high school, my best friend was three years my elder and everything I wasn’t: confident, athletic, popular, and a “ladies’ man.” Our relationship was largely defined by bullying—and I was the perpetual victim. But one day halfway through my first season of wrestling, our friendship was redefined. For some offense I can’t even begin to remember, I found myself running for my life with him on my heels swinging a plastic bat. I was much slower, and quickly realized the inevitability of being overtaken. Having no obvious alternatives, I spun around and shot in at his legs. The result surprised us both. There I was on top of him with one hand on his neck and the other cocked back to strike—and the conflict was over. We were ever after equals in our friendship. There had been no kicking, punching, or biting—for then the friendship may have ended. There was just that violent hug that brings down and subdues an opponent.

A decade ago, Bill Moyers assembled a diverse group to discuss the Book of Genesis. When Jacob’s story came up, one panelist shared his own experience wrestling with his father, who had forbidden him to pursue a career in art. He ultimately had to challenge his father physically to be released. “He had drunk coffee and shared letters”63

Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, recently gave an interview where he outlined eleven important lessons learned during his tenure.
Jacob and Esau

Even from before birth, wrestling was a part of Jacob’s life. He and Esau struggled constantly in the womb, tearing and bruising their mother. In twenty years of marriage, she had been unable to conceive, but now, even though she was finally pregnant, her sorrow continued. She turned to God in her own wrestle: “If it be so, why am I thus?” (Genesis 25:22).

The response came. It was her calling to mother two antagonizing peoples: “Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger” (verse 23).

On the day of their delivery, the two boys continued their wrestle. Jacob latched onto his brother’s heel as if to pull him back into the womb, as if to usurp his place as firstborn. Because of this, his father gave him the lowly name Jacob, a wordplay referring both to the anatomical heel and the kind of person we might still call a heel—a supplanter (verse 26).

The two boys grew into manhood, each being the favorite of one parent (verse 28). Rebekah, remembering the revelation, doted on Jacob. And Isaac, maybe longing for his estranged brother, Ishmael, favored the red and hairy Esau. Though Jacob seems to have been a great deal more like his father, we don’t always like seeing our reflections.1

Jacob and Esau had two encounters that were severe enough to be mentioned in the biblical narrative, and both reveal Jacob’s willingness. When his sturdy brother returned famished from a long hunt, Jacob offered him some stew, but only in exchange for the birthright. “Behold I am at the point to die,” Esau sighed, “what profit shall this birthright do to me?” (Genesis 25:32).

The text subjectively tells us how little Jacob valued that blessing (verse 34), but the story also shows how it had festered over two decades. He repentantly sent his family and flocks ahead of him with this message: “They be thy servant Jacob’s; it is a present sent unto my lord Esau” (verse 18).

And then, to Jacob, alone by the river banks and afraid of the impending reunion, a stranger appeared who wrestled him through the night. The response came. It was his calling to wrestle his brother in a tearful embrace that ended the wrestling towards him with an army of four hundred men (Genesis 32:6). Now that Jacob understood the injury he had caused his brother, he could only guess how it had festered over two decades. He repentantly sent his family and flocks ahead of him with this message: “They be thy servant Jacob’s; it is a present sent unto my lord Esau” (verse 18).

T

HE TEXT FOCUSES on Jacob, and so do we. But that same night Esau had his own wrestle on the other side of the river. When Jacob had fled twenty years earlier, their father had finally given in to Esau’s pleading and offered a consolation blessing. In it, Isaac promised his elder son that while he would be a servant to his brother, he would also someday break Jacob’s yoke from off his neck (Genesis 27:40).

Now that promised day had finally come, but Esau had to decide how to fulfill his own promise. He had become a prosperous man and sat at the head of a large army. He could easily slay Jacob, as he had wanted to. But he could also accept the peace offering, overcome his anger, and break free in the fullest and greatest sense.

As it happened, Esau chose the high road. He ran to meet his brother in a tearful embrace that ended the wrestling clinch they had been in since before birth. Jacob was so delighted that he compared the joy of seeing Esau to the divine visit from the night before: “I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God” (Genesis 33:10).

(Nota for this sidebar are found on page 30)
As I face an opponent, one of the strongest positions I can obtain is wrapping both arms around his torso and hugging him tightly. Then I can dump him, trip him, or throw him. But we'll remain in that embrace. And regardless of whom or what I may be fighting, I can also choose this same approach.

The first was “empathize with your enemy.” Comparing the success of the Cuban Missile Crisis with failures in Vietnam, he deemed that the difference was in empathy and understanding. They knew Khrushchev personally and could guess at his motivation. But with the Vietnamese, our government acted with “profound ignorance of the history, culture, and politics of the people in the area, and the personalities and habits of their leaders.”

Our country is currently engaged in a war with a people and culture very different than our own. There is suspicion, fear, and hatred on both sides, and neither knows much about the other. It’s the mutual estrangement that begets atrocities such as 9-11 and Abu Ghraib. But if we can approach this conflict with the wrestling stance, if we can hug while strangling, maybe we can avoid some of the ugliness of war.

WRESTLING GOD

I also wrestle at church. As I deal with my nagging questions or bite my lip in Elders Quorum, I can choose to hold my faith close while I thrash it about with critical inquiry. I can simultaneously pummel and embrace the Church. I relate to Hugh Nibley’s statement: “There might be things about the Church that I find perfectly appalling. But I know the gospel is true.” I need not attack it, only wrestle it.

Maybe even our praying should be more like wrestling. It’s so easy to slip into patterns and repetitions without really praying. I can think of a dozen times I’ve accidentally blessed the food while saying my bedtime prayers. And how many more times has someone at a ward activity blessed the brownies and soda to “nourish and strengthen our bodies”? My praying is so formulaic that if I ever stray from the basic blueprint at family prayers, my three-year-old takes note and asks me about it afterward.

Enos and Alma both wrestled with God in prayer (Enos 1:2, Alma 8:10). And some of the best-recorded prayers read more like matches than recitals. When Joseph Smith called out from the misery of Liberty Jail, he didn’t hold back: “O God, where art thou? How long shall thy hand be stayed?” (D&C 121:1–6).

Christ’s prayer on the cross is the most grappling invocation I know of. He didn’t offer his whole prayer out loud, but he didn’t need to. When in the height of his suffering he cried out, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,” I think he meant for us to remember the whole 22nd Psalm:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? . . .

But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praise of Israel. Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them. . . .

But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people. All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head. . . .

But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother’s breasts. . . . Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help.

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. . . . The assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. . . . They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.

But be not thou far from me, O LORD: O my strength, haste thee to help me. . . . I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.

This psalm describes a real struggle—with God and self. A few lines of pushing away followed by a few more pulling back in. Pushing and pulling over and over. That’s what it feels like to wrestle God. If I avoid that kind of grappling in my own prayers, it’s from estrangement rather than reverence. I can struggle that way with my wife or with a sibling, I know them; my love for them is never in doubt even in the hottest argument. Maybe I should get to know the Lord well enough that I can wrestle when I pray.
As Lowell Bennion wrote:

God himself does not seem to object to our questioning even him and his ways. Abraham persuaded the Lord to save Sodom if He could find ten righteous souls. Jacob wrestled with his heavenly antagonist until he got his way. And most impressive of all, Job challenged God's justice and compassion and stood by his own integrity through an extended debate.

The most important revelations of any time, including the 1978 reversal of racial exclusion regarding the priesthood, come from wrestling with the matter and then questioning the Lord point blank.

WRESTLING AS ATONEMENT

A LITERAL INTERPRETATION of Jacob's wrestling creates a blueprint for our own path to overcoming personal deficits and becoming at one with God. Of course this doesn't mean that our own wrestling will necessarily be literal. We may not, and likely need not, wrestle with a stranger through the night to gain our salvation. As Paul writes, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12). And while wrestling is a big part of my life and the vehicle of this study, it's not meant to be the central theme. It's only important to me as a reminder of the atonement it can symbolize.

Being sentimental about any sport is dangerous; it too frequently leads to exaggeration. Like baseball writers who obsess about the metaphor of a lost American innocence, some grapplingists have overstated the importance of wrestling. The trend became especially acute when Title IX legislation required universities to offer the same number of female and male sports. Since wrestling is boring to watch, brings in little revenue, and has traditionally been gender exclusive, programs all over the country were dropped. Enthusiasts responded with rhetoric crediting wrestling for everything from the American Revolution and emancipation of the slaves to the heroism of Flight 93. Nevertheless, the Bible text suggests that it is related to his struggle: "For as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed" (Genesis 32:28). The notes in the LDS version of the KJV render it: "for thou hast persevered with God," where the translation of Israel is extrapolated as "He perseveres with God." The LDS Bible Dictionary prefers, "One who prevails with God" (p. 708). Others have chosen a definition more reflective of the wrestling to which the name refers. Buckner Trawick offers "contender with God." See Buckner B. Trawick, The Bible as Literature: the Old Testament and Apocrypha (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1970), 60. My personal favorite comes from the Rabbi Arthur Waskow, one who wrestles with God or "Godwrestler." See his Godwrestling—Round 2: Ancient Wisdom, Future Paths (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996), 25.

NOTES


4. Ibid., 156–58.


6. Mohammed was in Mecca when he encountered a disbeliever who was famous for his strength. "If I knew that what you say is true I would follow you," the man claimed. So the prophet asked if he could see him wrestle. When Mohammed secured a firm grip, he lifted and threw his opponent. "Do it again, Mohammed," he challenged, and the prophet complied. See Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, The Life of Muhammad. A Translation of Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 178.

7. Joseph Smith's humor and athleticism are revealed in two parallel experiences. A sarcastic doubter called out to Joseph in the shrill, high-pitched shout then popular in some religious speech: "Is it possible that I now flash my optics upon a Prophet?" Joseph answered affirmatively and then quipped, "I don't know but you do; would not you like to wrestle with me?" See Truman G. Madsen, Joseph Smith the Prophet (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1889), 25. On another occasion, a group of sectarian ministers tried to stump the prophet with a series of difficult scriptural questions. After answering them satisfactorily, he issued his own challenge to them. He stepped outside, scraped a line on the ground, planted both feet behind him, and sprung forward as far as he could. Then he turned to the challengers and said, "Which one of you can beat that!" See Alexander Baugh, "Joseph Smith's Athletic Nature," in Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man, Susan Easton Black and Charles Tate, eds. (Provo Brigham Young University, 1993), 143.


11. Duane E. Jeffery comments insightfully on this matter: "Mormon spokesmen have glimpsed a view radically different from the usual Christian positions and their tenets are very poorly appreciated in the church today. This lack of appreciation seems to result more from neglect than from any shift in doctrine. The basic concepts, tentative though they are, have been so covered with the cobs of time that to most Mormons today even their basic outlines are obscured, the general concept in the church today is essentially standard Christian." Duane E. Jeffery, "Seers, Savants, and Evolution: The Uncomfortable Interface," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 34, nos. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2001): 200.

12. For a discussion of the story of how the brother of Jared's physical trials may have played an integral role in his preparations to receive a visitation from Jehovah, see footnote 7 of the "Calling and Election" sidebar (page 30).

January 1948, 8.


15. About the significance of this victory, John A. Tvedtines wrote: "In the ancient Near East, it was traditional to test the powers of the king—the chief warrior of his people—by having him run a footrace and throw a javelin. . . . The Lord may have used this tradition to strengthen his position in the eyes of the Canaanites as the one true God." John A. Tvedtines, "Elijah: Champion of Israel's God," Ensign, July 1990, 54.


17. Ibid., 53.


23. Their mother wrote that Alvin "manifested, if such could be the case, greater zeal and anxiety in regard to the Record that had been shown to Joseph, than any of the rest of his family." Lucy Mack Smith, History of Joseph Smith by His Mother (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, 1945), 89.


25. On his deathbed, Alvin's last words to Joseph were: "I am now going to die, the distress which I suffer, and the feelings that I have, tell me my time is very short. I want you to be a good boy, and do everything that lies in your power to obtain the Record. Be faithful in receiving instruction, and in keeping every commandment that is given you. Your brother Alvin must leave you; but remember the example which he has set for you; and set the same example for the children that are younger than yourself, and always be kind to father and mother." See Smith, History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, 87.


27. Bushman, 29.

28. For example, Elder D. Dilworth Young claims: "No man was ever able to throw him in a wrestling match or to match him in the sports of those days, like pulling sticks, or thumbs, or fingers, or any of the things men do to vie with each other for strength." See Elder D. Dilworth Young, BYU Speeches of the Year, 1966, 80. Such a view is disputed by William Law, a former second counselor to the prophet who later left the church, who writes: "The forces of the prophet in this line have been exaggerated. My brother Wilson wrestled once with him and he laid him down on the floor like a baby . . . Joseph was flabby; he never worked at anything and that probably made him so." (Salt Lake Daily Tribune, 31 July 1887, 6). The truth lies somewhere in between. While his physical strength was clearly remarkable, nobody wins every match. Still, his record was impressive enough that people noticed when he lost (Baugh, 141–42).


31. Ibid., 142–43.

32. In Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling, Richard Bushman describes Joseph's adventures home with the plates as follows: "While he was scrambling over a tree that had fallen across his path, a man struck him with a gun. Joseph knocked the man down and ran off at full speed, still with the heavy plates under his arm. A half mile further he was assaulted again and again made his escape. Yet a third time someone tried to stop him before he finally reached home, speechless with fright and fatigue and suffering from a dislocated thumb." (page 60).

33. Madsen, 122.


35. Baugh, 140.


38. Support for the idea that Joseph used the term where others may not have is found in a discourse Joseph gave about the father of John the Baptist: "Zacharias having no children knew that the promise of God must fail, consequently he went into the Temple to wrestle with God according to the order of the priesthood." See Andrew F Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph, A (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 235.


41. It's interesting, though not significant, that Owings is LDS and that the wrestler who finally beat Gable's college record, Cael Sanderson, is too.

42. This is, of course, my own assessment of Gable's motivation. But it's not without supporting evidence. Gable has been open about the effect his sister's murder had on him, saying, "It made me even more of a horse with blinders as far as wrestling went." And he later compared the pain of losing to what he felt that day: "I had never experienced something that traumatic in athletics. I would have to go back to when my sister was killed my sophomore year." See Mike Finn, "Dan Gable the Olympian: Former Collegiate Golden Boy Became Man in Munich," (accessed 18 September 2005 from http://www.win-magazine.com/active/archives/v10h10/gablefeature.html), and Mike Puma, "Gable Dominated as Wrestler and Coach," (accessed 18 September 2005 from http://espn.go.com/classic/histography/s/Gable_Dan.html).

43. Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol (New York: Dover, 1991), 30. Reading the full quote from Dickens makes me wonder if he might have been inspired by Jacob's ordeal in Genesis: "He turned upon the Ghost, and seeing that it looked upon him with a face, in which in some strange way there were fragments of all the faces it had shown him, wrestled with it."
wrestling with God? Does God resist you? Do you have to resist him? No, you have to put yourself into position, in the right state of mind. Remember, in our daily walks of life as we go around doing things, we’re far removed. If you’re bowling, or if you’re in business, or if you’re jogging or something like that, doing the things you usually do, and then you have to go from there to prayer, it’s quite a transition. It’s like a culture shock if you really take it seriously. You have to get yourself in form, like a wrestler having to look around for a hold or to get a grip, as Jacob did when he wrestled with the Lord. You have to size yourself up, take your stance, circle the ring, and try to find out how you’re going to deal with this particular problem. You’re not wrestling with the Lord; you’re wrestling with yourself. Remember, Enos is the one who really wrestled. And he told us what he meant when he was wrestling; he was wrestling with himself, his own inadequacies. How can I possibly face the Lord in my condition, is what he says. So this is what we’re doing.

Hugh Nibley

Teachings of the Book of Mormon—Semester 2: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990 (Provo: FARMS, 1993), 301
jury but concession. Players must apply holds in such a way as to cause their opponent to submit, but not to instantaneously injure the joint in question. While NAGA recognizes... the often hair’s breadth of difference in the reasonable application of a hold during a heated contest, the referee will take care to observe the appropriate application of the hold. Explicitly, the referee can disqualify a player, even after he has secured a submission, if the hold causes genuine injury, and was applied without malice.” (Electronic copy accessed 2 November 2005 from http://www.nagafighter.com/naga_rulebook.html#NAGA%20Contestants).

60. Moyer, 298

61. Moyer, 299–301


63. I learned this during a tour of Gettysburg.

64. McNamara’s interview is included in the Academy Award-winning documentary, The Fog of War, Sony Picture Classics, 2004. In a book he co-authored with James G. Blight, McNamara quotes Ralph White on empathy: “Empathy is the great corrective for all forms of war-promoting misperception. It means simply understanding the thoughts and feelings of others. It is distinguished from sympathy, which is defined as feeling with others—as being in agreement with them. Empathy with opponents is therefore psychologically possible even when a conflict is so intense that sympathy is out of the question. We are not talking about warmth or approval, and certainly not about agreeing with, or siding with, but only about realistic understanding.” See Robert S. McNamara and James G. Blight, Wilson’s Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing, and Catastrophe in the 21st Century (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 65.

65. Ibid., 70.


68. These were all suggested or implied by Ted Wituszki in “Wrestling Is Innate,” (Electronic copy accessed 6 November 2005 from http://www.themat.com/pressbox/pressdetail.asp?id=10133). In mentioning the downing of Flight 93 on 11 September 1999, Wituszki borrowed from a moving tribute written by Rick Reilly, a Sports Illustrated columnist. Noting that the four men known to have fought back against the hijackers were all athletes—a high school football star, a former college basketball player, a rugby player, and a national judo champ—Reilly made a poignant observation: “At a time like this, sports are trivial. But what the best athletes can do—keep their composure amid the chaos of a physical trial (or trials) followed by a divine visitation; therefore I show myself unto you”—may be the reason why the Capitoll isn’t a charocal pit” (Rick Reilly, “Four of a Kind,” Sports Illustrated 95, no. 12 (24 September 2001): 94.


Notes for the Calling and Election sidebar

1. Andrew Skinner, “Jacob: Keeper of Covenants,” Ensign, March 1998, 56. Skinner writes that Jacob was “ushered into the presence of God, every promise of the past years having been sealed and confirmed upon him” and reiterates that “the story of Jacob’s wrestle discloses the ultimate blessing that can be given.”


3. Ibid., 50.


5. For a comprehensive examination of ritual embraces in ordination and coronation rites, see Hugh W. Nibley, The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 241–53. Nibley specifically mentions Jacob’s ordeal and explains that the Hebrew word yeaveq can be translated as either “wrestle” or “embrace” (243).

6. Victor L. Ludlow wrote: “Placing a hand under the upper leg or thigh of a seated person was a solemn means of concluding an oath or contract, similar to ‘shaking hands’ on an agreement in our society.” See his Unlocking the Old Testament (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 16.

My great thanks to David and Marianne Watson for their comments in response to my presentation of this paper at the 2005 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, and for our conversation afterwards. They alerted me to this special aspect of Jacob’s injury and also Nibley’s description of wrestling as a ritual embrace. My thanks also to another symposium attendee whose name I do not remember for directing my attention toward Joseph Smith’s accounts of his First Vision and the struggle that attended that event.

7. There are also at least two other scriptural instances that very likely describe something similar. One involves Joseph Smith and another with the Brother of Jared. Enos is a possible third example. All four instances (if we include Jacob’s) have similar elements that follow a certain pattern: a physical trial (or trials) followed by a divine visitation with an attending promise of exaltation.

In D&C 132, Joseph Smith is directly addressed. He is commended for the great sacrifices he has made and is told, “I am the Lord thy God and will be with thee even unto the end of the world, and through all eternity, for verily I seal upon you your exaltation, and prepare a throne for you in the kingdom of my Father” (verse 49). And this promise is given in the context of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who “have entered into their exaltation, according to the promises, and sit upon thrones, and are angels but are gods” (v. 37).

The brother of Jared sought assistance from the Lord in order for his group not to have to cross the ocean in the darkness of sealed vessels. But instead of just kneeling down and demanding a solution, he painstakingly polished sixteen stones until they were clear as glass and then carried them by hand to the top of Mount Shelem, so named “because of its exceeding height” (Ether 3:1). Anyone who has peaked a high mountain knows what a taxing undertaking it is, particularly while carrying two handfuls of stones. By so doing, this prophet did not make it any easier for the Lord to visit him—surely it is as easy for God to visit the bottom of a valley as it is to appear at the top of a mountain—but it was so much harder for the brother of Jared that it demonstrated his desire and commitment. It showed that he would go as far as he could before asking for help the rest of the way. I find the similarity of this to Jacob’s wrestling striking.

Once the brother of Jared communced with the Lord, his faith was great enough that the veil was thinned and he was ultimately granted a full view of Jehovah’s body. During this appearance, the Lord tells him, “Because thou knowest these things ye are redeemed from the fall, therefore ye are brought back into my presence; therefore I show myself unto you” (Ether 3:13). It appears that he is receiving his calling and election, and, given this context, it seems significant for our speculations about Jacob’s opponent that the experience of having one’s calling and election made sure may include a divine visitation.

Enos’s story is not as clear, but he does state that the spiritual wrestle he went through came “before I received a remission of my sins” (Enos 1:2). It is at least possible that he is alluding to a visitation and promise of calling and election similar to the experiences of Joseph Smith and the brother of Jared. And, as with the other cases, his redemption comes at the end of a period of great struggling.


Note for Jacob and Esau sidebar

1. After a year of obsession over this whole story, I finally realized just the week before going to press that it’s Isaac’s favoritism of Esau over Jacob that has resonated so strongly with me all along. My own mild father—the youngest, smallest, and meekest of two sets of twin boys—seemed always frustrated with me, with my boisterous shyness and sensitivity. But not with my brother Michael, who came three years later. I’ve become a strong man. But, like my father, I had to develop that strength by winning and losing matches. Mike was just born strong. Strong and wild. Dad loved his spunky son, the son who fought back—who, even as a toddler, threatened to “beat your brains to the moon.”

Mike still says and does what he wants while I remain censured by the fear of disappointing our parents. And though I’ve adopted my father’s two great loves—wrestling and writing—I’ve never caught his eye with either. But Dad swells with wet-eyed pride over his younger, feistier son who’s out driving Hummers in Iraq while I sit here guzzling soda at the keyboard.

Jacob’s many grapples have become personally revealing to me. My brother and I still wrestle every time we see each other, and it’s the same hugging-while-complaining thing that I see in Jacob and Esau. Yet I’ve become even more touched by the struggle I imagine Jacob had in trying to earn his father’s esteem. He couldn’t buy or steal it, despite his efforts. But I hope he ultimately gained it. Decades after their reunion, Jacob and Esau met again to bury their father (Genesis 35:29). I like to imagine that by then, all three men had come to terms with themselves and with each other.
The prisoner sizzled on the rack
but he never squealed on friends or bemoaned his fate.
The high authorities observed transcendence in his suffering.
Not willing to make a martyr from the wreckage, they washed away his leces and fudged the past, doctored every inch of masculinity.
When Romans build their monuments to mayhem, they erase the souls of all they vanquish.
They designed a package for their sacrificial lamb, dubbed him virgin boy of virgin bride,
then willfully, heretically, called him God, as if he were a Greek.
They made him pacifist.
We are talking about a down to earth fighting man and not some priss
wallowing in asexual purity. He came from simple stock and simply said get out of my way and let me be.
Let all of us be free for God's sake.
His hands were dirty. Rebellion's not some idle chatter.
I sit and scratch my skin muttering psalms with other subdued practitioners.
The insides of this church are elegant and rich, but soul dead.
We are losers here, constant losers, wondering why it all goes wrong year after year.
We perform with melismatic skill and though there's satisfaction in the singing, we experience a profound and elemental loss. We experience dying.
Looking up I see my old comrade in arms nailed to his tree supposedly atoning for my sins, my sexual peccadilloes, but this is superficial cover-up.
The greatest sin in every life and in every history is that we lost the war.
Our children will be blamed, and blamed eternally.
They've done a job assassinating relevance.
He was a radical with a voice that pierced the night.
You knew exactly what he meant and why he said it.
Women have the capacity for developing deep friendships that provide safe spaces for discussing anything and everything—well, almost everything. How might women better learn to celebrate their differences in an enriching way? How might LDS women truly become “Sisters in Zion”?

**TOWARD A MORE AUTHENTIC SISTERHOOD**

**UNMASKING HIDDEN ENVY AND COMPETITION AMONG LDS WOMEN**

By Julie Mounteer Hawker

I continue to teach communication courses part-time at San Jose State—a liberal, leftist university. Most of my colleagues are aware of my membership in and devotion to the Church. They have often asked about my ability to successfully function in and embrace a patriarchal church without feeling “oppressed” by men. In pondering their queries, I have realized that my social experience within the LDS community is actually quite the opposite: I have rarely if ever felt “oppressed” by men in the Church because of its patriarchal nature. Unfortunately, I have consistently felt disapproval from some LDS women as I strive to carve out my individual role as a Latter-day Saint woman, wife, and mother. Most LDS women have been my biggest champions! But at times, I’ve sensed a shadowy counterpoint—envy—and in speaking with other LDS women, I know I’m not alone in this experience.

I’ve done extensive academic research on communication between women and have heard painful stories from many including my women students. I’ve come to realize the devastating results that often follow when women compare themselves to one another. This destructive byproduct is hidden envy and competition between women. These twin emotional experiences are at the core of women’s conflict with each other. The poison of this envy and competition spreads because women find it so difficult to acknowledge, let alone speak of, its existence.

Of course, men envy and compare as well; it’s part of the human experience. But competition among men is more socially acceptable than it is for women. Generally, men can acknowledge and discuss their rivalries more easily than women.
THE MANY FACES OF ENVY
When we seek what belongs to someone else and reject what is ours, envy leads to spiritual laziness and emotional frustration.

The terms "envy" and "jealousy" are often used interchangeably, yet they really involve two different emotions. Jealousy means to fear losing what one already has—for instance, a friend—and it involves three or more people. On the other hand, envy is based on wanting what another person has. Both emotions are rooted in one’s own insecurities.

In her book, The Snow White Syndrome: All About Envy, Betsy Cohen compares the words “envy” and “invidious.” Both stem from the Latin word, invidere, which means to look hatefully at someone or to make hateful comparisons. Cohen further discusses the varying degrees of envy as a continuum of emotions that begin with admiration and emulation but can denigrate to resentment, hatred, and, finally, the wish to harm the envied person and/or what the envied person has. In short, envy is admiration turned rancid. Perhaps this is why friendships are especially vulnerable to envy’s corrosive effects. Envy crosses social, cultural, religious, and economic lines. According to Christian tradition, envy is one of the “seven deadly sins,” and a proverb proclaims, “Envy [is] the rottenness of the bones” (Proverbs 14:30).

The scriptures contain many examples of envy. Saul’s destructive envy became so virulent that, after having once loved and mentored David, he sought to kill him. Laman and Lemuel’s relationship with Nephi was so tainted by envy they, too, were overcome with the desire to kill. Even Jesus Christ was ultimately crucified by Sadducees and Pharisees, who both envied and feared his power and growing popularity.

Interestingly, these enviers, like most others, struggle to or never admit their envious feelings. Because humiliation and shame are associated with envy, most of us typically attempt to hide our envious feelings. Saul was guilty of this, although he finally admitted his envy when David confronted him. In their dramatic exchange, Saul sits helplessly as David’s servant urges him to kill Saul because Saul had tried to kill David. David refuses as Saul is an anointed king. Saul, moved by David’s humility and compassion toward him, succinctly summarizes his pathetic plight when he says to David, “Thou art more righteous than I: for thou hast rewarded me good, whereas I have rewarded thee evil” (1 Samuel 24:17).

Another insidious element in envy is the self-deception that so often accompanies it. Envious people consistently project their own negative feelings onto the person they envy. For instance, Laman and Lemuel masked their envy as self-pity and criticism. Consequently, Nephi became the target of their relentless fault-finding and was subjected to their constant whining about life’s injustices. Today, as a society acknowledging anger, gossip, hostile jokes and teasing, putdowns, slander, rivalry, martyrdom, avoidance and/or withdrawal, withholding approval, pretending not to care about the envied person and/or what they have, and evoking envy in others—but we never call it envy. Today, envy seems to be more pervasive among women than ever—probably because more opportunities are now afforded to women than ever before. Whereas historically women might have envied each other’s beauty, wealth, and social status—accidents of birth—we now enjoy professional and educational opportunities that allow us to be less reliant on beauty or circumstance. These increased opportunities give us many more life choices, which equate to greater differentiation. As a result of these disparities, many of us feel unsure of how to relate to and remain connected to each other. The “success” of another woman may bring out emotions of longing and conflict about our own wants and choices, which sometimes lead to our questioning our own worthiness and value.

Our LDS culture naturally has its own brand of envy. Perhaps we’ve noticed or experienced the unspoken and acknowledged envy and pain that is so often a part of the process of receiving and holding Church callings (whether it be our own calling or that of our spouse) along with the subsequent attention and “power” that accompanies the calling. Another area ripe with potential for envy is the ideas associated with temple marriage. For some, a temple marriage means more than just the fact of being married for “time and all eternity,” it also implies that the marriage is healthier or more stable than other marriages. It can be very painful when we compare our “less righteous” children to those of other families in the ward whose children have served missions, married in the temple, and stayed morally clean. In addition to envy of callings and marriages, some envy or resent others who are especially talented in art, music, or drama.

Surely we can understand the upset some might feel when they believe themselves to be less fortunate, able, or less worthy than their LDS friends or acquaintances. But the envied person suffers, too. A couple of years ago, a friend I’ll call Renee confided to me the devastating fall-out she experienced when she was called to be the ward Relief Society president. When her good friend, Amy (who lived in her ward) heard of the calling, she immediately withdrew her friendship. When Renee repeatedly approached Amy about the disconnect be-
tween them, Amy denied any problem. Hence, their relationship grew very strained and has never fully recovered. As I listened to the pain in Renee's voice, I understood her frustration completely; I had seen and experienced similar situations.

One might question whether envy precipitated the friend's hostility and withdrawal. Humiliation often accompanies envy—especially when it might flirt with the taboo of “aspiring” to Church callings. Would an envious person honestly say to the envied, “I wish I were getting the attention and admiration that you receive from Church members because of your calling . . . or because your husband is the bishop (or stake president, or whatever). Why wasn’t I chosen? Or . . . why wasn’t my husband chosen?” Most people would never admit to these feelings. And because of the denial, envy festers and friendships or associations suffer.

One woman expressed to me her heartache over a friendship tainted and scarred by envy. She had been forced into the role of the envied, but out of a desire to salvage the friendship, she reached out to her friend. They began to speak about her friend's envy toward her. The envious friend bravely admitted her envy, and both women have worked through the years to rebuild their friendship. Their truce is fragile at times; the envied's loss of trust in her friend has never been completely restored, nor has the resentment of the envier been completely quelled. Nevertheless, I shared with my friend how fortunate she was that her envious friend had the rarely found courage to admit her envy.

The studies I've read reflect my own experience with envy and friendship. I have tasted the bile of envy from three close friends at different times in my life. Like the above-mentioned woman, in each instance, in an effort to save the friendship, I tried to discuss my friend's increasing hostility toward me. And each time, they stonewalled me, denying any such feelings or refusing to speak with me. At first, I tried to be sensitive to the pain and insecurities troubling my friends, but after months and, in some cases, even years, I decided that my own feelings mattered, too, and that I had to be my own champion. Besides, I was stymied as to how to connect or relate to them. Subsequently, I allowed each friendship to die its own death, and, at times, I still mourn.

Ironically, we women readily confide to each other our frustrations with our husbands, children, in-laws, or whomever. But when frustrated with each other, we often fall into the trap of what author Phyllis Chesler calls “inauthentic niceness.”

I have two women friends who speak truthfully to me without fear or hesitation. At first, I was taken aback and somewhat frightened by their honesty. And their fearlessness in disagreeing with my viewpoints intimidated me and, admittedly, sometimes offended me. Over time, however, I learned to appreciate their forthrightness. I decided I'd rather have a pointedly truthful friend than a “nice” friend who gossiped about me behind my back! I'm not suggesting that we women senselessly “bulldoze” each other in our differences, but we can surely learn to respectfully differentiate.

The biggest casualty of envy, however, is the envier's own spirituality. Ann and Barry Ulanov, authors of *Cinderella and Her Sisters: The Envied and Envying*, examine the spiritual plight of enviers. They define envy as sinful partly because of the way its emotional roots intertwine with the sin of coveting. Envy causes a person to feel demeaned by another's good fortune. In order to protect him- or herself, the envier wants to belittle the envied or what the envied has. Hence, envy looks closely for evil in another person and finds satisfaction when any fault is found. And if evil cannot be found, envy often drives the envier to conjure up or pretend that evil exists in the envied's heart anyway. The Ulanovs further elaborate on this aberrant intrusion of the spiritual self.

The envying do not want their own person but
someone else’s. When we envy we are not willing to find and live with our own self, with all the hard nasty work that that involves. Instead we want to seize another more glittering self. We may severely damage other persons with this violent thrust at their being, but even more seriously, we refuse what is our own. We hunger and desire to be a person of substance, but we are unwilling to nurture the only substance we can ever possess—our own. The refusal of ourselves strikes a major blow against our spirit—that center of our integrity as unique and original persons. When we seek what belongs to someone else and reject what is ours, envy can easily lead to spiritual laziness and emotional frustration. Rejection, resentment, hate, and anger eclipse ours, envy can easily lead to spiritual laziness and emotional frustration.

In his insightful story, “Abel Sanchez,” Miguel de Unamuno tells of a talented, brilliant doctor who is overcome with envy of his best friend, Abel, a gifted portrait painter. In his torment, the doctor replaces his own sense of self with a constant, painful awareness of his friend. The doctor cannot appreciate his own uniqueness and talents, or even the love of his wife and children. He rejects everything good and worthy in himself and his life; he can focus only on the abilities of Abel and those of Abels wife and children. Not surprisingly, the doctor comes to despise himself, his friend, and even God—whom he comes to believe plays favorites. In feeling rejected by God, the doctor comes to resent God and distance himself spiritually from him. He begins to see Abel as the biblical Abel, and in feeling that God rejected them both, he develops a sense of kinship with the biblical Cain. Though the doctor eventually comes to some understanding of his own contribution to his hatred for Abel, he is never fully able to get past it. On his deathbed, he cries, “Why must I have been born into a country of haters? Into a land where the precept seems to be: ‘Hate thy neighbor as thyself.’ For I have lived hating myself.” The doctor’s story poignantly shows envy’s tragic consequences when we separate ourselves from sources of light and love in seeking our neighbor’s demeaning through envy. We begin to imagine insult and injustice, and we feel vengeful. We cannot truly love others unless we love ourselves. And envy keeps us from loving ourselves.

Truly, to envy is part of being human. To aid in developing our sense of self, we can learn to recognize envy when we encounter it and refuse to personalize it when it strikes. The Ulanovs suggest that we need not believe others’ envy to be absolutely true statements about ourselves—whether the envy manifests itself as criticism or effusive praise.

Envy usually reveals more truth about the envier than the envied. When we recognize this principle, we open the door to feeling compassion toward the envier instead of feeling victimized by them. In an Ensign article, “The Fruits of Peace,” Patricia Holland, wife of Apostle Jeffrey Holland, shares how she learned this lesson:

At one time I worked with another woman in the presidency of an organization. She often teasingly belittled me, but because it was done in jest she felt she could get away with it. However, it became a great source of hurt and irritation to me. While trying to practice [the] concept of forgiveness, I realized that every time I received a jab in jest, it was because of an inadequacy this sister felt in herself. I really believe that she was a frightened woman. In the privacy of her own life and out of earshot or eyesight from me, she was so busy nursing her own hurt that she simply was not able to consider anyone else’s. In some unfortunate way, I believe she felt she had so little to give that any compliment or virtue extended to another would somehow demean her. She did need my love, and I was foolish to take offense.

THE CONNECTION/COMPETITION CONUNDRUM

Paradoxically, women nurture each other during times of need yet often struggle to applaud or rejoice in another woman’s success.

COMPETITION WALKS HAND in hand with envy. Many women seek the admiration and attention of other women. As little girls, and later teenagers, most if not all of us wanted to be popular or part of a popular group of girls. Gaining acceptance and approval was important to our self-worth.

As women, we still have the same desires. How many of us, when moving into a new ward, are able to distinguish different groups of women and find ourselves drawn to become part of certain circles? On the other hand, how many of us have witnessed the pain of some women who did not feel included in women’s circles within their ward? Regardless of our age, we as women need the love and acceptance of other women. But with that need comes the inevitable upset and conflict that connections bring.

I love the poignant line from the movie, An American Quilt, in which a woman character confides to another woman following a conflict with a girlfriend: “The hardest thing about being a woman is having women friends.” During times of conflict with other women, I’ve heard several LDS women say that they feel like they’re in high school again “playing all these silly games.” Only once have I heard a woman use the word “compete” or speak of “competitive games,” but that is exactly what these games are.

In their book, Between Women: Love, Envy, and Competition in Women’s Friendships, authors Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach discuss how women’s relationships can be soothing, safe, protective environments that, when competitive feelings arise, can abruptly transform into a frightening, disappointing, painful place:

What distinguishes women’s friendships is the easy reciprocity that envelops the relationship, allowing so many things to be safely discussed and felt. Such is the positive, nurturing side of women’s relationships. . . .
But women’s positive feelings toward each other have a counterpoint in equally powerful negative feelings. Women’s relationships produce a rainbow of powerful emotions. As much as we value and trust these relationships, we should be able to face the reality that they are not idyllic. They may provoke feelings of hurt and anger, envy and competition, guilt and sorrow. The authors speak of some women’s friendships as “merged attachments”—a sense in which close women friends might no longer feel individuated—and of the “emotional ambience” in which they operate. “Ambience” means to surround on all sides, and our powerful connections as women, whether in conflict or peace, truly encircle our emotions, often determining our moods and sense of well-being. That is why negative and competitive feelings can cause so much “havoc and distress [that they] can be almost unbearable. And yet equally unbearable is the thought of talking directly to one’s friend about the upset.”

The last sentence highlights something very important: the tendency in many of us to avoid confrontation at all costs, which unfortunately only serves to push conflict further underground. Truly, women hold great power over each other! (See sidebar, page 37) Why then do we sometimes use our power unethically to hurt and undermine each other? Once again, the poisons of insecurity, competition, and envy lie at the heart of these power struggles.

Eichenbaum and Orbach’s research shows that historically, “there are many examples of women who sought each other’s approval and often competed amongst themselves to attain it.” This need for approval fuels competitive behaviors which evolve into attention-seeking behaviors. Hence, competition is really a need for attention.

Juxtaposed with competition is our need and ability as women to nurture—enabling us to form substantive ties. This irony causes conflicted feelings in women. Eichenbaum and Orbach further explain that our “competitive feelings are rooted in a struggle to be seen as a separate identity from other women,” yet at the same time, our desire to stay in a merged attachment with women can be overwhelming. They stress that this attachment is one that distinguishes women from men: “Whereas women search for self through connection with others, men search for self through distinguishing themselves from others.”

Consequently, for us women, differentiation can feel like a threat to our self-identity even though we may compete with each other to achieve it. For this reason, many of us can look at another’s difference and feel angry and envious while simultaneously admiring her courage to differ. Unfortunately, because many of us fear disapproval from other women, we will hold ourselves back or purposely downplay our achievements.

Cohen describes an attorney who “has a good life [but] would rather be liked than respected.” The attorney writes, “even with good friends, in order to be liked, I have to downplay my happiness, material success, academic achievements, or pride in my children’s achievements.” This “holding back” reflects another facet of women’s power to influence each other. But holding back out of fear of disapproval is a force we must resist As Chesler writes:

It is important that a woman find her own voice and that she discover ways of projecting it into the universe. A woman must learn how to express her views clearly and firmly without being afraid that this will offend, fatally injure, or drive her intimates away. Difference does not have to mean disconnection. Each woman must find her own way of balancing a woman’s oversensitivity with a woman’s right to hear authentic female voices and a woman’s obligation to become that authentic, spontaneous female voice.

As Dr. Phil McGraw often says on his show, “Peace at any price is no peace at all.”

Women’s relationships are underpinned by our ability to support and nurture each other during times of need, difficulty, and disappointment. Unfortunately, many of us haven’t learned how to rally round each other in solidarity when some among us are thriving and successful. Because we may feel left behind or abandoned, during good times we sometimes withdraw our support and withhold our praise.

Competition is also about the desire for recognition because outside recognition grants us visibility. This is important to remember, for in our envy and competitive feelings, we may not actually want the Church calling or professional advancement or whatever particular success the person we envy has but rather the perceived status, recognition, attention, and value they seem to enjoy.

Eichenbaum and Orbach stress that when we feel isolated, undervalued, ignored, or passed over, feelings of competition erupt and represent a fight for selfhood. Sadly, many of us feel that in forging our identities, we must compete with other women. We compete to be respected and admired, have a better home, have better behaved or more accomplished children. We also sometimes compete in our outer appearance. At one time or another, all of us struggle with feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. But many of us don’t know how to gain confidence in our own capabilities, so we hide these emotions, and our feelings of inadequacy become shameful and humiliating to us. If we add fear, the emotions can easily transform into the opposite feeling: I can do better than you.

As with envy, our denial of the existence of competitive feelings perpetuates the problem. I have heard other women claim that competition never enters into their relationships, and, undoubtedly, that is true for many. But realistically, what one of us would say to another, “I’m envious that you have a nicer house (or whatever) than I have, so I’m going to compete with you in other ways to show you that I am just as successful, if not more so, than you?” Who wouldn’t hide such feelings?

I have seen this tendency to deny envious and competitive feelings firsthand. I once taught a workshop on envy at a Relief Society Enrichment Night. Halfway through the workshop, one woman, whom I’ll call Suzanne, insisted that in her circle of friends, no such envy or competition existed. She told me, “Julie, we women have no need of this workshop.”

I knew Suzanne’s assertion was false because four years pre-
Previously, one of her good friends, Mary, had confided to me about her frustrations with Suzanne. Mary had spoken specifically about Suzanne’s competitive feelings and how she felt they were coloring their friendship. I was ten years older and not a member of this particular group of friends, so I was a “safe” confidant for Mary. But isn’t it interesting and sad that Mary felt comfortable speaking to me about her then-contentious friendship but could not find the courage to speak directly to Suzanne about it? In turn, Mary’s failure to acknowledge her frustrations to Suzanne led Suzanne to make false conclusions about at least this particular friendship.

Chesler states:

Many women learn to pretend that they are not really aggressive or competitive, because such traits are not socially desirable in women. But if a woman pretends to herself that she is kind to other women when she is not, she will have no reason to learn how to resist her own normal, but emotionally primitive, human inclinations. Once a woman acknowledges that normal women are aggressive and competitive, she may become more realistic about what to expect from other women and clear about her own limitations as well.

Surely, admitting our own vulnerability to these emotions is a crucial step in the healing process. Betsy Cohen describes an
interview with Marlene who had been stung by her envious friends and her own mother. While visiting a good friend, Marlene began to suffer from her own envy. She described her misery in this way:

I went home feeling frustrated and angry at myself—and my friend. I was really envious and felt awful. I would conjure up mean fantasies about my friend's life. But I remembered my other friends' envy toward me, and I stopped myself. I told myself that this feeling of envy pointed out something I wanted in my life. I could either sit around and feel bad or make my life more like hers. It was a turning point for me, a fork in the road. I could see all the years ahead I would spend justifying myself by cutting down other people's successes. If I didn't do something, I knew I'd become embittered. If you have enough success, you can temper your envy.

Marlene's admission—even to herself—took courage. How easy it would have been for her to continue to blame her friend for her anger rather than take ownership of her dissatisfaction with herself. Furthermore, Marlene used her dissatisfaction to propel herself to a new level of achievement.

Being the object of envy and competitive feelings can also be unbearable. No woman wants to be criticized and ostracized by women envying and competing with her—especially when they are her friends. If we are the envied woman, we may try to soothe the envier with praise and positive reassurance. But often, they are to little or no avail. In fact, our “niceness” as condescending and artificial. A proverb summarizes this no-win snare: “Who is able to stand before envy?” (Proverbs 27:4).

Chesler gives further insight into the competitive dilemma:

To be envied . . . is to be vulnerable to [the enviers] spoiling you. For example, Abel had Cain, Mozart his Salieri. Psychologically, enviers wish to be the one God loves most, the Chosen One, the one whose being radiates excellence. Many women wish to stand in this role, and many do. The male universe has room for many more stars, the female universe is therefore much smaller, and the competition quite fierce for the limited number of starring roles. Some women cannot bear to experience themselves as lesser lights; in order to shine more brightly, they must rid the stage of greater lights. Originality, creativity, generosity, excellence, especially in the service of humanity, offends and threatens them. Envious people experience excellence in others as a form of persecution.

I have witnessed some women's purposeful attempts to gain the admiration, even the envy of other women. There is nothing innately wrong with wanting admiration, but we are wrong to make others feel less worthy in order to build ourselves up. Once had a friend who often initiated friendships and volunteered her services to women and then advertised her positive interactions to our mutual friends. Later, she would confide to me her “dilemma” that these particular women now desired her friendship, but she really had no interest in being friends with them. I wondered about this incongruence and decided that perhaps she felt some sense of power in garnering women's friendships and admiration and then wielding her power by rejecting them. Furthermore, I suspected she was attempting to win my admiration and envy by recounting to me her good deeds and subsequent popularity.

Now, let's contrast my friend's subterfuge to the words of Brigham Young University professor Donna Lee Bowen when she spoke at a BYU Women's Conference some years back: "Much of what we do in life is directed at garnering admiration from those around us. Admiration, however, is usually at odds with love. If we seek to be admired, we seek an audience. An audience lacks the close involvement that generates love. In wanting admiration, we want to be perfect. Love, however, tolerates and even welcomes imperfections."

TOWARD A MORE AUTHENTIC SISTERHOOD

How can we truly become “sisters in Zion”?

In OUR CHURCH culture, we often refer to each other as “sisters in the gospel,” or “sisters in Zion.” But how can we create authentic sisterly bonds when we engage in envious and competitive behavior? I suggest the following:

1. ADMITTING OUR ENVY. If we feel envy and can admit to it and examine it, we will recognize it as a signpost to other feelings, or as some sort of defense mechanism. Phyllis Chesler highlights the strong denial of our own potential culpability: The women whom I interviewed about woman's inhumanity to woman mainly talked about how other women had disappointed or betrayed them. Few were able to recall the ways in which they had disappointed or betrayed other women. No one admitted to remaining part of or profiting from a group in which members were gossiped about or ostracized.

As discussed earlier in the example of Marlene, owning up to our envious and competitive feelings can be a wonderful key, unlocking the door to creative freedoms and new levels of accomplishment. Denying our envious feelings will only ensure that they will continue to work their poison.

2. RECOGNIZING THAT BEING DIFFERENT IS NOT A NEGATIVE. Difference does not have to mean disconnection from each other. We must allow ourselves the option of being different. Chesler explains that women may sometimes confuse a difference of opinion, personality, or life choice with unfair criticism and rejection. She adds, “A woman has to be perfect. Love, however, tolerates and even welcomes imperfections.” In short,
to be authentic sisters, we need not think and act exactly the same.

The “soccer moms” incident I described earlier is one of many I've experienced with women over the years. I don't want to sound like a victim, however, because I am not. In working through many painful experiences, I have eventually learned how not to feel victimized by other women, to “dig deep” within myself and find the determination to pursue my own path without the approval of some women. Additionally, I have learned to distinguish a difference of opinion from unfair criticism stemming from envy. And finally, I refuse to allow other women to define who I am or to allow women (and men) to hold me hostage with their own definitions of womanhood or what it means to be obedient to gospel standards.

I've come to embrace the attitude of the late Julia Child, the famous TV chef. When asked about being envied, she said: “I know what I think of myself. . . . I am in charge, the captain of my own ship.”

3. TALKING ABOUT OUR FEELINGS. If we are ever to achieve authentic sisterhood, we must learn how to talk about our true feelings. As stated previously, the difficulties discussed here are exacerbated by our reluctance to discuss and/or disclose feelings of envy, betrayal, guilt, competition, abandonment, and anger.

The term “justice” can mean many things. We LDS women can choose justice by speaking up and defending fellow sisters who are criticized for choosing a different path. We can learn to tell our truth and hear another's truth ethically and constructively: Chesler advises women to ask directly for what we want and not wait for others to guess at what our needs are. These new ways of relating take effort and courage. But in applying them, we build faith in each other and learn to trust that speaking up in constructive ways will not sever but strengthen our ties to each other.

4. REFRAINING FROM PROVOKING ENVY IN OTHERS. Isn't it true that seemingly perfect women are hard to love because we cannot relate to them? Don't we truly empathize and cheer for those who struggle and are open about it?

We must recognize that one of the many paradoxes of envy is: when women seem too happy or too successful and don't seem to struggle enough, our empathy can very easily evolve into envy. I'm not suggesting that we go out of our way to showcase our miseries, large or small, in order to avoid being envied. Instead, I'm highlighting the real dangers of falling victim to “Perfect Mormon Woman Syndrome” and calling too much attention to our family’s successes, or to the personal standards by which we live the gospel, and so forth.

5. SEEKING THE LORD'S APPROVAL OF OUR LIFE PLAN. Forging ahead without the approval of others takes a strong sense of self. We can develop this through cultivating a close relationship with the Lord and seeking his will instead of the will of others. I was lucky to learn this lesson as a young woman. I was a twenty-six-year-old serving as a counselor in the stake Primary presidency when a woman whom I had known for years began to criticize me behind my back and even fired put-downs directly at me. She was not pleased at how I performed my calling. She even claimed I had “a bad spirit” about me! It's funny to me now, but at the time, I began to question my ability. I turned to the Lord for comfort and counsel. In answer to my prayer, I received as a clear impression the question: Who was I trying to please—God or this woman? Jesus Christ was the essence of perfection, yet he still had enemies who eventually killed him. If he couldn't please everyone, neither could I! Because of this epiphany, I no longer question myself as long as I feel my efforts have divine approval.

6. MAINTAINING OUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH. We must be vigilant in honestly examining and working to maintain our own spiritual health. If caught in envy's snare, as Marlene described earlier, we can use our recognition of it as a motivating force to discover what our needs are and then to work to fulfill those needs. After all, at its most primitive, envy is a hunger for goodness and yet not knowing how to get it.

Jesus Christ is the antidote for envy's poison. His love and goodness fills our empty vessels because through his love, we feel worthy and good. Thus, we learn to embrace and feel gratitude for our own unique goodness instead of focusing so intently on someone else's. As we labor toward a deeper spirituality, we feel a greater awareness of the Savior's love and approval.

CONCLUSION

I VE HAD SERIOUS reservations about writing this article and making my voice heard on this subject. I fear that some will accuse me of focusing on the negative in women's relationships and not on the positive. Yet I truly believe that we will never reach a level of sincere, pure sisterhood if we do not admit that we are bleeding—and stop the bleeding in order to heal our wounds. The power is within each of us to
bind up and heal one another’s wounds. We must honestly and consistently ask ourselves, “In which way am I using my power? Is it to hurt or to heal others? Am I ostracizing, criticizing, and gossiping about women I feel are more successful than I? Or am I inclusive and respectful of women who pursue a different path than my own?”

Just as important, we must periodically check for personal wounds. When we feel wounded by another woman’s success, we know we are bleeding. We might feel that she is using her success or power to wound us, and at times perhaps she is. But far more often than not—and here’s the tough part—we will find that we, not the woman we begrudge or resent, are the cause of our own wounding.

As individuals and as a large, diverse group of Mormon women, we must find or create a balance between individual autonomy and group connectedness. We must acknowledge our need for each other but also our need for self-actualization. We should not have to fear negative retribution when we pursue our own path.

Mary, the mother of Christ, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, were cousins, and they truly exemplified authentic sisterhood. In sharing this message about their sisterhood, I refer again to Patricia Holland’s article, which underscores this sense of authenticity:

> I have always been touched that in her moment of greatest need, her singular time of confusion and wonder and awe, Mary went to another woman. . . . It was their very womanhood that God had used for his holiest of purposes. Elizabeth is not petty or fearful or envious here. Her son will not have the fame or role or divinity that has been bestowed on Mary’s child, but her only feelings are of love and devotion. To this young, bewildered kinswoman she says only, “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:42–43)30

As women, we know how to love, nurture, care for, uplift, comfort, advise, and be each other’s soft place to fall when we are feeling needy, low, and vulnerable. But like Elizabeth and Mary, let us also be a place from which we can fly, revel, glory, and delight in each other’s great news. Let us be each other’s cheering sections not just in times of need but also in times of glorious triumph!
THE BISHOP’S WIFE MET ZINA AT THE DOOR. “HE’S not well,” she said. The emotion in her voice betrayed how much she appreciated the visit. In the otherwise closely-knit community of Zealand Station, the phobia of contagion had made outcasts of the family. Even the bishop’s family.

She led Zina up the narrow stairway to Joshua’s bedroom. When they entered the room, the bishop strode across the room to stand with his wife. Dr. Hansen stood next to the bed, jotting down readings from the monitor above the headboard. The room was dark and musty. The lingering cool of the morning was almost gone. The air smelled faintly of antiseptic and bleach. The sunlight streaming around the corners of the curtained windows painted a brilliant chiaroscuro on the hardwood floor.

Zina sat on the edge of the bed. She touched Joshua’s hot, moist forehead. “How are you feeling, Josh?”

“Not so bad, Zee.” His voice was slow and labored. “I’m going to be all right, aren’t I?”

“Sure. You’re going to be fine.”

Dr. Hansen somberly studied his instruments. He knew otherwise—and because he knew it, Zina knew it. She heard the thought as clearly as if he had spoken it aloud. She closed her eyes in dismay.

“What are you going to do, Zee?” Josh implored. “Are you going to do your keeping?”

She glanced up at his father. Then back to the boy. “I . . . I just wanted to see how you were, Josh.” Lord, how he believed in her. She almost said aloud:

Don’t, Josh, don’t believe.

Instead, she said, “I’ve got to go now.” She left, before he could object, before his thoughts could follow her and stop her and pull her back.

She pushed the door open, stepped out onto the porch. Behind her, the bishop said, “It’s not fair to you, I know.” The door swung back on its spring and thumped against the frame.

YOU’RE A PROBLEM to them, Zina,” Kani Zakes always told her when these things happened. He told her the first time when she was eight and her friends were getting their baptisms and confirmations. He had succeeded in the task as well as the bishop had, which, in the end, had left Zina neatly balanced on the beam halfway in between the two, if not slightly in his favor.

“Just like it says in the Bible,” Kani’d lecture her, “He who is
not against us is on our part.' What they forgot to add is 'whether you like it or not.'” He grinned and rocked back in his wheelchair. “I've always thought it too bad Zealand Station wasn't more Catholic. A few miracles and they'd make you a saint. Make you a sign of faith, at any rate. Hell, even I qualify in that department. Folks all over town tuck their kiddies into bed at night, warning ‘em what happens to crotchety old agnostics who don’t say their prayers at night.”

“Deny not the gifts of God,” she'd quote back to him. She'd heard it so many times herself.

Kani'd slap the stumps of his legs. “It’s no gift,” he'd chortle. She never knew whether he meant her or himself.

And now she repeated to the bishop, “I am not a blessing giver.” She was not, but she wanted to be. Kani was more right than he knew. She wished to be counted among the saints, hear her name mentioned in testimony, taste the respect paid those men of stature. She knew the ordinance. She had memorized it the first time she’d heard it. But she was not a saint. She was not Mormon. She was not a man. She could never be a blessing giver.

“You are a blessing giver when you act as one,” the bishop told her, “if you have faith.”

“How convenient faith can be, always finding the exception to the rule.”

“The convenience is of God’s choosing.”

“Then God should do the asking Himself.”

“I’m asking for it now. Is that not enough?”

“No, it is not enough! I never even considered it was possible until you thought of it! What miracles will you expect me to conjure up next? What other gifts will your God bless me with that I never chose to accept?”

The bishop shook his head. “I don’t know, Zina.” His eyes met hers. “And at this moment, I do not care. I am asking you to save my son’s life. I won’t pretend to be acting out of altruism.”

“And if I do not wish to know—”

“Then that is your choice.”

“You've known all along how I would answer.”

“And so did you.”

She turned away so he would not witness her capitulation.

“And if I can heal as well,” she asked bitterly, “whom shall I not heal?”

He had no answer for her. She began to weep. He yearned to comfort her as he would his own son—she felt that strong, penetrating emotion in his heart, but she would not permit it.

She composed herself, controlled her feelings. She would do her keeping—for Joshua she would—but she would not let them think her a witch. Whatever she did, she would do it in the name of their God. “If you bless me to heal Joshua,” she said to the bishop, who was and always had been her friend, almost a father to her, despite Kani's best efforts, “then I will try.”

He did not seem to understand what she had said at first, his mind numb as it was with apprehension and guilt. Then the relief washed over him, buffered him so strongly he had to bow his head and brace himself against the door frame to steady himself.

Kani’s wheelchair clattered over the planking between the stockyard pens. He chuckled. “Sounds like Saul going to the witch of Endor.”

“Damn you, Kani,” Zina said crossly. “Not you, too.”

But of course Kani would say so, too. She was a keeper. That's what he called her first time he saw what her quicksilver mind could do. But he liked to remind her: “Either way, don’t make you a blessing giver.”

“That’s not my fault.”

“What does the bishop expect of you, anyway?”

“He wants me to give Josh his blessing.”

Kani turned somber for a moment. “He’s not doing so well, I take it.”

Zina shook her head.

“Damnedest thing I ever seen, a virus like that—kids dying one by one, and never within the same incubation period.” His wheelchair ground to a halt alongside a silted pond clogged with swine. “Carl!” Kani called out. “You done in there?”

The burly man ambled up to the fence railing, hands cupped together. Kani held out the knapsack and Carl spilled it in a handful of vials. “That’s all of them, Kani.”

Back in his grungy office Kani sorted out the vials and began scanning the batch numbers into the blood plasma analyzer that chugged away in the corner. Zina stacked the vials in the tray as Kani passed them along. After a while, working there in silence, Kani said, “So if the bishop intends you to heal the boy, how exactly does he mean you to do it?”

“He gave me the blessing.”

“Literally, you mean?” said Kani, genuinely surprised. “So what did he bless you to do?”

“To know what to do.”

“But you don’t know what to do.”

She shook her head.

“Well, there you go.”

“But I think that I could, somehow,” she said, “if I just knew how. But I’ve never healed anybody of anything before. I’ve usually just done findings and rememberings.”

Kani sat back in his chair and pondered. “I’ll tell you what, Zee. Most of what I know about the inside of pig I know from looking at a pork chop. But I do know how to run that machine. It tells me what a pig’s blood ought to be versus what it is. The diagnostics take care of the rest. I figure if you can take a look at what a mind ought to be versus what it is, maybe that will tell you the same kind of thing.”

“People are not like pigs.”

“I’ve known a few,” Kani grunted.

“Anyway, it’s not like I have a lot to compare to. The problem is, people say, ‘Tell me what I’m thinking,’ like it’s a parlor game. But they really don’t want me to. All I hear is them thinking, ‘What am I thinking, what am I thinking?’ over and over. Even when they don’t do that, what they do think is so scattered and fragmented. You ask somebody to think of the places where maybe they lost something. All they think about
SUNSTONE

is how they don't know where they lost it, and how upset they are about it, and what's going to happen as a consequence.

“So just how is it that you end up finding things?” asked Kani, even though he knew the answer.

“Well, you trick it out of them. You get them to think of something else so they let go of the memory you need.”

“I think that just might be it.”

Zina nodded, yet she felt dissatisfied with Kani's conclusion. "It was the bishop, you know.”

“What’s that?”

“The first time, the first time I did my keeping for somebody else, it was when I found the Merrill boy. It was the bishop who asked me.”

Kani gave her a disconcerted look. She had found the boy, out on the Noharbor, drowning in the river bottoms during a flash flood. She had watched him die, could do nothing, and she had hated the bishop for weeks afterwards.

His thoughts told her she could stand to do some remembering herself.

ZINA PEEKED AROUND the door jam to Joshua’s room.

“G’day, Joshua,” she said, “know what time it is?” An old joke, it was. He smiled, despite his discomfort.

That was why Kani called her keeper. She could always keep time, keep it for other people, deep down in the core of the brain, where the body melded with the soul and gave rise to the pulse of life.

“Three thirty-five,” said Joshua.

Time was the one consistency. A child's mind sang a simpler tune than that of an adult, but even a child hid so much, disguised, retold, un-remembered everything. Kids lied like crazy, just like their parents. That was the burden of the blessing giver—to remember things right: the promises of God, the covenants of the people of the faith. When the bishop laid his hands on her head and pronounced the blessing, she really had expected revelation, but she had felt pretty much nothing except the gentle pressure of his hands.

But she had remembered, gradually at first, and then more and more. She remembered the first time she knew who she was, how she wasn't like the other children, how she could step outside herself, watch herself be herself, know how there were two parts of her that came together as one. How the two parts talked to one another—and did what each other said, even when they ought not to. It was what the Bible preached, but even the true believers could barely believe it was really true.

She knew the boy had little sense of where his body stopped and his soul began—and would not know what to do even if he did. Instead she said, "I want to play a game with you, Josh, a keeping game. We're going to play it in Brother Johanson's loft. You know, that high loft in his barn above the stables. Now you close your eyes.”

He closed his eyes. She stroked his cheek as she spoke. “Josh, you're going to get out of bed, put on your overalls, go downstairs. There you go, out the door, down the street, past the church, through the pasture to the barn. You know that loose board under the window on the east side? That's it, climb up the ladder to the loft. Now, Brother Johanson, he's just finished the spring mowing, so the loft is pretty full. When you get up on a bale, you know that if you fall backwards you won't be able to catch yourself because there's not a rail there. And you know if you hit the back of your head right on that beam that holds up the loft, maybe--well, probably—it would kill you. Sure would hurt a lot. A lot more than it hurts right now.”

She paused. She watched him, in his mind's eye, running down the street, cutting through the pasture, crawling through the broken board into the barn, scampering up to the loft. Like he did all the time when he was well.

He stood there, balanced, waiting.

“Now Josh, listen to me carefully. This is very important. You can't see me, but I am following you. I am right behind you. When you fall, I will catch you.”

She paused. She watched him, in his mind's eye, running down the street, cutting through the pasture, crawling through the broken board into the barn, scampering up to the loft. Like he did all the time when he was well.

He stood there, balanced, waiting.

“So Josh, listen to me carefully. This is very important. You can't see me, but I am following you. I am right behind you. When you fall, I will catch you.”

It was an impossible thing, what she was asking, even as real as she had created the image in her mind. Zina's vision clouded with tears. She took a deep breath, bit her lip, and went on. “I want you to fall back, Josh. Fall backwards, and I will catch you. You must believe me. I will catch you. You can't look to see if I'm there. You have to have faith in what I say.”

But he couldn't do it. He would start to fall, fear would overcome him, and he would catch himself, stumbling wildly on the precipice. Each time Zina would step forward, touch
him on the shoulder, whisper in his ear, “I will catch you.” He would glance around, and she would not be there.

Zina stepped forward, and just as he began to fall, caught him before his instincts could react.

“I will catch you,” she whispered again.

This she did again and again until his heart finally believed her more than his instincts did not. He let go, let himself fall. His body accelerated downward. His head would strike the beam, his skull would fracture, blood and brains splatter on the joists.

At that moment when he abandoned himself to fate, to pain and annihilation, she caught him, held him in her arms. Brother Johanson’s loft faded away. A shrill tone knifed through the blackness. She felt her body rudely jostled. The room swayed, brightened, sharpened into focus.

“No!” cried the bishop’s voice.

When Joshua fell and she caught him, the EEG monitor went flat, screamed an alert. Dr. Hansen pushed Zina out of the room swayed, brightened, sharpened into focus.

“Where am I?, he asked. And then, That is my father? The bishop’s hands were on Dr. Hansen’s shoulders, driving him back from the bed.

*There is always more pain in mercy than in justice,* the bishop said.

“He’s in coma,” Dr. Hansen protested, flushed and distraught.

Zina glanced around the room. Josh’s mother stood by the door, hands clasped. Mother, said Josh. The impulse was overwhelming: Mother. Zina felt the words form on her lips. She tore her gaze away. Unsure of her balance, she sat on the bed, stared down at Joshua’s body.

Me, said Josh. Am I alive? Can I go back? He was buoyant, inquisitive, free from pain.

“Yes,” said Zina. “Hush, be quiet.” Saying that, he fell, as he imagined it, asleep.

She reached back into his mind. At first, his mindscape was as quiet as a morning sky at sunrise. The patterns were unfamiliar, until she realized that looking at was always the reverse image. Her right was his left. She was used to looking in. Now, to be part of his mind, she had to turn herself around in her point of view, like reading a map in a mirror. She had to make his right her right.

She recalled a picture in a textbook about perception and the mind. It was a picture of an upside-down face, but with the eyes and mouth flipped around normal-like, in a smile. When you look at people, you focus on the eyes and see the face in relation to the eyes, and so the picture looked almost pleasant, even upside down. But turn the face right side up, and you recognized it as a distorted, ugly grimace.

Zina saw the distorted ugliness and it saw her. At once she was surrounded.

gooaway, it hissed at her out of the darkness, at the distant horizon of Joshua’s mindscape. She recoiled. Shadows reached toward her, circling, probing.

Again it burst upon her, like a swarm of locust.

gooaway.

“Who are you?”

The swarm rose in crescendo and died. we are many. It was a statement of being, not of definition. we are many.

“Why are you here?”

It repeated itself: we are many. She asked again, and it repeated itself again. we are many.

They were not wise, they were not strong, they were simply many. They wanted more.

She thought about the ten pigs.

Kani told her the story, and it wasn’t a fairy tale. “Seen it myself,” he insisted. “People who say pigs are smart, they don’t know what they’re talking about. Maybe smart for meat on four legs, maybe smart compared to your average cow.”

He said, “So, you’ve got ten pigs in a pen, you take out one, slaughter it, hang it in the smokehouse, dump the offal back into the slop. His nice, smart siblings gobble him up. The next day, you do the same thing. Nine days later, you come to get the last one, and the fool animal looks up at you, and it’s happy ‘cause all it thinks when it looks at you is all that good food you brought the past few days.”

Kani shook his head. “A dog, now, a dog would catch on. That’s the difference in smarts—being able to think outside your own appetites.”

That’s the difference in smarts, as Kani put it. But this swarm, it was all appetite, there was no reasoning with it, but she tried. “You are killing this body,” she said.

who are you to speak for this body?

“I am—” she hesitated. “I am its keeper.”

keeperkeeperkeeperkeeper. Like a mantra. keeperkeeperkeeperkeeper. what will you keep us from.

“From killing.”

The swarm roared like a wave upon the breakers. we do not kill.

“You have already killed.”

then it is our nature to kill.

“And so it is ours,” she whispered.

do not kill us, keeper. the blessing giver did not kill.

I am not a blessing giver,” Zina whispered.

nonononono. Fainter and fainter: give us a host, keeper, a host you do not keep.

Zina could kill them. She could block their control, cut their tendrils, and the body unfettered would destroy them. But she hesitated. She had lied. It was not her nature to kill. There was some sentience about them—rationalization requires sentience. But there must be conscience as well. There
must be, and she could not rationalize well enough to clarify to her own satisfaction the difference between murder and killing.

give us a host.

She pushed them back, bound them until they could not escape. "Josh," she said, "It’s time for you to go back."

He awoke and forgot where he was. Before he remembered, she drew the swarm out of him, into a prison in her mind, and slipped Joshua back to his own body. At once the EEG lines sprang back to life. His autoimmune levels jumped from depressed to supernormal. Dr. Hansen sprang to adjust his patient’s electrochemistry to prevent the flood of agents already pumped into his bloodstream from overwhelming the body’s resurrected metabolism.

Josh looked up at her. He touched her arm. "You caught me, Zee."

She smiled and clasped his hand in hers. She got to her feet, still dazed. She felt the bishop’s arm around her shoulders, escorting her from the room into the quiet hallway.

"Are you all right, Zina?"

The swarm buzzed angrily in their chains. She pressed the palms of her hands against her temples. They were tearing corting her from the room into the quiet hallway.

"We are many."

"I did not kill them," she gasped.

"We are legion."

And now she could not kill them. The swarm’s weakness along the mind’s circumference had been no indication of what would happen when she held them at the center. Relieved of the burdens of the boy’s dying body, they now reacted with their original, primal frenzy: If they proved uncontainable, her body would reject them, and they would surely find another victim.

She twisted away. She stumbled down the stairs, out the door. Bile welled up bitter in the back of her throat. The world dissolved into a blur. She fled from Joshua, from the town, from the people, fled blindly on her homing beacon, until she tripped and slammed against a fence post. She fell on her side and sank down in the mud. The dim outlines of the stockyard drifted into her senses. The mud oozed up around her, wrapping her in a cool wet blanket. The swine gathered around her. One nudged her with its snout.

Zina gazed at the swine, at their dumb innocence, their blind obedience to her will. She lectured her prisoners: There are enough of them here that if you disperse among them, they will survive, and so will you.

"Yes, they replied, let us into the swine."

She let them, and for a very short while, a few moments, each separate hive of the horde was content within its host.

Those moments passed.

A pig staggered off, plowed into the tepid water and collapsed, its brain burned up with fever.

"No!" shouted Zina.

The fever spread like wildfire. The frenzy became a stampede. The water was quickly choked with the drowned and the dying. Zina ran after them. The bishop had followed her, and now he caught her up and away. She struggled against him, but he held her in strong arms and carried her back to the gate, fearful of what she might do to spare the swine.

"Get ‘em out of the water!" came Kani’s voice. "Out of the water!"

Carl waded though the mud heaving the animals onto the bank. In the hot, bright, sunlight the dirty water steamed off the carcasses. Carl wiped his face with his sleeve. His hands shook. "I’ve heard of heatstroke getting to them, but never like this. Never like this."

"Get a kit!" Kani yelled. "We’re drawing blood on all of them!" Carl took off running. A sudden pall of silence fell across the yard. Kani shifted his gaze to where the bishop sat in the mud, holding Zina in his arms, staring off into the distance, frightened and amazed. Kani understood at once.

"That’s twenty head you owe me for, Bishop." He jabbed at the joystick of the chair, wheeled it around.

From where she sat in the mire by the gate, Zina watched the swine die, watched their life pulses flicker out, like that of the boy in the river bottoms. The brains of the swine were individually too small to succor the mass of their whole multitude. The entropy of each pig’s death sucked existence from them, one after the other, until they too dissipated into the elements. Dust to dust.

She felt enormous sadness, though not for them. They were creatures of no will. The will of a healthy child, the innate, protective will that made the body a refuge for the soul, that kept body and soul so tightly bound together, could destroy them. Their vector had been the disease, the fabric of the viral RNA. And though the virus spread widely in epidemic, they killed only individually.

In those few short moments after Zina had released them into the swine they had been content, until one of their number spied another, and then its only driving impulse was to possess the other, even to destroy its host in order to draw what it needed to attack the other. Having no will, when the assault was complete, their masses undifferentiated, their appetite reddoubled, insatiably—

Worthy of no pity.

She grieved, rather, for the swine. She had led them innocently to the slaughter. She wept, and let the bishop comfort her.

"They suffered because of me."

"There is always more pain in mercy than in justice," the bishop said.

BUT THERE IS more joy also. The bishop brought her back to his home, where his son, bright-eyed, growing stronger, welcomed her with the redeeming love and affection that only a child can bestow upon his keeper.
TURNING THE TIME OVER TO...

L. Kay Gillespie

CONFESSIONS OF A SANTA DISSENTER

A lie which is half a truth is ever the blackest of lies.
—ALFRED LORD TENNYSON

SANTA KNEELING AT the manger? Santa hanging from the cross? I have given my annual Anti-Claus lecture for more than thirty-five years—at six different universities and colleges, and before such diverse audiences as local churches, civic organizations, and the Sunstone Symposium.

Because my wife and I have never taught our children to believe in Santa Claus, our neighbors have kept their children away from our home at Christmas time, and I am a pariah in my ward because I protest every time Santa is brought into our meetinghouse for Christmas parties. Stuffed Santas in mousetraps mysteriously appear under my office door—along with verse, reindeer food, (and pooping!):

For all the souls who hate the noise,
Of Christmas cheer and lights and toys.
For Mr. Scrooge, and Mrs. too,
Here’s a little gift for you.
A lump of coal won’t be enough,
To make up for the shine and fluff.
So here’s a scoop of reindeer poop,
To offset all the Christmas goop!

We receive Christmas cards that warn: “The world is full of two kinds of people—those who believe in Santa Claus and Communists!” Another favorite: “Money’s short, times are hard, here’s your F—n Christmas Card.” I have even discovered notes attached to my car which read: “Don’t mess with Santa! Signed, The Elves.”

In what I am sure are well-intentioned acts of charity, anonymous donors have rented Santas to appear on my doorstep on Christmas Eve bearing gifts from Santa for my children. One of my junior high school teachers sent me a note calling me a “fat-head,” others have used the less-creative “Jerker,” and I’ve received plenty of “shame on you” messages.

Each year, I receive new, creative versions of ‘Twas The Night Before Christmas: Some I can share, others not. Here’s a favorite:

How to live in a world that’s politically correct?
His workers no longer would answer to “elves”
“Vertically challenged” they were calling themselves...

And, of course, I am privy to all the latest emails, including the suggestion that Santa Claus is really a she, not a he, because:

- Christmas is a big, organized, warm, fuzzy, nurturing social deal.
- Obviously not the kind of thing a guy could pull off at all.
- If he were actually a man, everyone in the universe would wake up Christmas morning to find a rotating musical Chia Pet under the tree—still in the store bag.
- If he were a man, there would be no reindeer because they would all be dead, gutted, and strapped to the rear bumper of the sleigh. And Blitzen’s rack would already be on its way to the taxidermist.

Although many of the Santa-related things I receive are sent as good-natured tokens of dissent with my family’s position, I am frequently amazed at the animosity that is fostered by my feeble attempts to redirect the Christmastime focus from Santa Claus to Jesus Christ.

My journey toward becoming a Santa dissenter began one Christmas Eve on a cobblestone street in a small German village. I looked up in the sky and watched the snowflakes gently dance toward the earth. This was my first Christmas away from home. Perhaps a combination of homesickness and self-pity was washing over me. But whatever the stimulus, it caused me to evaluate the difference between the U.S. Christmas celebrations and that which I was experiencing in Germany. Two of these include the separation of St. Nicholas (celebrated on 6 December) from the birth of Jesus Christ (celebrated for two days, 25–26 December). And on Christmas Eve, each child receives one gift from the Christic hold and then the family goes to midnight mass or some other church service.

Since that night so many years ago, I have returned to the Alps of Germany, Switzerland, and Austria to experience the Christmas seasons of my Christmas coming of age. Among my favorite experiences is that of standing at the site in Oberndorf, Austria, where “Silent Night,” in its original composition, was first written and performed. While my Anti-Claus lecture is delivered in my tongue-in-cheek, in-your-face style (which some students call my “Shock and Awe” approach), I believe much in what I suggest is crucial for Christian people to consider. We face a growing secularization that is replacing Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ, with “X-mas” and “Happy Holidays,” the celebration of Santa Claus, and the commercial, worldly, deconstructionist agenda that attends this movement to neutralize any religious context for the celebration.

I have carefully tracked some of the miscellaneous associated with this encroachment. Some examples from recent years:

- As a result of the European-Union mandated European gender legislation, Woolworths department store and other retail outlets must all stock “Mother Christmas” outfits and costumes to avoid being taken to court over sex discrimination.
- Russia has developed an “Anti-Claus” movement arguing that the American Santa Claus is replacing “Grandfather Frost”—a plump figure who wears a large golden sash, wears a hat like the old czars, and traditionally brings gifts to Russian children—and ruining Russian culture by replacing indigenous traditions with a capitalist image: “unbridled consumerism and shop-till-you-drop doctrines.” Leaders of the movement were at that time scheduling an “anti-Santa Claus Festival” and their own website—Grandfather Frost v. Santa Claus.
The Supreme Court has ruled that the Christmas tree is not a religious symbol and can, therefore, be displayed in schools, government buildings, and other publicly owned venues.

In Medford, Oregon, one man has decorated his front lawn with an image of Santa roasting the Grinch on a rotisserie. Neighbors complain it is too R-rated for an outdoor light display.

In New Zealand, a young boy threatened Santa that if he didn’t bring him a computer, he would blow up the chimney.

At S I have studied and observed the secularization of the Christmas celebration, I have felt compelled to expose several Santa Claus myths that people use to rationalize or justify their use of situational ethics in bringing Santa Claus into the celebration designated for remembering the birth of the Son of God.

**MYTH 1. “There really was a Santa Claus.”**

SANTA CLAUS IS a creation of anti-Catholic, pro-commercial, interests. It is a myth (even a lie) to believe or teach that Santa ever existed. He is not Kris Kringle (the Christ Child), St. Nicholas (the Bishop of Myra), or any of the other historical persons he has been identified with. He is a creation of capitalist interests promoted to sell objects of consumption.

Santa Claus has evolved from a smorgasbord of pagan figures, fancied imagination, and religious bigotry. For centuries, European countries have celebrated some characters—real and imaginary—as part of traditional holidays and religious services. Among these are:

- Odin, the Norse God, who wears a white beard and rides a horse-drawn chariot through the sky.
- Kris Kringle, who was brought to the New World by the “Pennsylvania Dutch” and derives the name from the German phrase for Christ child, Christ Kindle.
- St. Nicholas, the Catholic Bishop of Myra (meaning Myrrh), the patron saint of children as well as of maidens, lovers, merchants, sailors, robbers, and prostitutes.

Nicholas is a real, historical character who derived his reputation by giving to the needy and saving three daughters of a poor man from prostitution by throwing gold coins into their windows in order to provide a dowry for each. The Germans celebrate St. Nicholas on his name day, 6 December, by giving candy and small gifts to children.

- Sinter Klaas. In Protestant Holland, the Dutch, attempting to humanize and make St. Nicholas less Catholic (but keep the tradition) have created Sinter Klaas, “a stern . . . but kindly man who dressed in a bishop’s gown and miter to leave presents in the wooden shoes of good little boys and girls each December 6.”

Sinter Klaas came to New York (New Amsterdam) with the Dutch settlers of the seventeenth century. But he underwent a complete transformation as English settlers moved into the New York area and their children envied the Dutch children’s gifts and goodies obtained from Sinter Klaas. The idea of celebrating a Catholic bishop was not acceptable to them. Neither was the celebration of ancient Catholic name days. Thus, they completely overhauled the image and persona to create “Santa Claus,” who more closely resembles the pagan god Thor. Some of Thor’s more interesting descriptions include:

- He is the god of peasants and common people.
- He is portrayed as an elderly man, jovial and friendly, heavily built with a long, white beard.
- His element is the fire; his color, red.
- The sound of thunder is attributed to his rolling chariot.
- His chariot is drawn by two white goats named Cracker and Gnasher.
- He lives in the “North Land.”
- He is known as the Yule God.
- The fireplace in each home is sacred, and Thor is said to come down the chimney into his element, the fire.

It’s easy to see how Santa Claus could be manufactured out of such a myth. He was made even more visible by Clement Clark Moore’s 1822 illustrated story, A Visit From St. Nicholas (now known more commonly as Twas the Night Before Christmas), the first textual and visual description of our modern Santa Claus. His appearance heralded the modern celebrations of Christmas as we know them. By comparison, in the U.S. of 1776, there were no Christmas trees, no Christmas cards, and the holiday was not universally accepted as legitimate. It was actually banned in many communities, and much of the opposition was based on religious grounds. Christmas services reported in the New York Times for 26 December 1885 stated:

The churches of the Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists were not open on December 25, except where some Mission Schools had a celebration. They do not accept the day as a Holy one, but the Episcopalian, Catholic and German Churches were all open. Inside they were decked with evergreens.

Other significant dates in our modern celebration of Santa Claus include:

1866—Thomas Nast’s drawing of Santa Claus appears in the Harper’s Weekly.

1875—Christmas cards are
introduced in America by Louis Prang of Boston
1882—Utah legally recognizes Christmas as a holiday
1897—Francis Church, editorial writer for the New York Sun, receives a letter from Virginia O’Hanlon asking, “Is there a Santa Claus?” His answer contains the now ubiquitous, “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.”
1920—Emergence of commercial influence on the Christmas celebration. Also marks the arrival of “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” sung by Gene Autry.

MYTH 2. Santa Claus represents the spirit of Christ.

AS A SYMBOLIC rather than historical figure, Santa Claus is the antithesis of Christ. It is an exaggeration and a charade to pretend that modern Santa Claus symbols have anything to do with the birth of Christ. They are mostly pagan in origin, and their meanings are far from appropriate for a celebration of Christ’s birth. To exemplify this, compare the following:

**CHRIST**
- **WHITE = Purity**
- **RED = Sin**
- **ATTITUDE: Giving**
- **HONESTY: Lying and Deception**
- **SPIRITUALITY: Worldliness, Consumerism, Materialism**
- **GIVING anonymously**
- **REJOICING**
- **COORDINATE: COMPETITION**

**SANTA (SATAN?)**
- **WHITE = Purity**
- **RED = Sin**
- **ATTITUDE: Getting (ask children)**
- **HONESTY: Lying and Deception (“There is a Santa Claus!”)**
- **SPIRITUALITY: Worldliness, Consumerism, Materialism**
- **GIVING to be seen: (“To ___, From ___”)**
- **REJOICING**
- **COORDINATE: COMPETITION**

The origin and stories of common Christmas symbols also betray their place as far removed from the purpose of Christmas:

**SYMBOLS:**
- **Christ Tree.** “Learn not the way of the heathen … for the customs of the people are vain; for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers that it move not” (Jeremiah 10:2–4). It has been suggested that the followers of Nimrod [the anti-Christ] hung round ornaments representing eggs on their evergreen trees to symbolize the fertility granted by their pagan God.11

**SYMBOLS:**
- **Holly.** Holly berries were used anciently as symbols of sexuality—representing fertility, the propagation of life. The wreath shape was in honor of the sun’s orbit, the reappearance of which was celebrated with the winter solstice.

MYTH 3. Santa is part of a healthy fantasy world for children, and there is no harm in it as myth.

IT MAY NOT be harmful for children to have an element of the “make-believe” in their lives, but when we as parents and adults teach fantasy, we usually make sure children understand it as such. With Santa, however, we don’t do this. We teach that he is real and make up lies and rationalizations to perpetuate these lies.

Indeed, some people trace early fears and phobias to a belief in Santa Claus. A newspaper reporter recalls one of his colleagues who had a fear of Santa dating back to one of his childhood experiences:

“We went to see Santa on Christmas Eve at a local department store. I thought something was kind of strange about him because his leg kept collapsing and the kids would slide off onto the floor. Then later, when we got home, my mother told me to run down to the corner tavern and tell my father to come home for dinner before he spent his Christmas bonus. When I walked into the tavern, there was my father and Santa—the one from that department store—in the middle of the barroom throwing punches at each other. I’ll bet not many kids ever saw their father and Santa Claus duking it out Christmas Eve.”12

And, who can forget the Santa Claus scene in the movie Christmas Story where the little boy visits Santa and is thrown down the chute?

Additionally, it is suggested that the concept of Santa creates strains and irrational buying by parents who feel guilty because of the time they have spent away from their children during the past year. “More parents spending time at work and fewer spending time with children” creates “working parent guilt. . . . The result: Feeling contrite at time stolen from parenting, being more capable financially, working parents will overwhelm their children, in an effort to assuage their own guilt.” In ads, toymakers exploit this guilt.13

Unrealistic expectations regarding Santa Claus create feelings of depression, disappointment, and general dissatisfaction that cause many people to be unhappy during the Christmas holidays (holy days!). Many holiday depressions adults experience can be traced to overindulgence at Christmastime, indulgences which stop as children get older and Santa no longer showers them with gifts—the magic has worn off.

Children, too, often become depressed because they overbuild expectations in advance. Fantasies cannot match reality, no matter how wonderful the day may be, and disappointment follows.14

Sometimes children are set up by the Santa myth and must make major adjustments when things change unexpectedly in their lives. I received the following letter:

Dear Dr. Gillespie:

Five years ago, shortly before graduating, . . . I came to hear your lecture. At first, I was annoyed and angered. Santa had been part of my childhood, and I recalled a sense of being part of the grown-up world, an intimacy of shared secrets, when I discovered that Santa wasn’t “real.”

Six months later, when I faced an unexpected divorce, . . . I had no idea that lecture would be part of helping me and my children adjust to a new life.
By Christmas of that year, I realized so much had changed, and my whole perception of life was different. The old traditions also had to be re-thought. My children had already been debunked of a number of myths as they and I faced a very sober reality. At Christmas, I recollected your lecture and realized they deserve the truth at all times, not just sometimes.

Children of divorce, children of the homeless, the poor, and the unemployed—these are the ones who know the reality of Santa and the harm that can come from such pretenses.

My own research conducted along Utah’s Wasatch Front shows an interesting connection between parent-child trust and the teaching of and belief in Santa Claus. In questionnaires given to high school students, I found that while almost all had been taught by their parents there was a Santa, when they learned he didn’t exist, it came not from their parents but rather from friends and teachers. I followed this question by asking from whom they first found out about sex? Drugs? And I then asked, “Taking everything you have been told about drugs and sex, who seemed to be the most truthful?” In each instance, the high school students in my sample had learned more about sex and drugs from friends and “others” than they had from their parents. They also indicated that the most truthful information about these subjects came from friends, teachers, and others, not parents.

I’m sure I can not lay all of the “what’s wrong with this picture?” trip at the feet of Santa Claus. But I find it to be an interesting comparison and wonder about the extent to which children learn, at an early age, how honest their parents will be with them. Why would any Christian parents choose to begin their relationship with their children with a lie called Santa Claus, especially if they want their children to believe them when they teach them about Jesus Christ and a Father in Heaven? When asked about their feelings upon finding there is no Santa, some of these children were hurt.

I'm less excited about Christmas, hurt
It was a big let-down; it ruined Christmas
They appeared [ridiculous] going to all that trouble
I felt that I had been betrayed
I was upset because I thought they had been telling the truth

THERE is tremendous social pressure for parents to teach the existence of Santa and, in so doing, to avoid having their children ostracized or excluded because of their non-belief. As I mentioned above, I have neighbors who refuse to allow their children to play with mine during Christmas because mine don’t believe in Santa Claus. I am certainly not asked to speak or participate in Church meetings during December for fear that I might ruin Christmas for the children in the ward. There have been threats to burn crosses on my lawn because of my outspoken criticism of the Santa myth and the culture of deceit that surrounds it.

Yet even though I don’t recommend my activist approach to Santa dissent for everyone, I am continually amazed that people assume that anyone against Santa must be anti-Christmas. Is it blasphemous to celebrate the life and birth of Christ at a time set aside for such celebration? Is the assumption correct that children cannot appreciate the meaning of Christ’s birth without adding Santa Claus into the mix so they can truly enjoy Christmas? Is it ridiculous to want to be consistently honest with our children? Maybe it is time that each of us individually reassesses what we believe, why we believe it, and how it applies to our celebration of Christmas.

NOTES

1. Many cultures do a much better job of keeping the Christmas season’s focus on Christ’s birth—that the season should be a time of anticipation and spiritual preparation. Two of my favorite practices are: St. Barbara’s Twigs. According to an old Bavarian custom, on 4 December, the name day for St. Barbara, families cut twigs from the forsythia shrub or cherry tree and place them in a vase of water. Sometimes they tie to the twig the names of loved ones or others for whom they have a special wish. As Christmas Day approaches, the buds on these twigs begin to swell and burst into full bloom (blossoms and leaves) around 24 or 25 December, just in time to match the celebration of the birth of Christ.

3. Drawn from transcript of “Morning Edition,” NPR Radio, 7 January 2002. This same kind of movement got started in Austria with the Pro-Christkind Society for a “contemplative Christmas,” a program aimed at promoting an Austrian traditional Christmas rather than an American Santa Claus one. They caused such a reaction among Americans that they ended up apologizing in an “Open Letter to America.”
6. Taken from a news report 21 December 1989, notes in my possession.
THE DIVINE FEMININE—when I speak with Latter-day Saints about her, I use the term “Heavenly Mother.” When interacting with people outside the LDS tradition, I generally use “The Goddess” or other terms that reflect their cosmology. I like all of these opportunities to speak of her—and the chance to use all the terms. Whoever the Divine Mother is, she has many aspects, many manifestations. I need more than one image to know her, more than one name to describe her. Because I don’t limit her to one name or image, I am able to believe in all of them.

Within Mormon tradition, there is a communal agreement about the nature of deity, which then gets expressed through LDS theology, history, and testimony. Most Mormons, I suspect, would admit to having a testimony that Heavenly Mother exists somewhere in time and space. Even President Gordon B. Hinckley has stated publicly his belief in her. “Logic and reason would certainly suggest that if we have a Father in Heaven, we have a Mother in Heaven. That doctrine rests well with me.” However, at the same time, President Hinckley imposed a prohibition against elaborating further on that belief, to prevent it from becoming either discourse or behavior in the public sphere. “However, in the light of the instruction we have received from the Lord Himself, I regard it as inappropriate to discuss the female side of our Father in Heaven.”

In discussing religious practice, scholars refer in part to the visual elements of popular religions. These visuals may include many forms or styles—from imagery to vision, from paintings to photographs, from icons and design to writing. For example, Islam has a rich visual culture in which calligraphy is generative, breathing life into the Word—or, better said, is the Word. Visual elements may be symbolic, creativity is not always meant to be symbolic. Only in Catholicism, particularly Eastern Orthodoxy, images can point to a particular truth—such as the fact that the mother of Jesus is vital to the Christian tradition, a truth revealed in the number of and standardized elements contained in images of the Virgin Mary. However, the divine may also be thought to be literally present in the image, as when an image of Mary is reported to have spoken, wept, or suckled a starving monk. 

To some extent, the visual is a reflection of belief, so that visual aspects of religion may convey specific beliefs, or basic tenets of theology or cosmology. Belief is often complex; still, people tend to “judge a book by its cover,” as when assuming that an image conveys absolute truth or that appearance reveals a person’s true beliefs. For example, President Hinckley is concerned with the generative capacity of appearance when he cautions men not to wear earrings and youth not to get tattoos. This concern is complicated, of course, but it relates partly to what the image says about people and how it might generate behavior in Church members.

The relationship between image and belief is especially evident in the Mormon anthropomorphic God. To Latter-day Saints, God the Father is not just like, but actually used to be, a human man—so it is easy to picture him. Thus, because we humans actually embody his image, he becomes utterly real—even human—to us. Mormons most frequently image God the Father through the lens of Joseph Smith’s “First Vision,” in which “God” appeared as “two personages” of “flesh and bones.” This means that when we imagine God, we actively imitate Joseph’s vision. It also implies that we can replicate Joseph’s experience and have a personal vision and relationship with the divine. Imagining God, then, generates a type of reciprocity in our relationship with deity.

Perhaps because of this foundation, as a Mormon convert of more than thirty-five years, I am wedded to an anthropomorphic God. I am also wedded to a goddess. This means that as part of my spiritual quest, I found that I eventually needed to visualize and express the Mormon culturally-agreed-upon belief in the female god. However, because there is no description or image of the anthropomorphic female god in my religion, I turned to goddess imagery for ideas. I bought figures, art prints, music, knick-knacks, and books; I bought goddess key rings, jewelry, calendars, and tarot cards. In addition, I bought clay figures made by Linda Sillitoe, called “Givers”—figures of women, or goddesses, if you like—named according to the gift of insight they bring to their owner’s life. Whether because of the emotional demands of my spiritual “type” or because of my professional interest in material religious culture, I needed material versions of the material god.

In fact, as I was doing this, I was engaged in the creation of divine identity. I wasn’t worshipping the Goddess, or a goddess. I was trying on different identities of the divine feminine in order to see which ones were useful to me as I deliberated about and re-

DOE DAUGHTREY is a doctoral candidate in religious studies at Arizona State University, where she currently teaches American religious traditions and new religious movements. She is a member of the Sunstone board of directors, is married to a fabulous man, is mother of five children, and with her recent birthday achieved official “crone” status. She gave an early version of this essay as part of the 2004 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium panel, “Real Goddesses Have Curves (and Identities)” (tape SL04–271).
lated to my mental picture of my Mother in Heaven. Previously, I had focused on determining for myself what she is not—e.g. to me, she is not a frail, white-haired grandmother dressed all in white. (Though I have nothing personal against this image, I’ve had to work hard to weed out the stereotypical images my brain had stored about holy women/goddesses, who looked suspiciously like elderly temple workers.) So, I turned to the question of what or who she really might be, especially to me. Ultimately, it became a decision about my own belief in her.

T

HERE are few things about her that Mormons are permitted to explore, especially in public. This may be changing, but my own experience has been otherwise. Thus, getting to know the female god is a private practice. For Mormons, it’s safe in public only to assume that she’s a wife, mother of many, and busy doing what mothers everywhere should consider their primary role: birthing, nurturing, raising children, and supporting her husband. Thus, to really know her, I felt I had to go elsewhere, to look for images that fully articulate the divine female experience, its range of potential, and its human qualities.

After reviewing many images of the divine female from a variety of traditions, I finally selected a few goddesses who express to me the complexities of Heavenly Mother and my own life. Interestingly, they all turned out to be “triple” or multi-faceted goddesses, who represent multiple aspects of a woman’s life—such as the phases of maiden, mother, and crone, or the duality of darkness and light. One such goddess is Ix Chel (see line images at beginning of essay).

Off the coast of Cancun, Mexico, is Isla Mujeres, or the Island of Women. One travel guide states that Isla Mujeres “has been enjoyed as a healing sanctuary and energy center since 1300 AD when the Maya made pilgrimages to the shrine of Ix Chel to make offerings to the goddess of the moon and fertility.” Though I visited Isla Mujeres with my husband and young children several years before I began actively seeking my Heavenly Mother through goddess myth and imagery, the notion of an island of women tugged at my spirit. But I had then never heard of Ix Chel. Yet when I look at the photos taken on that trip, I can almost see a thread between me and the island—as if Ix Chel, weaver of the universe, had woven me into her own story.

According to her myth, as Patricia Monaghan interprets it in her book The New Book of Goddesses and Heroines, Ix Chel is a Mayan goddess of water, the moon, childbirth, and weaving. In her maiden aspect, she is the woman who resists captivity. For the sin of choosing the sun as her lover, she died at the hands of her jealous grandfather. In death, Ix Chel was attended by grieving dragonflies, who sang over her for thirteen days, at the end of which time she was restored to life and able to rejoin her lover. However, the sun also grew jealous and suspicious and accused her of betraying him with his brother, the morning star. Having been thrown from heaven by the sun, Ix Chel found sanctuary elsewhere; however, in mindless repetition, the sun was able to entice her to return to him, only to grow jealous of her again. Eventually, Ix Chel weared of the sun’s behavior and reclaimed her life by leaving him. Like an autonomous woman who instinctively senses danger, she wanders the night as she wishes, avoiding his presence by disappearing. She is the moon moving across the night sky, disappearing below the horizon as the sun rises behind her.

In keeping with this type of intuition, in her mother aspect, Ix Chel is thought to protect and care for human women through pregnancy and labor. Similarly, the goddess website <www.goddess.com> notes affirmations such as “I am joyful! My big hips are sexy!” that embrace the natal value of wide hips and promote appreciation of both biological and general female creative capacities as embodied by Ix Chel.

In her “crone” aspect, Ix Chel is often depicted as a dangerous-looking old woman with a serpent in her hand or on her head. In goddess spirituality, the serpent is a symbol reclaimed from its biblical association with evil to represent Ix Chel’s transformation through all the stages of life. This symbol recurs in the form of her assistant sky serpent, whose belly carried all of heaven’s waters. Similarly, in another association with life-giving substances and cyclical movement, the jug she sometimes carries contains enough water to flood, destroy, and then renew the earth. Ultimately, in keeping with her characterization as the Goddess of Becoming, Ix Chel is immediately recognizable as a shape-shifter: at once a maiden (fruitful), a mother (patroness of birthing women and their children), and a crone (bone-keeper and life-tender from beginning to end).

W

HEN I look at these images of Ix Chel, do I believe that she is my heavenly mother? No, not exactly. What I see in Ix Chel is what I want to believe about her, as well as what I want to believe about myself. We are each of us complex, capable, compassionate, and dangerous; and I am an embryo of her potential. What I see is that we are both goddesses. Through Ix Chel, Heavenly Mother is alive to me in a way that the divine feminine has never been. I hope that when I sing songs containing her name, she hears me. When I weave at my loom, she is with me. When I nurture my daughters on their birthing beds, she attends us all. And when my body dies, she will be the one who meets me and collects my bones. And I will collect the bones of my daughters who die after me.

She is my mother. She is me. And I love her.

To comment on this essay or read comments by others, please visit the Sunstone blog: www.SunstoneBlog.com.

NOTES
2. Ibid.
MORMONS AND POLITICS

CAN A MODERATE MITT FIND A WAY TO PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE?

By R. B. Scott

HERE HE GOES again. W. Mitt Romney has already proved that a Mormon Republican can be elected governor of the nation's most liberal state. Now he's off on another "mission impossible" to win the hearts and minds of the Christian conservatives who control the Republican Party and historically have not thought highly of Mormons like him.

If he beats the odds again, he could well become the next president of the United States. If he is less persuasive, he could wind up as a capable and attractive running mate. Either way, the party gets a very smart leader at the top of the ticket or an agreeable number two man who always plays by the rules he likes to help shape.

But you never know what brass-knuckle politics will lead to: any day now, Vice President Dick Cheney could suddenly high-tail it out of Washington to his hideout in Wyoming (pick your exit strategy: weakening heart, looming indictments, fresh compromising pictures of him with Halliburton pals). The President, looking for a Mr. Squeak E. Clean replacement, would remember that Romney is nearing the end of his first term as governor, has a rather spectacular history of bailing out troubled organizations (not to mention saving lost souls), and... well, you get the picture.

If serendipity strikes Romney again, he could be sitting just a heartbeat away from the nation's corner office, ready to head out on the campaign highway as the anointed heir, savior of the party, in charge and in control of those radical neo-conservatives. Just the way he would prefer it.

This is not some incredible Wag the Dog scenario. Brilliantly serendipitous things happen to good people like W. Mitt Romney So, pay attention.

R. B. SCOTT—Ron to his friends and Bruce to his mother—is a native of Salt Lake City who has lived in New England for thirty-seven years, two as a missionary. He was a staff writer for the weekly Life magazine and was one of the founding editors of People magazine. His first novel, Closing Circles—"the ornate adventures of being Mormon"—will be out just as soon as an agreeable publisher offers a contract. He welcomes email comments and inquiries to <rbscott@comcast.net>.

White House. And, it resonated with religious extremists everywhere who believe a holy showdown between Muslims and Christians is inevitable if not imminent.

T has been nearly four decades since Mitt's father, George W. Romney, the immensely popular governor of Michigan, had a lock on the Republican nomination until he proclaimed, "I was brainwashed about Viet Nam." We will never know whether Mormonism would have dogged him had he won the nomination, but probably not. In 1968, moderate Rockefeller Republicans like George Romney were flying high, having just wrested control of the party from the clutches of strident Goldwater conservatives.

Today a different brand of zealot—the acolytes of the Christian Right—rule the moderate party of Romney senior and Nelson Rockefeller. But Mitt would rather switch than fight them. Sort of. "I'm a red state kinda guy," and "I've always been pro-life," he proclaims a bit disingenuously.

The truly peculiar, perhaps surmountable, problem for Romney is this: those most ardent in their self-righteous scolds—the one's foisting "abstinence only" and "intelligent design" onto the public schools—are often the same people who rant that Mormons are heretics, slickly deceptive and dangerous anti-christs.

If you are unfamiliar with this new breed of unChristian, drop by an "open house" for virtually any new LDS temple. You'll see them carrying placards bearing hateful messages condemning Mormon teachings and sacred practices. Or join a public LDS-oriented internet discussion group. Sooner and later and often, these well-trained Christian soldiers will attack and disrupt and taunt, avoiding thoughtful discussion at all costs.

"For me, the shame is that Mitt is running now when the Republican party has been co-opted by the far right with its extreme and very narrow agenda," says Helen Claire Sievers, a Democrat who has worked with him on many Church leadership assignments over the years. "The challenge for him, both politically and ethically, is to get the Republican nomination, because I think his centrist philosophies of fiscal responsibility and genuine social compassion will position him well with the general American electorate."

MITT showed so much promise when he began this quest a dozen years ago—very, very smart, principled, committed," said another long-time
admirer who would like to vote for Romney in 2008 if he “doesn’t become your typical politician, willing to do whatever it takes to win the election.”

Romney’s promising start included supporting the formation of the non-partisan Concord Coalition—dedicated to fostering sound social and fiscal policies—led by the late Senator Paul Tsongas, a Massachusetts senator, Democrat, and one-time presidential candidate, together with other thoughtful leaders of both political parties. Until he began focusing his sights on the White House, Romney’s politics were right down the middle, drifting slightly left on social issues, veering right on fiscal policy—a freshened and appealing version of his father’s politics.

As a Church leader, he was equally moderate and pragmatic, even a careful change agent from time to time. Local members do not recall a single person who was excommunicated or disfellowshipped while he served as president of a stake that probably has as many religiously roccoco and fiercely independent academics, writers, and thinkers as any in the Church. He eschewed using Church councils to settle ethical and financial disputes between members, encouraging them instead to press their claims in civil court.

When martial breakups beset the bishops and high councilmen who served under him, Romney refused to accept their de rigueur resignations because doing so would have suggested, incorrectly in his opinion, that the Church viewed divorced members as second-class citizens.

According to Kathleen Flake, assistant professor of American religious history at Vanderbilt University and chronicler of Utah Senator Reed Smoot’s influence on the public perception of Mormonism in the early twentieth century, “while Romney does not speak for the Church, he could be considered the next key figure in a sustained, if ill-defined and uncoordinated effort to reassure America that they have nothing to fear from Mormonism. This effort is as old as Mormonism itself, but as the Church has grown, so has the need for such assurances.”

The gregarious and media-savvy Mormon president Gordon B. Hinckley took to the airwaves to dampen teachings that had long rankled fundamentalist and Trinitarian Christians alike. After an interview in Time wherein President Hinckley cast doubt on whether Church doctrine teaches that man can become as God is, a friend asked what I made of Hinckley’s and Romney’s efforts to soften the sharp edges of Mormonism. I buried my tongue in my keyboard and replied: “If you listen to Mitt and [President Hinckley] long enough, you might conclude that the unflinching, pragmatic leader who emerged in 1993 was the ‘Real Mitt’ even if they worry that his tempered ‘pro-choice’ endorsement then was more an expedient reaction to political reality than it was a vision borne of serious study, thoughtful reflection, and sincere prayer.”

Ditto, the Church’s reaction—or lack thereof. The results of a private poll conducted before Romney announced for office made it quite clear: no candidate for statewide office who opposed a woman’s right to choose would ever be elected in Massachusetts. Period. The poll results were shared informally with the Brethren.

At that time, a senior LDS official close to the First Presidency said that some members of the Quorum were dismayed at Romney’s position on abortion even if they understood it was consistent with the doctrine of agency. They realized it would serve no purpose to quibble—the greater good was to get him elected, to give him a fair shot at realizing the victory his father booted forty years earlier.
PAUSE for a moment. Imagine it’s 1994 and you are one of those Christian Right zealots. You already believe that the Mormon position on abortion is too squishy. Now one of its most visible members announces he’s “pro choice,” and the Church takes no action. Ditto “morning after” treatments. In 1994, Romney championed them, reasoning that they could render obsolete the need for most abortions. If he has had a change of heart since then, he’s not admitting it. So would his recent rush right make you wary? Would you be confident he wouldn’t rush left when it was convenient?

Even long-time friends understand how hard it is to get a handle on the “Real Mitt.” “The fact is, he always tells the truth. He is extraordinarily precise about what he says and how he says it,” says a former associate who worked with Romney at Bain & Company. His assessment is shared by many, many Romney friends in Boston who admire and know him well but are distressed that many Romney friends in Boston who admire and know him well but are distressed that politics have forced him to compromise.

The former Bain associate continues: “If you were to go back and parse the actual sentences he used in 1993 to define his support for the right of women to choose, I’ll bet you’d discover his position today hasn’t changed that much. It just seems that way. Like Clinton, Romney expects that you know the answers to important questions are always complex. Therefore, it’s important to carefully define and understand what ‘is’ is.”

Perhaps that is why conventionally conservative columnists profiling the attractive Romney often gloss over his apparent flip-flops on key issues such as abortion, same-sex unions, and casino gambling. The most boggling flip of all was from ardent support for stem cell research in 2002—research that could lead to effective treatments for his wife Anne’s multiple sclerosis—to outright opposition in 2005.

For some conservatives, it seems enough that he is a fiscally conservative leader who has a reputation for rescuing failing ventures, has a moral compass that points “true north,” and solid core values. Who cares if their origins are Catholic, Jewish, Presbyterian, Baptist or, egad, Mormon?

As recently as 1999, apparently 17 percent of the electorate did care, saying they wouldn’t vote for a presidential candidate who was Mormon. The recent heated response to Newsweek’s cover story commemorating the 200th birthday of Joseph Smith suggests that bitter, anti-Mormon sentiments are still alive and well in the land. The challenge to Romney is to demonstrate clearly that stacked against Hilary Rodham Clinton, an enigmatic and in-scrutable Mormon like him looks pretty darn competent and is a better alternative than the take-charge former mayor of New York City, the straight-talking populist senator from Arizona and former prisoner of war, or the African-American woman who runs the State Department.

Right now, he faces the toughest decision of his life. It is not one he can put off for long. As if to underscore his personal angst, as he has done in the past, he sought advice from the man he admires most in this world: Mormon president Gordon Bitner Hinckley. The conversation eventually turned to whether a run for the presidency would be good for him and the Church. The specifics of the conversation are, of course, known only to people who were there. However, Romney left with the clear impression that the upbeat Mormon prophet was not worried about the additional scrutiny a presidential campaign might focus on the Church and its teachings but was emphatic about steering wide of any and all partisan political involvements. “The choice to run or not must be yours and yours alone,” he reportedly advised, firmly but kindly.

So there Romney stands, all dressed up with lots of places to go and no electronic Global Positioning System to get him there. He needs to warm the engines now if he is to run for re-election in Massachusetts in 2006, an election recent polls suggest he could lose decisively.

Or, he needs to devote all his energy to winning his party’s presidential nomination, a goal that may ultimately prove unattainable, very costly, and personally compromising.

Or, he can hedge along the way, concluding that the stars have aligned to make him better suited for the job a heartbeat down the hall from the nation’s corner office.

Perhaps the most promising prospect after all is the hope that Dick Cheney will retire soon to Wyoming and that good things will continue to happen to nice boys like Mitt Romney, as they always have.
DEVELOPING AN LDS-COMPATIBLE PERSONAL RELIGION

By D. Jeff Burton

This column explores the stories of Borderlanders because it is useful to know how others have successfully (or unsuccessfully) dealt with problems and challenges. Since my last column, I’ve spoken with several people who had interesting questions. In this column, I share one of them, along with an extended version of my response. Since the following recounts a conversation that took place over an hour-long lunch, I don’t have a written record, but I remember it well enough. As I did during the conversation, I’m borrowing some thoughts from my book, For Those Who Wonder.

My lunch was with “Jake,” a thirty-something man from Provo, Utah. His essential struggle is over maintaining his integrity while still feeling acceptable to family and church associates as a “faithful” rather than “testimonied” member.

I’ve decided to try to stay with the Church, despite my doubts, reservations, and concerns. But I’m torn up inside because I can’t bring myself to “do all things” to follow every Church practice and procedure. I just don’t feel that compatible anymore. How can I make this work for me and yet stay active and “acceptable”?

My replies over the next hour or so took the following basic form:

For you to successfully “stay,” you must have faith in yourself, God, and the Church, maintain a continued relationship with God, and create a suitable model for living your own “personal religion” which will be based on the foundations of Christ’s teachings and be compatible with the LDS model. You will carefully select attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors appropriate to your needs. You must also be honest with yourself and others as you make changes. Existing motivators will have to be examined and modified, as appropriate and possible. Let’s explore these issues.

LDS personal religion. The Church encourages members to develop a personal religion and personal relationship with God but in accordance with its model (with which you are pretty well aware). Its foundations, for example, consist of Christ’s life and teachings (e.g., honesty, morality, prayer, love, giving, sharing, service, and faith.) The Church also has many policies and procedures unique to Mormonism and provides many opportunities for service and growth as part of its model.

LDS-compatible personal religion. In building an LDS-compatible personal religion, you should incorporate the Church’s requirements and opportunities and be sure yours is built upon the same foundations. As such, your model for righteous behavior and attitudes will be in concert with, but perhaps different in some respects from, the LDS one.

Why it can work. Some have told me that the “compatible personal religion” approach is impossible for them. I agree that it may be impossible for some, but I think it may be possible for others because:

1. Gospel blessings come through following Christ’s teachings and through appropriate behaviors. For instance, it does not require a testimony of Joseph Smith to be honest in your business dealings and receive the attendant blessings that follow honest speech and behavior.
2. A personal relationship with God is available to anyone. God is no respecter of persons and loves each person equally. Prayer continues to provide a communication channel.
3. There is a certain acceptable latitude with respect to particular beliefs about the LDS religion, making it possible for us to diverge to some degree from the standard model without alienation. For example, it is not necessary to have a unwavering belief in the divine origin of the Book of Mormon to attend church, enjoy and magnify one’s calling, and live a Christlike life.
4. It is possible to be open and honest about our beliefs and feelings. It may not be easy, but it is usually the best approach for ourselves and for others. Emotional health is easier to maintain when our actions follow our true beliefs.

A caution. If you choose to create an LDS-compatible personal religion and be honest with those around you about your beliefs, the worst thing you can do is begin changing things without plans or assistance. In their anxiety, discomfort, or anger, some people simply tear things down, speaking only in terms of what they “don’t believe,” and then do nothing more.

So, before making changes, it is usually wise to consult with someone who is understanding of your plight. Talk it over with your parents, your friends, your spouse, and others who care about you. Help is available from others who have successfully managed to develop a comfortable home within the Church even without an unwavering testimony. LDS Family Service counselors have dealt with these issues countless times. I often urge people to talk things over with their bishops. I believe that besides your benefiting from their counsel, you are in a position to be of great service to your bishop, who can gain valuable insights to the reality of questioning and wondering when someone is courageous enough to be honest with them, and mature enough to avoid anger and accusations. It can help bishops see that “faithful” in addition to “testimonied” members are acceptable, too.

D. JEFF BURTON is an author and a member of the Sunstone Board of Directors.
Before you embark on this journey, it is also best to have some idea of what you hope your new personal religion will look like. If possible, it is best to (1) make a conscious decision to strengthen your personal relationship with God, (2) assess your family’s needs regarding your lifestyle and religious practices within your home, and (3) write out a model for your religious life that is compatible with Christ’s teachings, LDS culture, and Church rules. (See sidebar below for an example of one member’s attempt to develop an LDS-compatible personal religion.)

Risks. Although a “personal religion” approach such as this one above may seem inviting, it carries some risks. Your spouse, children, or neighbors may dislike the changes, the disruption, and your rearrangement of the standard LDS model. It may be threatening to them. It is important to ask yourself: What if other family members follow my lead? You must realize that it may create unity, but it may also result in stress and strain if they, in turn, carry their changes to excess. If you make these changes, some local leaders may disagree and distance themselves from you. Additionally, this personalized approach can cause real trouble if the changes you make are sudden, dangerous, or ill-advised. The whole enterprise may cave in around you if your changes are too radical, or you may be asked to leave.

Despite the risks and heightened responsibility it requires, I recommend this approach as an alternative for members like you who otherwise are ready to leave the Church. Under the circumstances, this approach is potentially the least disruptive for you. It may save you and your family from a lot of unnecessary stress. It might be worth a try before you give up.

Living your model. Living your model will be difficult at first. Don’t be afraid to back off and change the model to be more realistic and workable. Most of us first develop models that are more stringent than we can live and that are in many ways stricter than the official LDS model.

Motivation. The first thing you will notice after adopting a new model for a religious life is the need for new motivators. In the existing Church model, prime motivators for following the rules (e.g., Word of Wisdom, tithing, temple work, preparing and teaching lessons, attending meetings) include both “presenting” motivators (those we like to mention, e.g., love of God, love of Church, obedience to God, individual growth, eternal rewards, personal satisfaction, tradition), and “hidden” motivators (e.g., group pressure, guilt, fear, and possible divine punishment). These latter motivators, while strong, are often obscured and rarely mentioned, except perhaps when we deny their existence or importance. When used, they have a positive sounding tone: “I couldn’t afford not to pay tithing,” is a positive and non-threatening way to say, “If you don’t pay tithing, God will not only not provide for you, but he will also take away that which you have.”

Hidden motivators, recognized and acknowledged or not, are powerful and influential, and you must deal with them if you are to change your personal religion and still remain at peace with yourself. You might evaluate to what extent these hidden motivators influence you. Do you know when you are motivated by deep-seated guilt and fear? It is the last thing most of us want to admit. We prefer to think that we make decisions based on goodness or on rational, reasonable analysis.

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EXAMPLE OF AN LDS-COMPATIBLE PERSONAL RELIGION

AS IT PERTAINS TO GOD: I try to understand God and my relationship with God. I pray and stay close to God. I acknowledge God’s goodness in my life. I show thanks to God by the way I treat others. I acknowledge that I do not know all there is to know about religion and God, relying on faith to bridge the gap.

AS IT PERTAINS TO CHRIST: I try to understand and follow Christ’s teachings for living the abundant life. As such, my personal religion includes these behaviors:
- I study Christ’s life and teachings.
- I try to follow Christ’s example.
  For instance:
  - I adopt the motto: “Do unto others.”
  - I care about other people.
  - I try to “turn the other cheek,”
  - I try to forgive.
  - I try to be honest with myself and others.
  - I share what I have with others.
- I honor my parents and grandparents.

AS IT PERTAINS TO MY FAMILY: I make my family’s interests the highest priority. I try not to let my own beliefs and feelings be too disruptive to their religious growth and what they experience for themselves. I support my spouse and children in their beliefs and Church activities. I contact teachers and leaders and encourage them to teach Christian ways of living to my children. I negotiate acceptable arrangements concerning my Church activity with them on a timely basis. I respect my children’s right to have a stable home life.

AS IT PERTAINS TO OTHER PEOPLE: I listen. I try to understand others. I accept others and their personal religions without criticism. I allow others to have their own beliefs, feelings, and desires. I try not to convert other Church members to my ways of seeing and believing, but I am honest with others about my life. In doing so, I try to control and manage emotional responses (e.g., anger) which may hurt others. I communicate my desires, feelings, and beliefs, but in ways which will not hurt others. I listen to other people without criticism. I negotiate and compromise with others to solve problems. I respect others’ rights to privacy. I take responsibility for all of my actions and attitudes that may hurt others.

AS IT PERTAINS TO MY PERSONAL LIFE: I accept things as they are. When I have problems, I try to solve them. When I make mistakes, I say, “I’m sorry.” I forgive others. I accept the principle of moderation in all things. I exercise, eat correctly, and maintain good health practices. I strive to continue my education. I try to see the full reality of every situation. I am honest with others about myself, my beliefs, and my feelings. I seek help and counsel when I cannot understand or solve a problem on my own. I listen to other points of view. I avoid letting unwarranted guilt and fears drive my behavior.

AS IT PERTAINS TO THE CHURCH: I am honest about my beliefs and feelings about the Church, but I am not unfairly critical of it or its leaders. I remain an active participant, as it benefits me and others. I accept callings which are compatible with my abilities and desires. I take responsibility for my activity in the Church. Through established channels, I seek to change Church programs that I believe can be more beneficial.
Of course, guilt is a sometimes useful emotion, and fear is an ancient, deep-seated, and powerful feeling. Both can lead us to correct and safe behavior. When these feelings keep us from killing, lying, or stealing, they serve us.

However, as Latter-day Saints, we sometimes feel misplaced or unwarranted guilt and fear. If we feel guilty about something which is not wrong or fear something which is not threatening, then guilt and fear are poor servants. They bar us from thoughts, beliefs, and activities which could enrich our lives.

At one time, I was involved with LDS Family Services as a lay counselor. The following real-life stories illustrating these points are drawn from that experience.

“Norma,” active for most of her sixty years, called to say that her husband, “John,” a faithful and unquestioning member of the Church, had been suffering from depression for several years. John had never been called to be a member of a bishopric. As a result, he felt God must be displeased with him, that he lacked “valor,” or had not been forgiven for past mistakes. He could not identify any act or sin which might reasonably have prompted any Divine displeasure, but nevertheless felt consuming guilt and overwhelming fear for the future and his salvation. Norma wondered if she were the “cause” of the “problem.” Was her own “unworthiness” responsible for her husband’s “failure”? After several meetings and subsequent reassurance from their bishop, the feelings of depression were relieved.

• “Marie” suffered from chronic vaginal bleeding and actually believed she was within weeks of bleeding to death. Her doctor had warned that unless she had a hysterectomy, she would eventually die. She refused the surgery because she was driven by feelings of fear. Her patriarchal blessing had promised many children “if she was worthy.” A hysterectomy would be a sign of unfaithfulness, an acknowledgement of unrepentant sin. It would be a sign that Marie was not worthy of God’s promised blessings so she thought it better to die than to contravene the promises. Eventually, after some talk, her bishop and stake president suggested that her interpretation of the blessing was too literal. She eventually came to accept that the blessings could be achieved in the afterlife or with surrogate “children” in this life. She went on to have the surgery, but with some misgivings, not having completely purged herself of the unwarranted fear.

These are examples of the kind of inappropriate and destructive guilt and fears that must be overcome before you can be completely happy living your new personal religion, and this may be a lifelong task, a difficult challenge which will require much courage, thought, and effort. Being honest with yourself and looking deep within the reality of your life is the first step in overcoming these enslaving and inappropriate motivators.

Finding New Motivators: Living the foundation principles (e.g., honesty, morality, love, kindness, giving, faith, following Christ’s teachings) are essential to successfully living the new model. Motivators for living the foundation principles include both presenting and hidden elements. Whatever motivates you to do these things, even if not entirely appropriate, can basically remain unchanged, for at least you reap some benefits from appropriate behaviors and attitudes. Blessings follow largely from action, not ideals. Hopefully, however, you will eventually move away from guilt and fear, and adopt more appropriate motivators, such as: “I am active because I want to be, and I know it is good for me and others,” or, “Christ showed us the way to live, and I believe he is right, so I do what he suggests.”

Finding sufficient motivation for continuing to follow the organizational requirements of the Church may be more difficult. Unreasonable and unwarranted fears and guilt will no longer be effective motivators. Group pressures will weaken. Old motivators will have to be replaced by more mature motivators such as personal choice and responsibility, positive and loving attitudes, faith, and respect for your children. Rewards can continue to motivate but hopefully they will be moved from heaven to earth, emphasizing eternal glories and looking more toward the rewards that follow from simple goodness, doing well, seeing your children happy. Group pressures and the groups you identify with may expand to include more than just your ward and Church associates. You will have to identify and evaluate these new pressures. Simply choosing to live in the “real world” and a life informed by reason become important motivators. Being open and honest with others about your life is, in itself, a motivator.

CREATING a new model for a religious life is a challenge, but it can be very rewarding for those who succeed. James Fowler suggests that as a crisis of faith passes, a person will either move from his “Stage Four” (wondering, doubts, tension, turmoil) back to “Stage Three” (safely being part of the group) or forward to “Stage Five” (comfortableness with a life that is less certain and circumscribed, greater acceptance of diversity and the notion of faith as an ongoing “journey,” and so forth). Those who venture or stumble into the wilderness of Stage Four can look to the promise and blessings of Stage Five, or to the safety of Stage Three. Whatever you choose, even if it is remaining for quite some time within a Stage Four state of doubt and a constantly rearranging worldview, you can still lead a religiously compatible with the traditional LDS model.

NOTES
1. In my first column (this is the eighteenth), 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, re- duced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria. See the figure. Copies of former columns are available on the Sunstone website, www.sunstoneonline.com.
2. If you would like to speak to me, just send an email or letter. I regularly meet on the phone or in person with members who would like to discuss their situations.
3. A new fourth edition draft is available as a pdf file for a free download. Just send me an email, and I’ll send you a copy of the pdf file.

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

D. Jeff Burton
2974 So. Oakwood Dr.
Bountiful, Utah 84010
jeff@eburton.com
REVIEW ESSAY

WHERE IS JOSEPH SMITH NOW?: BEGINNING THE SECOND QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JOSEPH

JOSEPH SMITH: ROUGH STONE ROLLING
by Richard Lyman Bushman
Alfred A. Knopf, 2005
740 pages, illustrations, index, $35.00

JOSEPH SMITH: THE MAKING OF A PROPHET
by Dan Vogel
Signature Books, 2004
744 pages, illustrations, index, $39.95

Reviewed by Mark D. Thomas

It is scandalous that the Joseph Smiths who emerge in these works are so different, but their divergences allow us to see the organization of data in two very different ways.

AS A PRESENT for Joseph Smith's 200th birthday, Latter-day Saints and others interested in Mormonism receive two new and very detailed biographies, each representing very different ways of scrying for the Mormon prophet. In many ways, the books and biographers are perfect complements to each other, though I believe the success of the two diggings differs markedly.

Both Richard L. Bushman's Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling and Dan Vogel's Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet come to us as labors of a lifetime, each containing carefully crafted portraits of Mormonism's founder. Both are important reference works for scholars of early Mormonism. Approximately one-fourth of each of these 700+ page books consists of footnotes, demonstrating both authors' strong grasp of primary and secondary sources. And both stand in contrast with more general and summary-type works on Smith by Robert Remini and Donna Hill.1

Yet for all of their wonderful details, there is something un-Joseph-like about many of the little pieces in this puzzle-making competition. Somewhere between Bushman's long list of accomplishments of the prophet's great-grandfather and Vogel's citation of the 1827 list of liquor purchases by Joseph Smith Sr., I began to long for something that feels more like Joseph to me: a few lines from a Rossini opera, perhaps. Something on a bolder scale to articulate who Joseph Smith Jr. was. Indeed, one might accuse both scholars of believing in the dictum: "more is less." No one deserves such a slow death by suffocation of detail. But these authors had other projects in mind, and I suppose too much detail is better than not enough. I am grateful for the gift of these two fresh and provocative approaches.

Even as I write this, however, I hold it to be a scandal of Mormon scholarship and an embarrassment for historians that these two biographies describe what appears to be the life of two entirely different people. Even their choices about the shorthand way to refer to their subject—Bushman uses "Joseph" while Vogel uses "Smith"—reveals much about their approaches. Bushman is interested in the person with a complex spirituality who became an enigmatic, biblical-style prophet while Vogel is interested in the phenomenon of the boy/man who grew through daring deceit and fraud to declare himself God's power broker on earth. With these very different approaches, Joseph seems to be slipping deeper in the earth, even as we dig for him. Though it is scandalous that the Joseph Smiths in their works are so different, these divergences can work to our advantage since they allow us to see the organization of data in two very different ways.

At the end of this essay, I suggest that these two biographies, along with the pending publication of the Joseph Smith papers and the internationalization of Mormonism, mark the beginning of what might be called a "second quest" for the historical Joseph. And just as with the new quest for the historical Jesus, we will leave behind many inns before reaching Mormonism's home. I believe this second quest for the historical Joseph will encompass and yet transcend the historical puzzle-making.

TWO AUTHORS, TWO PORTRAITS

RICHARD Bushman is a respected professor at Columbia University, a former Mormon stake president who currently serves as stake patriarch. Rough Stone Rolling is Bushman at his best, presenting his most objective, his most astute, critical scholarship. In this book, Bushman acts as a neoclassical scholar—balanced like granite Ionic pillars, with an interior of rich

MARK D. THOMAS has spent his adult life researching and writing about the Book of Mormon. He is the founder of the Book of Mormon Round Table—a group of Mormon and non-Mormon scholars who meet annually. He lives with his wife, Christine, in Holladay, Utah, and is currently director of field studies at BYU's Marriott School of Management.
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Bushman's biography a definitive and respected history of the life of Joseph Smith for the foreseeable future.

Bushman presents Joseph as a complex, ironic character. He makes summations of aspects of his character but clearly believes we cannot get at some things. At these points, Bushman points out the possibilities and moves on. His conclusions never go beyond what the data will support. Certainly, he brings his own perspective to the work. But when he can, he tries to let the story speak for itself.

Bushman sees Joseph Smith as a man of deep strengths and weaknesses, perpetually on the verge of financial and spiritual catastrophe. Yet he also presents him as a mammoth and generous personality who, like Abraham Lincoln, came out of nowhere. Bushman's Joseph combined profound love and charisma with vindictiveness—he would not be crossed. He was creative and bold—and often foolish and boastful. Joseph disdained high society. He was a populist who at times appeared raucous, impious, and certainly playful. Yet he could also muster enormous dignity and composure when circumstances called for it. Joseph was chief visionary and chief executive of the Church, as well as chief developer of real estate. He received revelations as if from an inexhaustible spring (232–51, 294–304, 323–25, 332, 343–44, 390–92, 399, 409, 423, 488–90).

At times, Bushman seems puzzled by Joseph's actions. In the case of plural marriage, he asks: "What lay behind this egregious transgression of conventional morality? What drove him to a practice that put his life and his work in jeopardy, not to mention his relationship with Emma?" (442) He wonders what lay behind Joseph's calling this a commandment and statements that those who reject it would go to hell. In trying to make sense of this, Bushman writes that the God of Joseph "was both kind and terrible" (442). In passages such as these, we see Bushman struggling to make sense of the Prophet's mind. While Joseph recognized the potential for deceptions from Satan, he never admitted deception as a possibility in the case of plural marriage (443). Bushman acknowledges the prophet's marriages to women who were already married and who lived with their husbands after marrying the prophet. This leads Bushman to conclude that this doctrine may ultimately be less about plural marriage than about a family theology. While stating that sexual relations were part of the package, at least in some of the marriages, he concludes
that Joseph “did not lust for women so much as he lusted for kin” (445). Bushman goes into much more detail about the logic of plural marriage than I can list here. But this gives readers an idea of how he treats one of the more controversial aspects of the prophet’s thought and practice.

The subtitle of Bushman’s biography is from the prophet himself, and is apt. Bushman sees Joseph as “an extremist prophet,” who “gave God a voice in a world that had stopped listening” (279). Each episode in this book illuminates something about Joseph Smith as an independent and idiosyncratic thinker. What we get from Bushman is character that evolves, finds dark days, thinks and acts big, moves ahead of his followers (and, therefore, keeps silent at times), rains curses on his opponents, blesses and inspires—and keeps rolling like a stone hewn from the mount without hands. Bushman notes the many roughnesses of Mormonism that stem from this unpolished prophet: its authoritarian, yet populist nature (154, 232–70, 523–31); its cruelty and seeming incapacity to accept criticism while at the same time capable of great compassion and love for fun (251, 293–304); its “mixing of the mystical with the plain” (483–84).

Rough Stone Rolling addresses pressing issues in Mormon history: Is Joseph Smith culpable for the excesses of the Danites? Bushman’s answer: Yes—he egged them on with his rhetoric and gave them legitimacy, even though he may not have known all that they were doing (375). Did women get the priesthood in Nauvoo? No—but the Relief Society organization was patterned after the priesthood and gave women power in an evolving church (451–53). Bushman forthrightly deals with Joseph’s treasure-seeking and stone-gazing, judging folk magic his preparatory gospel (47–57). The Book of Abraham is “an awkward and unsuccessful attempt to blend a scholarly approach to language with inspired translation” (294). It is “an apocryphal addition to the Genesis story of Abraham” (286–94). How and why did the priesthood and endowment evolve? (313–23) What was the Council of Fifty, and why was Joseph Smith declared King of the world? (523–31) Bushman admits that with the rise of recent scholarship, proponents of the Book of Mormon as an ancient document face an uphill battle (93). He addresses all of these issues with frankness and balance.

The primary weakness of Bushman’s work is his seeming acceptance at face value of Joseph Smith’s late statements about his own youthful years. For Bushman, Joseph’s pronouncements seem to be generally straightforward and factual—even late versions of early events. I believe a great deal of work remains to be done to uncover the events of early Joseph Smith from later inaccuracies and performance variations in his story.

Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet

IN CONTRAST TO Bushman’s treatment, Vogel’s biography seeks an overall psychological interpretation of the life of Joseph Smith as well as a broad interpretation of the Book of Mormon. As its subtitle suggests, it is an interpretation of how Smith came to think of himself as a “prophet.” While Bushman seeks insights into a complex person by drawing from detailed events, Vogel operates from a single, grand thesis that explains it all: Smith was a “pious fraud.” But ultimately Vogel finds more fraud than piety in Smith.

By “pious,” Vogel means that Joseph Smith had some sort of religious vision/conversion experience in his youth, and he believed that God commissioned him to call the world to repentance. By “fraud,” Vogel means that Joseph Smith “occasionally” used deceptive means to accomplish that mission (vii-xxii). But when we actually see what Vogel actually believes to be fraudulent, it seems that it could include the bulk of Smith’s major religious claims and activities.

Vogel suggests that Joseph Smith may have fabricated evidence and used fraud during his money digging career (xi–xx, 80–86, 98–101) and engaged in the same tricks used by modern-day psychics to convince people of Mormon. As its subtitle suggests, it is an interpretation of how Smith came to think of himself as a “prophet.” While Bushman seeks insights into a complex person by drawing from detailed events, Vogel operates from a single, grand thesis that explains it all: Smith was a “pious fraud.” But ultimately Vogel finds more fraud than piety in Smith.

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that he was a real seer (69–70). He also claims that this fraudulent activity reflects on the nature of the translation of the Book of Mormon (xvi–xvii).

Vogel admits that it is possible that Joseph Smith had visions after his first vision but is clearly skeptical that they occurred (xi–xv). For instance, due to the changes in the stories as they were told over time, Vogel has difficulty believing Smith's story of the 1823 vision of Moroni. This leads Vogel to state that he treats "Smith's visions in terms of the evolving stories he told people about them rather than as actual events" (42–44).

In other articles and essays, Vogel has been more forthcoming about his outright skepticism about Smith's visions, suggesting, for instance, that Smith spent a sleepless night on 21–22 September 1823, wrestling with the "moral dilemma, whether or not to proceed with his story of finding gold plates." Vogel suggests that Smith's decision to tell others of a visit by an angel as a "decisive moment in Smith's career." 5

In this book, a more cautious Vogel states that the visit of John the Baptist to Smith and Cowdery may have been a vision, or it may have been pure fabrication for theological reasons (306–07). He concludes that the visions of the three and eight witnesses were "group hallucinations" with Joseph Smith acting as "facilitator" (446–69). He suggests that Smith may even have put rocks or sand in a box for the eight witnesses to heft as an aid to helping them believe the experience that Smith and the hallucinatory state induced by prayer—"two hours with fanatical earnestness"—suggested they were having (468–69).

In other places throughout the book, Vogel points out that Joseph Smith lied about plural marriage (ix), may have made the golden plates himself (98–99), and believed that God deceives people for their own good (xxix). For this reason, according to Vogel, perpetrating such deceptions would not overly trouble the would-be prophet: "If Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon, became a prophet, and founded his church as a pious invention, he possessed the psychological means to explain and justify such acts" (xxi).

Despite Vogel's consistent caution in using "may" and other terms that soften his claims about Smith's fraud, Vogel just as consistently uses the inflammatory language of a prosecuting attorney rather than more neutral language of an objective scholar. In speaking of Smith, he uses titles such as "deceiver" (x), "fraudulent seer" (xii), practitioners of "trickery" (xii–xiii), "mentalism" (xiii), and "confidence schemes" (xiii–xvii). Though the book is well researched and rich in historical detail, I find Vogel's interpretation of texts, especially the Book of Mormon, invalid, and his logic unpersuasive. Following are two representative examples of Vogel's problems with texts and logic.

Vogel interprets the Book of Mormon as a complex autobiography of Joseph Smith—a sort of autobiographical allegory revealing multiple levels of meaning in Smith's life. Vogel gives at least six levels of meaning to the journey of Lehi (130–46, 379–402). For example, Nephi represents Joseph Smith Jr., Lehi is the "good" Joseph Smith Sr., and Laban is the "bad" Joseph Smith Sr. Vogel gives two possible meanings for Nephi's killing of Laban: his killing the "backsliding Universalist and sword-bearing treasure seeker" so that "the good father can emerge." A second possible meaning is Joseph Smith Jr. wanted to kill his father in order to "free the Bible from the intellectualizing grip of his father and those like him, to interpret scripture for himself more literally and through the spirit of God" (135). Vogel spends many pages outlining psychobiographical readings of Book of Mormon people and events. They are extremely speculative and interesting theories that beg to be tested. Let us test one. For simplicity's sake, let's stay with the Nephi/Laban story.

Certainly Lehi and Nephi are character types "even as the prophets of old" (1 Nephi 1:20) and certainly quite like the prophet of the Restoration. As I see him, Joseph Smith, like Lehi, was a social outcast, left the doomed city, and, guided by his seer stones, sought a new, promised land. But this is not the kind of analysis that Vogel gives us.

In the Book of Mormon text itself, the narrator gives an explicit social/psychological meaning of the Laban story—that with God's aid, the weak outcast can overcome the powerful—and indeed Nephi explicitly compares himself and his brothers' battling Laban with Moses and the children of Israel's battling the Pharaoh of Egypt. But Vogel's analysis contradicts that explicit thesis. Vogel argues that Joseph Smith Sr. was a social outcast, "impotent," had a melancholy disposition, a man who felt inadequate, and was essentially a drunken failure who needed to be saved by his son (9–15, 42, 154). Vogel portrays Joseph Jr. as more powerful and able than his father, even before the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (42). According to Vogel, the psychological message of Laban's story is that strong things (Joseph Jr/Nephi) overcome weak things (Joseph Sr/Laban), the exact opposite of what the text says about itself.

This is just one example of Vogel's strained reading of the text. Time and time again during my reading, I asked, "Do Vogel's psychobiographical speculations help me understand the book or Smith better?" Usually the answer is "No."

Vogel does offer some good insights into the Book of Mormon. I like, for example, his description of the fortification of mound builders in Joseph Smith's environment and how they compare to Book of Mormon fortifications (257–59). He also offers some very useful summaries of Universalism, king men, and other issues in their nineteenth century context (e.g. 200-03, 260).

The irony of Vogel's book is that it is so rich in wonderful detail, and yet his thesis of Joseph Smith as a pious fraud contradicts the primary data in his own book. For example, Vogel portrays the Smiths as a family of sincere visionaries. Lucy Mack's sister had a vision of Christ. Solomon Mack has seen visions of lights. Lucy claimed to see a spiritual light through a veil. Joseph Sr. had many dreams that he considered visions. And he was one of the eight witnesses that Vogel claimed had a "visionary" experience similar to the three witnesses (e.g., 8–9, 15–20, 26–28, 31, 46, 50, 460–67). The sincerity of their visionary claims is just one aspect of the deep religious character of the Smith family, as portrayed by Vogel.

Joseph Jr. utilized the same visionary techniques as his family, yet Vogel argues that many of his religious activities and claims are intentional deceptions. In short, according to Vogel's own data, Joseph Smith Jr. seems to be fundamentally different from his family. Yet one of the foundations of Vogel's argument is that we can understand Joseph Smith best as a product of his family (xx–xxi). Thus Vogel's Joseph Smith is a stranger to his own historical setting. In fact, Vogel's argument and evidence force me to accept the portrait of Joseph Smith's character and visions Bushman draws rather than Vogel's portrait of Smith as a consistent liar with claims of visions devoid of sense data. Vogel's data actually supports Bushman's conclusions better than do his own.

Objective observers are likely to agree that we can, with certainty, conclude that Joseph Smith lied during his lifetime. The prime example is Joseph Smith's deception to hide plural marriage. (Vogel also points to
the golden plates as a prime example of deception and fraud, but Latter-day Saints are less likely to accept this.) But I believe it is too great a leap to conclude from one or perhaps two examples that Joseph Smith can be summarized as a fraud with good intentions, and as a charlatan.

There is a nearly universal belief that deception is sometimes justified, and showing occasions of deceitfulness is an insufficient method for distinguishing frauds, magicians, or charlatans from true visionaries. Ask any spy. See the movie Goodbye, Lenin. Ask a mother speaking to the dying, or a man commenting on his wife's haircut. If Joseph Smith is a charlatan, he is not so easily distinguished from generally honest folk.

THE SECOND QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JOSEPH

A

Fred North Whitehead states that "the death of religion comes with the repression of the high hope of adventure." So it is with the future of Mormonism and research on Joseph Smith. That adventure will be dictated both by the ongoing and newly discovered facts of history and by the needs of future readers. So the second quest for the historical Joseph will be based on at least these features. I believe there are three leading indicators for determining the future direction of research on Joseph Smith: (1) reaction to Bushman's and Vogel's books; (2) the forthcoming multi-volume publication of the Joseph Smith papers; and (3) the internationalization of Mormonism.

1. Reaction to the Biographies

WHAT DO PROFESSIONAL and lay historians think of these two works? Bushman's work is too new to have been read widely, but the publisher has told me that there has been high interest in the book for some time. Deseret Book has purchased several thousand copies to sell through its many outlets, which tells me that some will view the book as receiving an informal endorsement from official Mormondom. From what little data I've been able to gather, non-Mormon scholars who have read the book seem to be impressed. And Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling will certainly receive much praise from the same history organizations that honored Vogel's biography.

Vogel's Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet has been available long enough to be considered a standard for the future, though a minority of readers will certainly take Vogel into account, especially those who have a religious ax to grind against Mormonism. The great divide of divergent views is not likely to be bridged any time soon.

2. The Joseph Smith Papers

WE DO NOT yet have all of the pieces of the puzzle. A number of Mormon scholars are working on an exciting project to publish all of Joseph Smith's papers. The first three volumes of this series should come out within the next few years. This series will help provide better texts for what we already have and a set of new texts.

Ron Esplin, executive editor of the series, has stated that among other important topics, these texts will provide new material to better interpret the School of the Prophets, the endowment in Kirtland temple, and the Danites. The legal papers, in particular, should give us new insights into Joseph Smith. Richard Bushman has had the advantage of seeing many of these new documents, but his book had to be completed before the full impact of the documents could be included in his present work. This coming forth of this series is a leading textual indicator in interpreting Joseph Smith. This new evidence may tend to support Bushman, since he has seen it. Vogel has stated to me that even though he has published five volumes of early documents related to the Restoration, there are significant materials among the papers being collected that are not yet accessible to him and other scholars.

3. Needs of the International Readers

Milton taught us that "a scholar is a candle which the light and desire of all men will light." For now and into the foreseeable future.
future, the main persons carrying the matches to light Joseph Smith are Mormons. So what are the growing needs of Mormons? 1 believe the third leading indicator in the new quest for the historical Joseph is the internationalization of Mormonism. Mormon expansion—both geographically and academically—will change the way research is done about the prophet.

Mormon scholarship is something more than history. And Mormons are something more than Americans. One example of how the prophet is likely to be viewed in future Mormonism can be seen in how artistic depictions of Jesus changed as Christianity spread across the world. In the art of sub-Saharan Africa, Jesus is invariably portrayed as a Black African. The portraits of Jesus in Northern Europe depict him as a Northern European Jesus. This process of creating “culture specific” Josephs is already at work in the art and history of Mormonism as it becomes global. So, what will Joseph Smith look like to a Brazilian who is a believer in spiritualism, Catholicism, and Mormonism? How will a Guarani Indian in Paraguay hear the message of Jesus’ prophet when his people were once massacred and enslaved in the name of Jesus?

Mormonism’s scholarly strength is history. But as the Church expands and matures, other disciplines are likely to make important contributions in the quests for the historical Joseph. We have already seen sociologists, biblical scholars, theologians, and others enter the field. Emile Durkheim argues that all religions are true in the sense that they answer, each in a different way, the fundamental problems of human existence. If one agrees with this premise, one important quest for the historical Joseph Smith will include the ways the Prophet addressed the universal issues of death, poverty, meaninglessness, guilt, and the like—all important elements in the Restoration. But to date, Mormon biographers and authors, including me, have not yet reached the level of sophistication required to create the kinds of studies suggested here.

Certainly, we will never abandon the details of Joseph Smith’s historical setting, as detailed by Bushman and Vogel. But as Mormonism goes global, the general view of Joseph Smith is likely to change from an exclusive, American prophet to a universal one. Both Vogel and Bushman are aware of this larger prophetic context, but neither has yet explored it in detail. I believe that such comparisons will undermine Vogel’s thesis of Smith as pious fraud and could also make Bushman nervous by tying Joseph more closely to the prophetic eccentrics that surrounded him. But it seems to me that because of the empowerment that comes from doing so, an explosion in the creation of culture-specific images of Joseph Smith is likely to occur soon. That it is coming is, I believe, the elephant in the room that very few are discussing.

When we set Joseph Smith in the context of world religions instead of western New York, what could he look like? Visions of angels and the light from stones place Joseph Smith in a broader tradition of prophets, mystics, and shamans. The description of Joseph Smith seeing light in the darkness is reminiscent of a broad group of religions. How does Joseph Smith’s gazing at shining stones in a hat to access the spiritual world compare to the use of shining stones by shamans the world over?

CONCLUSION

We have been well-served by the work of these two historians—Bushman and Vogel. And we need to be humble enough to keep listening to these fine historians in the future to help us see what we might have missed in the past. We can also disagree with them. I say to myself and to all who read and write about the prophet: “Think that you may be wrong.”

Humility and openness to new insights is the first banner of science and the first article of our faith in a growing global community. With an eye that can catch the sleight of hand, with an ear for the rumor of angels, let us sing praise to the man who communed with Jehovah and to his two recent biographers. We are better for having read their works.

LIU SHAHE

His speech makes measured music in the old Sichuan dialect. He quotes Confucius, Walt Whitman and Li Po then tells the American writer her name sounds like pearls dropping in a dish—Hong-ting-ting.

During the long darkness Liu shaped hard wood with plane and saw, fashioned cabinets tight as tombs. As witness to his children, he wrote poems in the night. When the Red Guards came he burned the scraps of paper, then threw the ashes on the wind.

These days he stays home, writes old style poems—“traces of the saw tooth’s edge—cipher of awl and auger”—and complains about young poets writing crazy verse.

“My children no longer read my poems,” he says, “They just rock and roll . . .

Rolling Stones.”

—ROBERT REES

NOTES

2. See Dan Vogel, “The Prophet Puzzle Revisited” in The Prophet Puzzle, Bryan Waterman, ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1999), 57–58. Vogels strong skepticism about the nature of Smiths visions is also on display in a letter to the editor in Dialogue: Journal of Mormon Thought 37, no. 4 (Winter 2004), viii-xii.
4. Notes from these conversations in my possession.
BOOK NOTES

INTIMATE JOURNEYS

THE SUM OF OUR PAST: REVISITING MORMON WOMEN
by Judy Busk
Signature Books, 2004
248 pages, illustrations, index, $32.95

THE SALT LAKE CITY 14TH WARD ALBUM QUILT, 1857:
STORIES OF THE RELIEF SOCIETY WOMEN
AND THEIR QUILT
by Carol Holindrake Nielson
University of Utah Press, 2004
176 pages, illustrations, index, $24.95

Reviewed by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

In these attractively illustrated books, two Utah women explore connections to their own religious and family heritage.

Each book takes the reader on a journey—in Busk's case, a literal and metaphorical journey along the pioneer trail; in Nielson's, a journey of discovery as she traces the provenance and meaning of a family relic.

Judy Busk, an English and journalism teacher in Richfield, Utah, and a columnist for the southern Utah Daily Spectrum, set out in September 1993 with her husband, Neal, to explore sites along the Mormon trail. She filled their modern "covered wagon"—a Ford van—with books, articles, and dissertations describing the lives of pioneer women. The book is not a guide to the pioneer trail; it is a series of personal essays framed by descriptions of sites visited on that 1993 trip. Visiting the pristine houses in restored Nauvoo led to meditations on housekeeping. Busk explores the ironies of a "bakery never flour-dusted or ash-dirtied because nothing is ever baked there" or in "a bedroom whose four-poster bed is neatly covered by a finely stitched patchwork quilt," undisturbed because no one slept there (29). For her, this picture-pretty past did little but create guilt about her own homemaking failures. Thus, she was delighted to find a decent who admitted that the cookies handed out to visitors had actually been made elsewhere. Seeing an actual kitchen in all its stickiness, "will cure any illusion you might have about the good old pioneer days" (32). Busk's touch is light. She obviously isn't interested in delving into the theological stickiness in Nauvoo or elsewhere on the pioneer trail. For her, the past is the past, and she is happy to live in the present. In the chapter on polygamy, for example, she writes, "I am personally grateful for Wilford Woodruff's Manifesto . . . I like having sisters in the gospel, but not sister wives. I'm glad I live in the present of mainstream Mormonism and not in its past" (179). In a book laced with personal memories, she offers a sampling of current scholarship on Mormon pioneer women and evocative descriptions of the pioneer trail.

In contrast to the loose lyricism of Busk's meditations, Carol Nielson's book offers focused and meticulously researched information on a single object, a massive quilt made in 1856 by members of Salt Lake City's Fourteenth Ward Relief Society as a fundraiser. Nielson explains that Richard Horne, the twelve-year-old son of ward Relief Society counselor Mary Isabella Horne, won the quilt in a raffle, kept it for forty years, then cut it right down the middle, giving one half to his daughter Belle and the other to his daughter Lizzie. The two halves remained apart for nearly a century. When Nielson's husband inherited one half, Nielson was determined to find the other. Through careful research, she eventually found the remote cousin who had it. Then she got busy researching the lives of the women who made it.

The Salt Lake City 14th Ward Album Quilt contains colored photographs of the quilt, a sketch of the history of the 14th Ward Relief Society, and biographical sketches of sixty-four of the women who made it. They include the polygamous wives of well-known Church leaders such as Parley Pratt and Wilford Woodruff. Woodruff's wife Phebe was president of the Relief Society. But there are also fascinating sketches of little-known women such as Ester Ann Luce and her sister Caroline, who were among those converted in the Fox Islands of Maine, and Sarah Rose, whose silk sampler is now at the Pioneer Memorial Museum. Thanks to Nielson's research, we know that the quiltmakers came from fifteen states and five foreign countries. Some lived together in the same households as polygamous wives.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is the James Duncan Phillips Professor of History at Harvard College. She is a specialist in American social history, women's history, and material culture. Her most recent book is The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Making of an American Myth. She won the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for history for her book, A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812.
Nielson has done a remarkable job of culling information from a wide variety of sources. The book includes footnotes and a full bibliography. Although she doesn’t say much about the needlework itself, she links each biography to a colored photo of its maker’s square. As a consequence, the book is both an engaging work in its own right and an invitation to further research in the decorative arts. The quilt not only documents the skills of pioneer women, it is also an encyclopedia of fabrics available in Utah a decade before the coming of the railroad.

Fancy embroidery and appliqué are not the first things you think of when you read documentary accounts of this period. Relief Societies were primarily engaged in charitable works, providing clothing for local Indians and raising money to assist immigration. In June 1857, Wilford Woodruff attended a meeting of the Relief Society held at his house, where he saw fifty women “sewing, knitting, sewing carpet rags, making quilts, &c. It is a laudable undertaking,” he wrote. “They clothe all the poor in the ward and during the last quarter they made a donation to the Perpetual Emigrating Fund of $126. I wish all go and do like wise” (26). But quilts don’t have to be fancy to keep people warm. Although the sisters of the Fourteenth Ward Relief Society no doubt relieved the poor, they also relieved themselves of the drudgery of housekeeping, the burdens of self-sufficiency, the anxieties of polygamy, and the dangers of idleness.

Together Busk’s and Nielson’s books illustrate the paradoxical relationship many contemporary LDS women have with our iconic pioneer past. Pioneer women are the paragons of piety, domesticity, and frontier courage against which we measure ourselves. But they are also the reminders of a social system we would sooner forget. Unlike Church-sponsored histories, both books acknowledge the existence of plural marriage, yet neither is comfortable probing its implications. Busk is happy that the Church abandoned its practice—but doesn’t ask what its residue may imply for women today. Nielson simply notes that many squares in the 14th ward quilt—including those in Wilford Woodruff’s own household—were made by “sister wives.” For both authors, exploring the complexities of plural marriage would get in the way of their larger objective—to give nineteenth-century women a place in history, neither as heroines nor as victims, but as individuals. They have taken us part of the way.

IN 1986, SIGNATURE BOOKS PUBLISHED THE BACKSLIDER, BY LEVI S. PETERSON. A comic novel with the depths of tragedy, a cowboy novel with profound theological resonance, a coming-of-age novel which gets better read in middle age, a “Mormon” novel and an un-Mormon novel, a novel of natural carnality whose consummation is a moving affirmation of monogamous love—The Backslider is a book with many readings and many meanings.

JOIN US IN CELEBRATING TWENTY YEARS OF THE BACKSLIDER for a Festschrift collection of essays. We are seeking reader responses, ruminations, and personal essays about The Backslider. Selected essays will be published in SUNSTONE magazine, on the Sunstone website, and possibly in a book. First contributions to this celebratory conversation on the novel—from Eric Samuelsen, Gae Lyn Henderson, Morgan Adair, Bruce Jorgensen, Marylee Mitcham, and Cherie Woodworth—were presented at the 2005 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium (Tape SL05–236).

If you have ideas, suggestions, submissions, or questions, please send them to Cherie Woodworth, executive editor of the Festschrift project, at cherie.woodworth@aya.yale.edu.

Preliminary deadline for submissions, for priority consideration, is May 1, 2006. Final deadline for all submissions is JULY 1, 2006.
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DETERMINING WHAT IS "REAL"

By Kevin Christensen

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dictions, comprehensiveness and coherence, simplicity and aesthetics, fruitfulness and future promise. Just so, Alma 32 describes faith decisions in terms of the success of key experiments, mind-expanding enlightenment, the delicious appeal of ideas, fruitfulness and future promise. I cannot, however, recommend Vogel’s brief summary and paraphrase of my arguments. I have published several long articles on the topic, and presented on the theme of “Paradigm Debate in Mormon Studies” at the 2004 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium.9

V
OGEL claims that apologists (and especially me) misuse Kuhn “to justify mixing religious values with scientific criteria, privileging positive over negative evidence, creating ad hoc question-begging responses to counter evidence and, ironically, resisting paradigm shift” (p. 69). Indeed?

In a previous online response to me, Vogel kindly explains the true order of things with respect to valuing negative evidence:

Christensen should keep in mind

...
that no matter how many correlations one perceives in a text, one negative evidence cancels them all. In other words, it is the apologists who are obliged to answer every negative evidence, while those who doubt only need present evidence for rejecting Book of Mormon historicity.¹⁰

I find this a most enlightening statement. Vogel is free to value evidence as he sees fit. So are we all. So it is worth my asking: Should a single negative experience be grounds for leaving the Church, dropping my belief in the historicity of Book of Mormon, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the existence of God? Or is a much broader perspective called for?

On many occasions, I have found that when viewed from another perspective, a seemingly powerful, decisive, and final “negative evidence” becomes very powerful positive evidence. Let me cite one example.

In an essay published in 1993, David P. Wright, an eminent critic of Book of Mormon historicity, argues that the Melchizedek material in Alma 13 is anachronistically derived from Hebrews in the New Testament, thus negating the claim that Joseph was transfigured later references to Melchizedek to retain some memory of the cult of Elyon. . . . This accounts for the Melchizedek material in Hebrews, and the early Church’s association of Melchizedek and the Messiah. The arguments of Hebrews presuppose a knowledge of the angel mythology which we no longer have.¹²

In contrast to Wright’s conclusion, Barker’s work connects the Melchizedek traditions to the First Temple, which not only moves them back 700 years from the writing of Hebrews but also argues that the source of the unity in the traditions that Hebrews relies on is the Temple.¹³

But suppose that when I read Wright’s essay in 1993 I had let Wright’s argument be the one negative evidence sufficient to cancel out all positive experiences in my faith?

• Then I would not have read the Review of Books on the Book of Mormon in 1995 and seen the essays by Ross David Baron and Martin S. Tanner that each quoted an intriguing passage from Margaret Barker’s important 1992 book, The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God.

• Then, early in 1999, I would not have had the recognition and interest during an impromptu visit to a half-price bookstore in Dallas to pick up The Great Angel, the only copy of any of Barker’s books I had ever seen. And upon reading The Great Angel, I would not have gotten excited enough to track down the rest of her books, including a library copy of the then out-of-print The Older Testament containing the passage I quoted above, and which, because of my familiarity with Wright’s argument, I immediately recognized as significant for Latter-day Saints.

• I would not have contacted Barker in September of 1999 nor delivered papers on her work at two Sunstone symposiums. Neither would I have written Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies, which was published by FARMS in January of 2002.

• Noel Reynolds, after reading The Great Angel and Paradigms Regained in the Spring of 2002, would not have contacted me, and I would have not been in position to coordinate Reynolds’s visit with Barker during his trip to England that fall. Without me, he probably would have contacted her, and she would still have come to BYU for a May 2003 seminar and still presented memorably on the historicity of the Book of Mormon at the Joseph Smith Conference in Washington D.C. in May of 2005. I am convinced that these were meant to be. But I would have known nothing about it.

Knowing my personality, had I caved to Wright’s challenge rather than having put it on a back burner, I’d likely be off reading novels, playing computer games, and watching TV, not bothering with matters of faith. I would not even have known what I was missing. And that would have been thanks to what appeared to be “a single negative evidence” that is, from my current perspective, dead wrong.

Vogel opines, “If anachronisms and lack of evidence are not considered counter-evidence, what is? Isn’t there a point at which resistance becomes unreasonable and irrational” (p. 71). Surely. But as I have discovered, many of the critics’ favorite anachronisms aren’t what they appear at first, and a great many have been transformed into positive evidences.¹⁴ There may be a point at which resistance becomes unreasonable and irrational, but time is the ultimate arbiter of that—each individual is responsible for his or her own judgments, and appearances at any given time are subject to change without warning.

For an example, let’s turn to evidence Vogel himself uses in an essay on the Book of Mormon witnesses as victims of Joseph Smith’s hypothesized skill at hypnotism. Vogel cites as evidence an 1857 letter—found in the official Church archives and full of all sorts of details involving the correspondents—that contains a second-hand report of a rumor to the effect that Joseph Smith learned hypnotism “from a German peddler.”¹⁵ But why would Vogel, a rigorous and dedicated historian who has taken the
READ WITH DIFFERENT contexts, different perspectives—and I come to different valuations. I plant the seed in different soil, and I nourish it differently, and I get a very different harvest.

trouble to gather five volumes of valuable early Mormon documents, even bother to cite a late rumor? Why notice and why value a rumor? I can only surmise he does it because the firsthand early accounts do not support his hypothesis about Smith being a skilled hypnotist while the late rumor does. Does the notice and value that Vogel assigns to these documents derive from the canons of the historian’s trade—which favor firsthand, contemporary reports over secondhand accounts, and far less for late, un-pedigreed rumors—or from the demands of his hypothesis? Even more instructive is that in a previous footnote on the same page Vogel quotes the 1857 letter, he cites a hand accounts, and far less for late, contemporary reports over secondhand accounts, which favors firsthand early accounts. Not only does Vogel cite a late rumor as evidence, but this is not typical. What Kuhn describes as a sudden change to a different perspective, a “sudden paradigm shifts.” (p. 69)

It so happens that Kuhn never describes community paradigm shifts as either “sudden” or as “mass conversions.” Instead of a single group conversion, what occurs is an “increasing shift in the distribution of professional allegiances.” An individual may have a sudden change to a different perspective, but this is not typical. What Kuhn describes as a paradigm shift takes time and involves overcoming resistance for both individuals and paradigm communities:

Looking at a contour map, the student sees lines on paper, the cartographer a picture of a terrain. Looking at a bubble-chamber photograph, the student sees confused and broken lines, the physicist a record of familiar subnuclear events. Only after a number of such transformations of vision does the student become an inhabitant of the scientist’s world, seeing what the scientist sees, and responding as the scientist does. Kuhn’s observations about the time and processes involved in entering a paradigm is precisely akin to Nephi’s observation that “there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them, save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:5). We cannot see all at once but have to study things out in our minds, search diligently, prepare our minds, ponder, experiment, and nourish—all as part of an ongoing process.

The section of Vogel’s essay that attempts to define responsible Kuhn/irresponsible Kuhn is rhetorical sleight of hand. The issue ought to be my actual use of Kuhn and the content and structure of the actual arguments I make, regardless of who said it first, and regardless of the irresponsible use someone else might make in an unrelated debate. Only if my use corresponded to the hypothetical irresponsible Kuhn could the criticism apply. I have never used the three-step “fallacy from Kuhn” that Vogel identifies as common among some Creationists.

THE selection of any method presupposes a problem field and a standard of solution. So what should a Book of Mormon archaeologist or scholar look for, by what method, and with what acceptable standard of solution? When our standard examples and background assumptions differ, do our methods, problem fields, and standards of solution. For example, Brent Metcalfe claims that:

Despite the popularity of their theories, Book of Mormon geographers have been unable to deliver a single archeological dig that can be verified by reputable Mesoamericanists as the ruins of an ancient Near Eastern culture, much less of Lehiites and Jaredites. This statement makes clear what Metcalfe demands—"the ruins of an ancient Near Eastern culture"—and to whom he will grant authority to dispense what Kuhn calls "a license for seeing": only "reputable Mesoamericanists." One would think, for instance, that he’d note a most obvious problem: that of looking for the ruins of an ancient Near Eastern culture in Mesoamerica given the conspicuous tendency of ancient Near Eastern cultures to occur in the ancient Near East. 20

Arguing similarly, Vogel claims that my appreciation for Brant Gardner’s method of “looking for Mesoamerica in the Book of Mormon instead of the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica” is misplaced, for Gardner’s approach “looks only for similarities in the text, instead of comparing the text as a whole against what is known about Mesoamerica” with the effect that “historical anachronisms become invisible to researchers and falsifica-
tion becomes impossible” (71).

Here is what Gardner actually says he is doing, and he provides a powerful example of the difference that a change in perspective can bring to the questions one asks and the evidence, or lack thereof, that one finds.

The difference came when I started looking for Mesoamerica in the Book of Mormon instead of the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica. Oddly enough, there is a huge difference, and the nature of the correlations and the quality of the correlations has changed with that single change in perspective.

When I started my examination, I had no expectation of what I would find. Some of the correlation I have found came not from attempting to find some specific thing, but in realizing that the text did not say what I had thought it said—and that it really didn’t make any sense until I saw it in the context of Mesoamerican culture.

When people ask for one thing that is the most important correlation, I have a hard time coming up with one, because it isn’t a single thing. It is that the entire text of the Book of Mormon works better in a Mesoamerican context. Speeches suddenly have a context that makes them relevant instead of just preachy. The pressures leading to wars are understandable. The wars themselves have an explanation for their peculiar features. All of those things happen with a single interpretive framework that is in the right place at the right time. Even the demise of the Nephites happens at the “right time.”

Contrasting Metcalfe’s approach, Gardner redefines the problem field, method, and standard of solution. Instead of looking for a conspicuously transplanted ancient Near Eastern culture in the Americas that accounts for the population and history of the entire hemisphere, he’s looking at a limited geography in Mesoamerica as a context against which to read the Book of Mormon. So has Gardner “verified” the Book of Mormon? To a degree, he has, but only tentatively, and in relation to the questions he asks and the approach he takes. And contrary to what Vogel writes about “looking only for similarities,” Gardner recognizes the need to balance his emerging correlations against currently unsolved puzzles:

Notice that Gardner openly notices and discusses potential “historical anomalous,” demonstrating that Vogel’s charge that such things “become invisible” is false. And instead of making “falsification impossible,” as Vogel claims many Book of Mormon apologists do, Gardner is openly putting the text at risk via his methods—and openly stating his perspectives on the results.

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Against these correspondences

There is the crux of my impasse with Vogel: I interpret the text differently, and I value the problems differently. In many cases, where Vogel sees problems, I see no problems at all. Yes, I am aware of the kind of “Chicken Little” panic some of these problems have raised in various circles, and I acknowledge a number of unresolved issues that I keep on my back burners. Nevertheless I do, in fact, read the text differently on those very issues than Vogel reads it. I read with different contexts, different perspectives—and I come to different valuations. I plant the seed in different soil, and I nourish it differently, and I get a very different harvest. I do not say that my readings are the only ones possible, but I strive to show that they are plausible and, from my perspective, better and more promising.

But according to Vogel, “Christensen believes Kuhn’s thesis gives Mormon scholars permission to corrupt the scientific method with religious values” (71). Not surprisingly, he does not quote me in support of this charge. I’ll just say, no, I don’t believe that. He continues though, saying that “This allows . . . Christensen to arbitrarily assign greater significance to positive, rather than negative evidence” (70). Would it be more reasonable, scientific, scholarly, and objective to let Vogel assign the proper evidential significance for me? On this point, I think of John Clark’s presentation at the Joseph Smith Library of Congress seminar this past May in which he showed trends in evidence. He viewed the existence of sixty unresolved issues against the clear trend of a rising number of issues that are being resolved—changing from two or three in 1830 to fifty-eight percent by 2005. To this we could add the very successful Book of Mormon correlations with Jerusalem and 600 BCE and the Arabian journey that are just now being noted. Such things do have implications for the possibilities of the New World portions of the Book of Mormon. As a critical incantation, “DNA” does nothing to explain how Joseph Smith managed them. It is our perspective that helps us assign significance to correlations, puzzles, and counter-instances.

The thing to do, Vogel tells us, is to adopt the paradigm of the Book of Mormon as a pious fraud and to see Joseph Smith as a liar who meant well (72–73). As I consider this solution, I imagine a new dialogue between Jesus and this kind of disciple in response to the Bread of Life sermon. The text notes that because of the doctrine Jesus taught, “Many therefore of his disciples, when they heard this, said, This is an hard saying, who can hear it?” (John 6:60). Jesus then offers other sayings which are even harder, and, as a consequence, “many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him” (John 6:66). Jesus then says to the twelve, “Will ye also
A FLIGHT OF GEESE

The most reluctant leaves have let go, rattle on the roof like crabs and lose color in the gutter. A shed, tin-clad, gives in the wind, relaxes south toward mouths of rust. Light at the earth's edge disappears, rain is falling and there's rain coming.

Into gray afternoon I walk, not sent out, but restless and hurting for a letter, blue sky or anything green. I walk though there's no place to go, looking for some sign there was summer, looking for any sign at all.

—MARCIA BUFFINGTON
TOWARD A NEW READING OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

By R. Dennis Potter

ON BOTH SIDES of the debate concerning DNA evidence and the Book of Mormon lie philosophical assumptions concerning science, historical narrative, and language that have not yet been thoroughly investigated. In this short article, I identify these philosophical assumptions and question their validity. Both sides of the debate make these assumptions, so in attacking them, I am rejecting the critics and apologists alike.1 Because these assumptions are so ingrained in our modernist technological culture, it may seem irrational to question them. But I argue that it is irrational to maintain them.

The upshot of these arguments is to show that we as Latter-day Saints must temper our almost religious faith in the authority of science to tell us the one and only truth about the world—including about the Book of Mormon. My arguments will further show that we must also avoid the tendency toward what I will call “ultra-literal” readings of our religious narratives. And finally, I will argue that it is irrational to maintain them.

SCIENTIFIC REALISM

THE first assumption both critics and many apologists in the DNA and Book of Mormon debate make is that the most current scientific theories give us the most accurate picture of the nature and structure of the world. That is, science provides a correct logic for all discourse and one correct meaning for terms such as “contradiction” and “logical entailment.” 1 will call this position “scientific realism.”

Scientific realism contrasts with “scientific instrumentalism,” which says that scientific theories do not necessarily reflect any transcendent truth about the world but are only procedures to help us predict results. I will say more about this point later.

Clearly, the DNA and Book of Mormon debate assumes scientific realism since it assumes that the body of theory that we call “genetics” describes the way the world is.

LOGICAL REALISM

THE second assumption made in this debate is that the assertions of any given discourse can be logically compared in their content to the assertions made by any other given discourse.2 This is to assume that there is a uniquely correct logic for

R. DENNIS POTTER is Mormon studies coordinator and assistant professor of philosophy at Utah Valley State College. He is the founder and former editor of Element, a journal of LDS philosophy and theology. He is also a co-founder of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology (SMPT).
Questions about which discourse to adopt are not questions about ultimate reality but about what life we choose to embrace.

We have a special intellectual faculty that grasps them intuitively? It seems to me that language must be learned on the basis of observable data, and I don’t see abstract objects among them. If language is based on what is publicly available, then we must reject the propositional approach to linguistic meaning. If so, then scientific realism is not plausible. Ironically, this argument is based on the very empiricism that leads most people to embrace science.

Logical realism also has its problems. The first is that there are many different formalized logics, such as classical, intuitionistic, relevant, paraconsistent. And each of these systems of logic have different understandings of what counts as a contradiction as well as logical consistency. Professional philosophers seem to assume that classical logic is the right logic and that we have really good reason to believe this. But the logicians themselves know better. What reasons do we have for preferring classical logic to intuitionistic logic? What evidence could possibly count in favor of one instead of the other? If we think that the rules of classical logic “just seem right,” then we can always find someone who thinks that they “just seem wrong.” In fact, it is somewhat like religious experience. My religious experience convinces me The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is true, and yours convinces you that the Roman Catholic Church is true. We are in the same boat, and we will be hard-pressed to persuade the other to move from her conviction. It is the same with different logics. My logical intuitions tell me that the Material reading of a particular conditional statement is correct; your intuitions tell you that the Relevant reading of that same statement is correct. Again, where is persuasion going to happen? How are we going to persuade the other to our position?

The second problem with logical realism is that it also assumes the propositional philosophy of language. For logical realism to be true, there must be a universal and transcendent set of propositions that can be the objects of comparison across all discourses. But again, this propositional view of language cannot really explain how we learn language.

Towards a Materialist Philosophy of Language

In contrast to a propositional theory of linguistic meaning, we need a materialist philosophy of language. Such a theory explains meaning in terms of the actual concrete circumstances of linguistic use. There is much work to be done in this project, but the following is a little about how a materialist philosophy of language relates to the DNA debate.

Terms such as “truth,” “contradiction,” and “consistency” are used in the context of a discourse. A contradiction in one discourse may not be a contradiction in another discourse. Assertions in one discourse are not necessarily comparable to assertions in another discourse. Scientific discourse and Mormon religious discourse are fundamentally different in (for example) what counts as evidence for statements about the past. The past-tensed assertions in the DNA evidence as relevant to questions about Book of Mormon historicity. To them, such evidence is irrelevant to the most meaningful kind of truth or falsity regarding the Book of Mormon.

Ultimately, there is no way to judge whether genetics contradicts or is consistent with the Book of Mormon narrative. In principle, we could construct a new discourse that would allow us to logically compare the statements of genetics with the statements of Mormon faith. In effect, both the critics and the apologists are doing this. But neither way is better vis-a-vis a transcendent correspondence to the truth. These are different ways of handling the interaction of these two practices. And we do not need to come up with some way of handling the two practices. I can engage in one discourse and then the other without any inconsistency. I can live in the heterogeneity of the various discourses of my life. This is not to live with a contradiction. There is no contradiction between these practices unless we decide to construct a new practice that encompasses them both and from within which we define the sense of “contradiction.”

Let me give a concrete analogy to help explain the position I am arguing. The theory of evolution and the Genesis account of creation are embedded in two different discourses. In order for us to regard them as in contradiction, we must translate the language of one into the language of the other. So, for example, we must say that the Genesis account’s use of the word “day” is the same as the scientists’ use of the word “day.” This translation is not obvious on the basis of the text/discourse itself. And it could be performed in a different way. I believe the DNA and Book of Mormon controversy is very similar to the Genesis and evolution controversy.

One may object to my arguments on the grounds that they lead to a kind of relativism. I’ll admit that the view advocated herein is...
ANY FURTHER DISCUSSION of the Book of Mormon and DNA should look at what this religious discourse means for the lives of Native Americans.

relativistic but only in a specific sense. It does not mean that anything goes. To identify the relativism herein, it will help to employ Rudolf Carnap’s distinction between internal and external questions. An internal question is one that can be adjudicated from within a linguistic framework (Carnap’s word for “discourse”) based on its conventions for linguistic use. For example, the question, “What is the product of 2 and 3?” can be adjudicated from within the framework of arithmetic. However, an external question is about the framework itself. For example, the question, “Are there numbers?” is about whether we should adopt the framework of arithmetic in the first place instead of being a question about whether there is a peculiar type of abstract object in the world.

Answers to external questions are relative and a matter of choice. One framework may be more “useful” than another, but it is not “truer” than another. However, answers to internal questions are perfectly objective from within a framework. There is a fact of the matter for each internal question. These are relative to their frameworks, but it is not the case that “anything goes.” Questions that compare frameworks are clearly external; the question about whether there is a peculiar kind of hard-literalism in how they are actually employed in the religious practice. An example is the pursuit of scientific evidence to support the Book of Mormon. Such a pursuit assumes both scientific and religious realism. If my arguments against scientific realism are persuasive, we must also reject this view.

In making these claims about science and hard-literality, I am not arguing for a liberal approach to theology. Theological assertions are not merely symbolic or metaphors for transcendent truths. And it is a mistake to argue that the Book of Mormon is true in its theological or moral assertions but false in its narrative history. I believe the theology and morality of the Book of Mormon is so tied to its narrative they cannot be separated in this way. For this reason, I reject the liberal approach. I suspect that much of liberal theological interpretation of the Book of Mormon narrative helps us liberate Native Americans from their marginalized positions in society. How do we need to understand the narrative in order to do this? These are the types of questions we need to ask as we construct our discourses of navigation between our religious narrative and our scientific narrative.

Since discourses affect the way people live, political, social, and cultural implications should bear on whether we adopt a particular kind of discourse, including how we read the Book of Mormon. To me, this is the most important upshot from these arguments, and any further discussion of the Book of Mormon and DNA should look at what this religious discourse means for the lives of Native Americans. Caucasian scientists and apologists are discussing a text that has played a fundamental role in defining the identity of the Native American from within Mormonism. It would be good to discuss this issue in a way that brings to the front the socio-political implications of the various solutions to this problem. Does the Book of Mormon narrative help us liberate Native Americans from their marginalized positions in society? How do we need to understand the narrative in order to do this? These are the types of questions we need to ask as we construct our discourses of navigation between our religious narrative and our scientific narrative.

NOTES
1. Although in some way, this essay should be understand as apologetic as well.
2. A “discourse” is a field of language that has its own rules for linguistic use and practice, not unlike Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of a language game.
3. These differ in their acceptance or rejection of different laws governing logical inference. For example, classical logic affirms the validity of the law of excluded middle (every statement is either true or false), and intuitionistic logic does not.
GENERAL CONFERENCE BRINGS COMFORT, COUNSEL

DURING OCTOBER GENERAL CONFERENCE, WHICH took place a few weeks after Hurricane Katrina devastated the U.S. Gulf Coast killing hundreds and displacing hundreds of thousands, President Gordon B. Hinckley said he did not believe the tragedy was retribution by an angry God. “I do not say or infer that what happened is the punishment of the Lord,” said President Hinckley during the priesthood session.

In this, President Hinckley appears more progressive than evangelical preachers who had dubbed New Orleans a den of sin. Televangelist Pat Robertson had gone so far as to suggest that Katrina showed God was angry at Democratic senators who wanted a pro-choice Supreme Court justice when conservative judge John G. Roberts had first been nominated for a vacancy in the Court.

The 95-year-old Hinckley closed the Sunday morning session by thanking “my Father in Heaven that he has prolonged my life to be a part of these challenging times.” He also gave a report of the recent trip that had taken him to Alaska, Russia, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, India, Kenya, and Nigeria. President Hinckley also dedicated temples in Newport Beach, California, and in Samoa. “I do not enjoy travel,” he added, “but it is my wish to get out among our people to extend appreciation and encouragement, and to bear testimony of the divinity of the Lord’s work.”

President Hinckley then addressed the topic of forgiveness, quoting from the parable of the Prodigal Son, the Sermon on the Mount, and a recent news story in which a woman insisted on offering a plea deal to her assailant, a 19-year-old man who disfigured her and forced her to undergo painful face reconstruction surgery.

“There are hardened criminals who may have to be locked up,” President Hinckley commented. “There are unspeakable crimes, such as deliberate murder and rape, that justify harsh penalties. But there are some who could be saved from long, stultifying years in prison because of an unthoughtful, foolish act. Somehow forgiveness, with love and tolerance, accomplishes miracles that can happen in no other way.”

THE OCTOBER CONFERENCE marked the ten-year anniversary of the Proclamation on the Family. In the Saturday afternoon session, Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve denounced “Satan’s aggression against the family” and lamented that “institutions that used to support and strengthen families now try to supplant and even sabotage the very families they were created to serve.”

“In the name of ‘tolerance,’ the definition of family has been expanded beyond recognition,” Elder Ballard added, “to the point that ‘family’ can be any individuals of any gender who live together with or without commitment or children or attention to consequence.”

Within days after the conference, Affirmation: Gay & Lesbian Mormons issued a statement responding to Elder Ballard and assessing the Church’s activities in the decade since the Proclamation was issued. “Ten years ago, the LDS Church didn’t need a proclamation to protect the family,” they write. “However, LDS leaders did need a proclamation to justify the aggressive political campaign that they were carrying out against same-sex families.”

The statement concludes: “As gay and lesbian Mormons, we too grew up in LDS homes where we learned about the importance of the family. We do not wish to destroy anyone’s family. But we wish that LDS leaders would stop using the Proclamation on the Family to attempt to destroy ours.”
CHURCH PROVIDES RELIEF TO HURRICANE VICTIMS

THE CHURCH LAUNCHED A MASSIVE RESPONSE TO assist victims of Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast. On 29 August, only hours after the devastating hurricane hit, two members of the Welfare Services emergency response team were on their way to the disaster area, where they visited towns and delivered assistance. Apostles Boyd K. Packer and M. Russell Ballard, along with D. Todd Christofferson of the Presidency of the Seventy and Presiding Bishop H. David Burton, also flew to the area and visited an evacuation center in downtown Baton Rouge.

Between 5,000 and 10,000 Latter-day Saints live in the areas affected by Katrina. Missionaries were evacuated from the damaged areas and are all accounted for. Three members are known to have died during the hurricane.

LDS-owned buildings in Louisiana and Mississippi were used to shelter displaced people and to serve as distribution points for supplies. Church facilities were lost to hurricane damage in New Orleans and Slidell Louisiana stakes. Some chapels in nearby areas experienced wind and flood damage. The Baton Rouge Louisiana Temple and adjacent stake center were unharmed.

According to the Church’s website, www.lds.org, LDS volunteers have to date provided 17,402 man-days of relief service, completing nearly 7,100 work orders. 4,000-person work crews, known as “chain saw warriors” have descended on afflicted areas, clearing debris, removing fallen trees, and making minor roof repairs. The Church called the project, “the largest response ever by the Church to a disaster in the United States.”

MISSIONARIES LEAVE VENEZUELA

ON 24 OCTOBER, THE CHURCH COMPLETED THE transfer of 220 non-native missionaries from Venezuela to other missions. The move comes as relations between the governments of Venezuela and the United States continue to deteriorate.

Church spokesperson Dale Bills said that for some time, the Church has had trouble securing visas for new U.S. missionaries called to serve in Venezuela and in renewing visas for those already in the country.

The Church has begun calling eighteen-year-old native Venezuelan missionaries to supplement the ranks of other Venezuelan missionaries who will remain in the country and continue working there.

CHURCH OPPOSES NUCLEAR DUMP

SHORTLY AFTER THE NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION authorized a nuclear waste site in a Tooele County Indian reservation, the Church issued a statement opposing the plan to build the facility in Utah’s west desert.

“We regret the decision by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to authorize the issuance of a license that would allow storage of radioactive waste in Skull Valley,” reads the statement. “Storage of nuclear waste in Utah is a matter of significant public interest that requires thorough scrutiny.”

In May 1981, the First Presidency issued a similar statement opposing the MX missile system which would have deployed nuclear warhead missiles in Utah and Nevada.

Private Fuel Storage LLC, the group of utilities behind the project, had promised the impoverished 121 members of the Goshute Skull Valley band hundreds of millions of dollars if they would allow the waste facility on their lands.

PLAZA FIGHT FINALLY COMES TO END

AFTER SEVERAL YEARS of contentious litigation, the legal battle over the sale of a block of Salt Lake City’s Main Street has come to an end. Lawyers for the Church and the city of Salt Lake are now breathing more easily as a federal court validated the sale and the right of the Church to build a plaza that places restrictions on some forms of speech and behavior.

The ACLU sued over the sale, arguing that the plaza was a public sidewalk and therefore the city had no right to sell the block to the Church.

In its ruling, the court wrote that “the asserted purpose of the plaza, unlike that of a normal sidewalk or other public forum, is to act as an ecclesiastical park.”
THE JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH INSTITUTE IS HISTORY

THE JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH INSTITUTE, ONCE A MAJOR center for the study of Mormon history at BYU, has been closed. All those working on the Joseph Smith Papers Project have been moved to the Church History Department at Church headquarters.

Managing Director Jill Derr told the Deseret Morning News the Church History Department has been “planning for several months or years how to make church history available to a wider audience of church members and others. [The Church History Department’s] growing strength as a center for church-sponsored history has had an impact on us.”

“I don’t see this move as any effort to suppress information,” she added. “That would destroy the whole purpose in doing the papers, which is to make all the documents available.”

According to one source, the move had been anticipated for the past several years because some high-ranking administrators in BYU’s College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences had come to see the Institute as a drain, both in terms of finances and staffing. While many college-sponsored centers and institutes around the country regularly rotate their faculty from throughout the college, thus sharing the economic burden, the Smith Institute had a permanent staff of full-time faculty and other employees dedicated solely to the Institute’s objectives.

CHURCH LEADER GIVES CANDID INTERVIEW ON RADIO CALL-IN SHOW

IN A RARE EVENT, AN LDS general authority was a guest on a radio call-in show, fielding questions from the host as well as callers—not all of whom were friendly to his message. In an appearance on “Radio West,” a daily call-in show hosted by Doug Fabrizio on KUER, a Salt Lake City NPR station, Elder Merrill Bateman of the First Quorum of Seventy defended the way the LDS Church counts its members and disputed a Salt Lake Tribune story about the number of Church members in Utah (see SUNSTONE, September 2005, 74). In the course of the hour-long interview, Elder Bateman also addressed a number of topics ranging from missionary work and the Church’s “raising the bar” initiative to the LDS stand on the war to policies about having one’s name removed from Church records.

“The Church is not interested in growth for growth’s sake,” Bateman emphasized. “We do not prepare growth projections. We obviously look at the numbers—we are interested in the numbers—but more interesting for us is what happens to individuals.” Bateman confirmed some statistics reported in the recent Tribune articles but contested others. Whereas the articles claim that only 62.5 of Utahns are Mormon, Bateman...
As part of her research, Soukup interviewed President Gordon B. Hinckley and Elders Dallin H. Oaks and Jeffrey R. Holland. "President Hinckley was very understanding," says Soukup. "It's just a little scary to walk into a room and ask your spiritual leader if, for example, his revelations are 'convenient.' But he didn't shy away from any of the questions. Neither did Elder Oaks or Elder Holland, and I really hit them with the hardest ones."

"Of course we are Christians," President Hinckley responds in the published version of the interview when asked about the claims made by some to the contrary. But according to Soukup, when she first asked him the question, he quipped, "You know all about that. Why are you asking me?"

"If the Church is true, you shouldn't be afraid of looking into its history, and that was something I learned for myself," Soukup told the Deseret Morning News. "In the end, it definitely made me a stronger Latter-day Saint."

REACTIONS. The 31 October Newsweek includes fifteen letters in response to its story on Mormonism, some positive but most critical of Mormonism doctrine or culture. "Many readers took exception to calling Mormonism a Christian denomination," Newsweek reported, "and others criticized the church for its secret ceremonies and exclusivity. Joseph Smith was also the target of criticism: one reader called him 'a boy magician and latter-day con man.'"

Two published letters suggest that LDS policies and practices actually weaken, rather than strengthen, families. "There is no mention of families torn apart when a family member leaves the church, no mention of nonpracticing Mormons being barred from their children's weddings in temples," write Ted and Bebe Ottinger, of Seattle, Washington. "Their letter goes on to call the Church an organization with 'a history based on racism, sexism and homophobia.'"

"My childhood was spent being reviled and teased mercilessly by other children because I was a Christian," wrote a Lutheran who grew up in a small southern Utah town. "It astonishes me that during the past 20 years or so the church has begun to sell itself as a Christian denomination, and it is embarrassing that Newsweek would print such a blatantly biased article."

A non-Mormon from Indianapolis praises the support network Mormons enjoy: "When my [LDS] neighbors moved here from Utah, they were welcomed by their new LDS ward and immediately had a network of support. . . . Other churches could learn a lot from this practice of just being there." But another reader complains that "Mormons are unlike the Lutherans or Catholics who, with their huge social-service programs, take care of anyone in need. Caring for all, not just one's own church members, is what Jesus taught his followers to do."

Latter-day Saint Christine Kopp, from Miami, Florida, blasts the article for including the reference to the September Six, who "do not represent the same opinions as the remaining 12 million members." She also takes issue with the Community of Christ's Mark Scherer's comment about polygamy. She puts his title of 'historian' between quotation marks. "This article makes us look like blind, barefoot and pregnant, ignorant hillbillies," she complained. "All we want is to practice our faith in peace."

Not all Mormons agree that the article presents Mormonism in a bad light. "It is so wonderful to see the media treating us with sincere interest and respect," writes Sara Thurgood from Hoover, Alabama. "I feel elated to witness my faith rising out of obscurity into the mainstream of Christianity."

"No claims have ever been made that the church or its prophets are perfect," remarks a reader from Southfield, Michigan. "Joseph Smith wasn't, and neither is Gordon B. Hinckley. But their teachings speak for them, and they truly are making positive, society-changing contributions. It is nice to see that recognized."

ONLY DAYS AFTER NEWSWEEK PUBLISHED ITS PIECE ON Mormonism, NBC's Today followed suit with a segment on the Church for its series, "Mysterious Faiths." The title of the series may confirm what LDS leaders have feared: that for mainstream America, Mormonism continues to be exactly that—mysterious. The show grouped the Church with faiths such as Scientology and Opus Dei, and the resurgence of Kabbalah.

In a segment pre-recorded in Salt Lake City, reporter Carl Quintanilla provided viewers with basics—the fact that the Church abandoned polygamy more than a century ago, the Church's emphasis on family life, and the healthy lifestyle of its members. But truth stumbled when Quintanilla explained, over footage of President Hinckley waving at a crowd, that Latter-day Saints “believe their current leader to be divine.”

Another claim many Saints would question came from stake president Brent Belnap, who told Today host Matt Lauer that Mormonism is merely one “alternative” for salvation. "Are you saying that the Church of Latter-day Saints is the only path to God and salvation, or are you presenting it as an alternative?" Lauer asked.

"I think it's more like an alternative," Belnap replied. "We do believe that everyone will resurrect because of Jesus Christ. There are those who will be also exalted in the hereafter, if they follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and repent from their mistakes, but that's a choice that every individual should make."
claims the Tribune excluded “in-transit members” (people who are moving). “When you include those, we’re at 70 percent.”

Elder Bateman said that the number of missionaries has been dropping significantly (from more than 61,000 in 2002 to about 56,000 in 2004), but that Church leaders knew all along this would happen. He suggested this drop is the reason why the percentage of worldwide converts has been dropping as well. “It is a cycle,” he explained. “It goes up and down, it depends on demographic factors, for the most part.”

In a follow-up question on missionary numbers, Elder Bateman suggested that by using the expression “raising the bar,” Church leaders merely mean that the Church wants better prepared missionaries. “To some extent that may for a period of time cause a reduction in the missionary force,” he said but added that such reduction for these reasons “hasn’t been major.”

Bateman also challenged a 2001 City University of New York survey indicating that the number of new LDS converts is the same as the number of those leaving the Church. Instead, Bateman suggested that the number of those leaving the Church is actually dropping. “Sacrament meeting attendance is going up. The number of full-tithe payers, both in percentage and in numbers, is going up. The number of people worshipping in the temple is going up. Our numbers suggest that we are not static—that we are retaining people.”

Fabrizio suggested to Bateman that some inactive members feel that the Church won’t leave them alone. “We are under mandate not only to make a record for [new members], but also continue to remember them and nourish them,” Bateman replied. “We continue to visit people who don’t consider themselves active.”

“Now,” he added, “if a person does write and says, ‘We want to have our name taken off Church records,’ we will honor that. For the most part, we want people to have a little bit of time, to make sure that’s where they want to go, but we’ll honor their request.”

Two callers to the show took issue with Elder Bateman’s claim that the Church cares more about individuals than numbers. “Our zone conferences were pep rallies to bring our numbers up,” complained a returned missionary who had served in Chile. Another returned missionary said that in Guatemala, elders would take children to play soccer and then take them to the baptismal font with the excuse of “cooling off.”

Bateman admitted that “there have been instances of these things occurring,” but he reassured listeners that “we have taken care of them once we’ve learned about them. We’ve not been shy to step in and stop them.”

“The Church hierarchy doesn’t go around talking about it because we’re not proud of it,” he added. “And it’s not widespread—it’s happened in a few places here and there over a long period of time.”

A caller asked Bateman whether the fact that the Church doesn’t have a stand on the war in Iraq has an effect on its membership. “Our position in the Church is that we support the government in which we live,” Bateman replied. “We are supportive of the government of the United States. . . . but also we need to make sure that we’re fighting—we hope we’re fighting for the right causes.”

DUTCHER’S ARMY IS BACK—
BUT CAN IT STAY?

THE SEQUEL TO RICHARD Dutcher’s genre-launching Mormon film sensation God’s Army has just been released, and reviewers are giving it high praise. Arriving five-and-a-half years after the original, God’s Army 2: States of Grace again focuses on LDS missionaries preaching in an area of Los Angeles. But this time, it focuses less on missionary life and more on an exploration of faith and redemption in the lives of the missionaries as well as a member of a street gang, a struggling actress, and a homeless preacher. “All these characters are pulled into a relationship because of the events that happen,” Dutcher explains in a SunstonePodcast interview. “I hope the film [gives viewers the chance to spend time] with some good and interesting [characters who face] some very unusual circumstances.”

Intended as a cross-over that can be enjoyed by non-LDS audiences as well, the film will be released nationally with the shorter title, States of Grace, in cities with large Mormon populations but in typical “Bible belt” regions as well. For details, watch the website, www.zionfilms.com.

Dutcher prefers to call the movie a “follow-up”—not a sequel. In speaking with Deseret Morning News film reviewer Jeff Vice, he said “it was important to have some continuity with the first film, but I didn’t want to use the same main characters. In essence, I’d be making the same movie over and over again, and I didn’t have any interest in that.”

He didn’t make the same film. Of the main subject matter, News columnist Jerry Johnston writes, “Dutcher apparently believes one can’t soft-pedal sin without trivializing redemption. And I’m with him on that.” Speaking to the film’s darker themes and Dutcher’s approach to honest storytelling rather than pandering to the kind of sweet specialness that some Latter-day Saints might wish for, Johnston continues: “Some will say the barrage of bad behavior tars the image of the church and missionary work. But I know branch presidents who will see the film and think Richard Dutcher has been reading their mail.”

Despite the film’s critical success—consistently earning three-and-a-half to four stars—its early box office revenues have been disappointing. After it opened on thirty-three screens in Utah and Idaho, Dutcher reports that four theaters dropped it after the first week. And despite huge increases in per-screen averages its second week in release (up to 75 per-
Deceased. WAYNE C. BOOTH, 84, one of the most celebrated and influential literary critics of the twentieth century, at his home on 10 October. Born in American Fork, Utah, he served an LDS mission in Chicago. Following a bachelor’s degree from BYU, he returned to his mission area, earning both a master’s and doctorate from the University of Chicago, where he also taught the last dozen years of his distinguished career.

Among his many writings, two of Booth’s books still stand as towering works, part of the core English curriculum at universities around the world: The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961) and The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (1988). Booth coined terms such as “implied author” and “unreliable narrator” that are now common parlance in literary criticism. In a reflection on Booth for the New York Times, Margalit Fox writes: “Literature was not so much words on paper as it was a complex ethical act. He saw the novel as a kind of compact between author and reader: intimate and rewarding, but rarely easy.”

Booth is survived by his wife of fifty-nine years, Phyllis, and two daughters, Katherine and Alison. Their son, John Richard, died in 1969 at age eighteen. Booth’s memoir, titled My Many Selves, is due out soon from Utah University Press.

Arrested and released. SETH JEFFS, 32, brother of fugitive FLDS Church prophet Warren Jeffs, in Colorado, on charges of harboring a fugitive. Police found in Seth’s car $142,000 in cash, cell-phone cards, many letters addressed to Warren Jeffs, and a donation jar labeled “Pennies for the Prophet.” After spending ten days in custody, Seth was freed on a $25,000 bond.

Warren Jeffs has been a fugitive since his June indictment on charges of arranging a marriage between a 16-year-old girl and a man who was already married.

Speculating. STEVEN E. JONES, BYU physics professor, that the actual cause of the 9-11 collapses of the two World Trade Center towers was “pre-positioned explosives.” Among evidences he lists in an article posted at www.physics.byu.edu/research/energy/htm7.net, and which is scheduled for publication in a peer-reviewed book, The Hidden History of 9-11, Jones argues that the symmetrical way in which the buildings collapsed and the inability of jet fuel and office materials to generate enough heat to melt steel supports, lead him to believe that shortly after the planes flew into the towers, pre-set explosives were detonated.

Sworn in. 2 August 2005, as Under Secretary of the Treasury for Domestic Finance, RANDAL K. QUARLES. A native Utahn and Latter-day Saint, Quarles takes this position after a distinguished career in international finance in both the private and public sector. Quarles is remembered by some in SUNSTONE circles for his piece, “A Religion of Clerks or I’ve Got Those Stuffing, Stapling Blues” (November-December 1980), a letter he wrote to the Church’s membership department while serving as membership clerk in the Manhattan First Ward. To the delight of countless other clerks, his letter’s serious but tongue-in-cheek prose actually led to positive changes.

Selected. For publication, JEANETTE ATWOOD’S entry in the 2005 24-Hour Comic Highlights Anthology. Atwood’s work, “Puzzles,” was chosen from more than 800 entries as one of twenty-four stories to be included in this year’s book. A 24-hour comic contest is considered the ultimate smackdown challenge for cartoonists, who, without pre-planning, write and draw a 24-page comic book in 24 hours. “Just finishing is considered an honor,” says Atwood, “To have my story actually selected for this year’s anthology is a huge thrill.” Atwood, a returned LDS missionary and graduate of Sheridan College’s classical animation program, is a regular contributor to SUNSTONE.

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Detracted. WAYNE C. BOOTH, 84, one of the most celebrated and influential literary critics of the twentieth century, at his home on 10 October. Born in American Fork, Utah, he served an LDS mission in Chicago. Following a bachelor’s degree from BYU, he returned to his mission area, earning both a master’s and doctorate from the University of Chicago, where he also taught the last dozen years of his distinguished career.

Among his many writings, two of Booth’s books still stand as towering works, part of the core English curriculum at universities around the world: The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961) and The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (1988). Booth coined terms such as “implied author” and “unreliable narrator” that are now common parlance in literary criticism. In a reflection on Booth for the New York Times, Margalit Fox writes: “Literature was not so much words on paper as it was a complex ethical act. He saw the novel as a kind of compact between author and reader: intimate and rewarding, but rarely easy.”

Booth is survived by his wife of fifty-nine years, Phyllis, and two daughters, Katherine and Alison. Their son, John Richard, died in 1969 at age eighteen. Booth’s memoir, titled My Many Selves, is due out soon from Utah University Press.

Arrested and released. SETH JEFFS, 32, brother of fugitive FLDS Church prophet Warren Jeffs, in Colorado, on charges of harboring a fugitive. Police found in Seth’s car $142,000 in cash, cell-phone cards, many letters addressed to Warren Jeffs, and a donation jar labeled “Pennies for the Prophet.” After spending ten days in custody, Seth was freed on a $25,000 bond.

Warren Jeffs has been a fugitive since his June indictment on charges of arranging a marriage between a 16-year-old girl and a man who was already married.

Speculating. STEVEN E. JONES, BYU physics professor, that the actual cause of the 9-11 collapses of the two World Trade Center towers was “pre-positioned explosives.” Among evidences he lists in an article posted at www.physics.byu.edu/research/energy/htm7.net, and which is scheduled for publication in a peer-reviewed book, The Hidden History of 9-11, Jones argues that the symmetrical way in which the buildings collapsed and the inability of jet fuel and office materials to generate enough heat to melt steel supports, lead him to believe that shortly after the planes flew into the towers, pre-set explosives were detonated.

Sworn in. 2 August 2005, as Under Secretary of the Treasury for Domestic Finance, RANDAL K. QUARLES. A native Utahn and Latter-day Saint, Quarles takes this position after a distinguished career in international finance in both the private and public sector. Quarles is remembered by some in SUNSTONE circles for his piece, “A Religion of Clerks or I’ve Got Those Stuffing, Stapling Blues” (November-December 1980), a letter he wrote to the Church’s membership department while serving as membership clerk in the Manhattan First Ward. To the delight of countless other clerks, his letter’s serious but tongue-in-cheek prose actually led to positive changes.

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Not defending such acting out when it is used to exploit others, should we not defend it when it helps us practice being “characters” superior to our ordinary selves, thus learning how to be such characters? When I hypocritically act like a person of saintly generosity, am I not learning how to be generous? When I hypocritically enact the role of someone who believes in a belief I question, am I not likely to discover that thinking in that previously detested way actually makes sense?

What my practices as a missionary taught me was that if I pretended to listen sympathetically to beliefs I detested, I would sometimes discover that they were better beliefs than those I had held when entering the discussion. And even when that did not happen, my “hypocrisy upward,” or “outward,” did at least broaden and deepen my own grasp of the world and of how we limited creatures can deal with its mysteries.

I hope it is clear that nothing I’ve said suggests that all “religious” or “Mormon” “views,” open or disguised, are in my view equally defensible. . . . Some religious commitments save; some destroy. Some “hypocritical” efforts to listen can reveal beliefs even worse than they appeared at the beginning. To “take in” or “act out” the “other” with full empathy, learning to think with the other, is no surefire route either to self-improvement or to brightening some one corner of the world’s darkness. . . .

But surely our world would be a better one if more of our brothers and sisters more of the time would practice not the kind of lying, self-aggrandizing hypocrisy so prevalent around us but hypocrisy upward: the aspiration, through taking on roles or taking in “the other,” that produces genuine understanding. Would not the Church itself be radically improved if more of us—not just lowly active members and peripheral hangers-on but the highest authorities, too—would really listen lovingly to “the enemy” long enough and closely enough to discover what is really there?
The Sunstone Education Foundation is pleased to announce:

THE 2006 R. L. “BUZZ” CAPENER MEMORIAL WRITING CONTEST
IN COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

The Sunstone Education Foundation invites submissions of papers to the inaugural 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 be greatly benefited through 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 2006 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, held 9–12 August, and their papers 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:
$750.00 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 30 April 2006. 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 names 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 at www.sunstoneonline.com and in SUNSTONE magazine.

Failure to comply with these rules will result in disqualification.
Esau had to decide how to fulfill his own promise. He had become a prosperous man and sat at the head of a large army. He could easily slay Jacob, as he had wanted to. But he could also accept the peace offering, overcome his anger, and break free in the fullest and greatest sense.