“ANYTHANG WILL HELP” by P. D. Mallamo (p.20)

REFLECTIONS OF A PUBLIC DEFENDER by Ken Driggs (p.32)

CHRIST IN HIS DISTRESSING DISGUISE by Marylee Mitcham (p.40)

HEALTHY PARTNERS
Brown fiction contest winner by Lewis Horne (p.44)

SMOKE AND MIRRORS
England essay contest winner by Stephen Carter (p.50)

Chris Kemp and Frances Lee Menlove on compassion in the face of suffering (p.14)

NEWS AND UPDATE
FLDS leader arrested; Can a Mormon become president?; BYU controversies; and more!

IN HIM WAS LIFE; and the life was the light of men. — JOHN 1:4
Eugene England Memorial
Personal Essay Contest
Call for Entries

THE SUNSTONE EDUCATION FOUNDATION invites
writers to enter the 2007 Eugene England Memorial
Personal Essay Contest, made possible by the
Eugene and Charlotte England Education Fund.
In the spirit of Gene’s writings, entries should relate to
Latter-day Saint experience, theology, or worldview.
Essays, without author identification, will be judged
by noted Mormon authors and professors of writing.
The winner(s) will be announced in SUNSTONE and
at the 2006 Association for Mormon Letters
conference. Only the winners will be notified of the
results. After the judging is complete, all non-winning
entrants will be free to submit their essays elsewhere.

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

RULES:
1. Up to three entries may be submitted by a single
author. Four copies of each entry must be delivered
(or postmarked) to Sunstone by 30 JANUARY
2007. Entries will not be returned. A $5 fee must
accompany each entry.
2. Each essay must be typed, double-spaced, on one
side of white paper and be stapled in the upper left
corner. All essays must be 3500 words or fewer.
The author’s name should not appear on any page
of the essay.
3. Each entry must be accompanied by a cover letter
that states the essay’s title and the author’s name,
address, and telephone number. Each cover letter
must be signed and attest that the entry is the
author’s work, that it has not been previously
published, that it is not currently being considered
for publication elsewhere, will not be submitted to
other forums until after the contest, and that, if the
entry wins, SUNSTONE magazine has one-time,
first-publication rights.

For examples of past contest winners, see the May 2003,
July 2004, and May 2005 issues of Sunstone. The 2006 contest winner
is in this issue (page 50).
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Submissions may be on IBM-PC compatible computer discs (MS Word or WordPerfect format), or by e-mail attachment. Submissions should not exceed 8,000 words and must be accompanied by a signed letter giving permission for the manuscript to be filed in the Sunstone Collection at the University of Utah Marriott Library (all literary rights are retained by authors). Manuscripts will not be returned; authors will be notified concerning acceptance within ninety days.

SUNSTONE is interested in feature- and column-length articles relevant to Mormonism from a variety of perspectives, news stories about Mormons and the LDS Church, and short reflections and commentary. Poetry submissions should have one poem per page, with the poet’s name and address on each page; a self-addressed, stamped envelope should accompany each submission. Short poems—haiku, limericks, couplets, and one-liners—are very welcome. Short stories are selected only through submission. Short poems—haiku, limericks, couplets, and one-liners—are very welcome. Short stories are selected only through submission. Letters for publication should be identified. SUNSTONE does not acknowledge receipt of letters to the editor. Letters addressed to specific authors will be forwarded, unopened, to them.

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**SUNSTONE**

**BACKSLIDER REVISITED**

I APPLAUD SUNSTONE’S DECISION TO publish twentieth-anniversary reflections on Levi Peterson’s *The Backslider*, and I enjoyed Chered Woodworth and Bruce Jorgensen’s essays in the April 2006 issue.

When I reread *The Backslider* this summer, I wondered once again why it hasn’t found a larger non-Mormon audience. It’s a great read—believable characters trying to be or convinced they are good Mormons, humor (not all of it dark), sex and guilt, bigamy, even blood atonement. Surely members of other faiths who have their own spiritual struggles can relate to Frank Windham’s endeavors to please the supercritical God he envisions.

*The Backslider* hasn’t yet found as broad an LDS audience as it deserves either. The humor strikes close to home, and laughing at ourselves is generally harder than laughing at others. My daughter found *The Backslider* subservive of Church values. I would have at her age, too. Now I relate to Frank’s berating himself for real and imagined sins. Like Frank, I once set unattainable goals for myself and tried to reach them with skewed priorities. Where was my cowboy Jesus?

We Mormons excel at guilt. Like many of us, Frank and Margaret, his mother, insist they believe in the atonement but then condemn themselves when misfortunes and tragedies occur, believing those are payback for their lack of perfection. Margaret believes the deaths of her mother’s babies were caused by her vanity rather than by the poverty of homesteading with a part-time husband. Frank, Jeremy, and the polygamists in the realm of blood atonement.

Sexual morality is a tough issue to deal with, especially for young men brimming with hormones. Frank and Jeremy’s extreme methods of dealing with normal impulses should make priesthood leaders who interview young men think twice about asking deeply personal questions. I asked my husband if he thinks probing questions about masturbation give boys an unhealthy fear. He assured me, “Nobody takes those questions seriously.” Well, boys who don’t have dads or reliable friends to talk to might take those questions seriously. My oldest son once said he always looked the bishop in the eyes and lied, and all of his friends did the same. This experience did little for his testimony of the bishop’s discernment. I suspect most of us will lie if pressed to answer highly personal and embarrassing questions.

Sexual morality in *The Backslider* takes a hilarious turn when Farley Chittenden describes the unique method of repenting for past sins he has devised with his ex-prostitute plural wife, Gomer. While Farley is luscious, the lives of the other polygamists in the novel are sad, even frightening. The self-sacrificing plural wives bear firm testimony of the principle that makes their lives so difficult.

With Warren Jeffs all over today’s headlines, polygamy is a hot topic and might be the key to getting this novel out into the non-LDS mainstream. Maybe Signature Books could talk the Big Love producers into writing Farley, Gomer, Bertha, and Hanah into an episode, then reissue the novel with a cover photo of Farley’s plural family—including Gomer in full bloom? It may be trickier to build a broader LDS audience for the novel. *The Backslider* portrays active Mormons who seem incapable of applying the Golden Rule in their own lives. Frank frets over his sins of vanity, gluttony, and skipping Church meetings, not recognizing that the shameful way he has used Marianne is his worst sin. Frank’s down-to-earth bishop advises him to marry the virgin he has taken advantage of until he learns that Marianne is not Mormon and then dismisses her as probably “loose.” Margaret burdens her sons with fear of any kind of pleasure. Steny Uncle Raymond bullies his wife and takes advantage of family members in his cattle business.

Clara, Frank’s mother-in-law and a devout Lutheran, is the nicest person and best Christian in the book. She completely forgives Frank for his initial abandonment of Marianne. She takes in the very-pregnant Gomer and arranges medical care while Farley is in jail, then welcomes Farley to the ranch upon his release. Clara even manages to be supportive when Marianne converts to Mormonism. For balance, her husband Wesley’s self-importance proves that Mormons have no monopoly on human flaws.

I suspect it is not the sex and language that many Latter-day Saints find offensive about *The Backslider*. It is that the characters reveal an unpleasant truth about ourselves. Despite what we say and hear in Gospel Doctrine classes, other than the Word of Wisdom and temple garments, there is really not much difference in how we Latter-day Saints live our lives and how members of...
other faiths live theirs. The Backslider reflects LDS culture as it really is, not as we wish it were. And this is why we should read this book. Instead of being subversive of Church values, it shows us the foolishness of our own inconsistency in applying Christian principles in our lives. Recognizing our own foibles through fiction might help us accept and tolerate not only our own shortcomings but also those of others. Acceptance and tolerance—that sounds like the basis of the Golden Rule. What could be more supportive of Church values?

ANN M. JOHNSON
Cedar City, Utah

A USEFUL MEDITATION

PHILIP MCLEMORE'S TAKE ON President McKay's thoughts about meditation, together with his own personal observations and practices, certainly gives a new meaning (for LDS, at least) to the word “mantras” and how they pertain to our individual lives (SUNSTONE, April 2006). After reading the article carefully several times, and with a bit of meditation on my own, I would be hard pressed to endorse the practice as he portrays it.

It would be interesting to have President McKay enlarge on his concept of meditation and the pondering of sacred things. I have personally heard his counsel on our need to study, ponder, and ask for the promise of Moroni to be realized in all areas of our lives. Other than that aspect, I would be hard up to quote any past or present prophet who has endorsed meditation.

Rather than McLemore's type of practice, I would suggest an alternate plan. Let's call it the “temple mantra.” Instead of emptying our minds and thus becoming an inert and useless person, would it not be better to spend twenty minutes or so meditating upon the sacred truths of the temple endowment? This practice would, in addition to expanding our minds spiritually, mentally, and physically, enable us to offer the same gift to others. Doing so is often referred to as becoming a Savior on Mt. Zion.

MAX H. RAMEMELL
Bountiful, Utah

OVERSTATED PRAISE

GERRY ENSLEY'S TRIUMPHAL assessment of Blake Ostler's two-part essay dealing with the logic of DNA arguments against Book of Mormon historicity and exchanges with some of his critics (Letters, SUNSTONE, April 2006) is not conducive to open dialogue, not to mention dreadfully misinformed and premature. All but one of Ostler's responses were to criticisms of his first essay, which were also premature, for the validity of Ostler's critique of DNA arguments depends a great deal on the validity of his defense of the local colonization theory in his second essay, which, to quote David A. Anderson, was "wholly unsuccessful" (Letters, SUNSTONE, September 2005). Anderson's critique exposed some of Ostler's faulty assumptions, logical lapses, and textual manipulations. Ostler responded, to be sure, but despite Ensley's assertion, it was not "well-reasoned."

Ostler may have scored some points early in the exchanges, but he was beginning to lose ground and credibility when the discussion was pushed out of the limelight and into the outer-darkness of Sunstoneblog.com (see announcement, SUNSTONE, November 2005, 7). There, at the top of the "Book of Mormon Historicity" thread, one can find my response to Ostler's second essay, which I recommend Ensley read (after he rereads Anderson's critique) and carefully contemplate.

While Ensley asserts that critics have used "fraudulent arguments" that rest on "problematic foundations," he should consider the fact that critics have formulated their arguments based on the views and interpretations held by a majority of the LDS community, which apologists have yet to convincingly demonstrate are wrong (which is different than showing that they are unrealistic). The critics are well aware of apologetic inventions such as the limited geography and local colonization theories; they just don't buy them and believe that many LDS, once informed of the issues, won't either. If DNA arguments are "fraudulent" and "problematic" because they assume the traditional view and reject

HONEST JON

by Jonathan David Clark

...AND NOW WE'D LIKE TO RELEASE THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS WITH A VOTE OF THANKS-BUT-NO-THANKS...

SUNSTONE welcomes a new cartoonist to its pages, Jonathan David Clark. Jon is a Latter-day Saint who lives in Knoxville, Tennessee, with his wife and four children. He's a full-time music composer for television and a part-time cartoonist whose strip, "Honest Jon," is syndicated in eight newspapers and three magazines.
apologetic innovations, then how can Ensley think that Ostler’s syllogisms are valid when they are built on the question-begging assumption that the Lehites represented a local colonization?

Admittedly, some critics have overstated what DNA evidence means to Book of Mormon historicity and have underestimated the resourcefulness of the apologists to make adjustments, but there can be little doubt that DNA has changed the contours of the debate. Who can deny that there is much less wiggle-room than there was before DNA arrived? Ostler might scoff at what he considers illogical DNA arguments, but can he deny that his general acceptance of DNA evidence has contributed to the way he now reads the Book of Mormon?

DAN VOGEL
Westerville, Ohio

Letters for publication are edited for clarity, tone, and space. Send them to EDITOR@SUNSTONEONLINE.COM.

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The Eyes of a Flounder

Poems by Laura Hamblin

LAURA HAMBLIN’s poems roam widely and notice everything, and sometimes a witch speaks them; the poems convince us that a truth-telling wise woman’s voice is just what we need to hear. She alone can name the hates we keep “in a shoe box, buried / in the back yard / under a tree,” or remind us that in our raging loneliness, each of us can become a “midnight hag.” And because she recognizes prettiness for the lie it is, she can more plainly show us beauty: the goddess of wisdom, Sophia, “singing the song she teaches, / in a language I never heard, / in a language I never knew.”

—LISA BICKMORE, author of Haste
(Best Poetry Award, Utah Arts Council)
“ONE OF THE BEST SYMPOSIUMS EVER!”

THE 2006 SALT LAKE SUNSTONE SYMPOSIUM AND WORKSHOPS
9–12 August at the Salt Lake Sheraton City Centre Hotel

“WHO ARE THESE CHILDREN COMING DOWN?”
The opening night plenary crowd sings about Saturday’s warriors while a Utah Now film crew captures the evening’s fun.
091. SMITH-PETTIT LECTURE. RELIGION AND POP CULTURE: SHOTGUN WEDDING, MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE, OR MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN? MARK I. PINSKY, BENGT WASHBURN

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NOTE: The session titles marked with an asterisk indicate the recording joined the session after it began or it is of slightly less than ideal sound quality but can still be enjoyed.

Several threads at WWW.SUNSTONEONLINE.COM, contain discussions of favorite symposium sessions (see 27 August, and 9, 10, and 11 August). Check out others’ favorites! Tell us about your own!
TOUCHSTONES
Small Miracles

AFTER YEARS OF mistreatment and neglect by those who should have protected her, the girl was placed with extended family. Therapy and disciplined structure took time and patience to effect any change, but finally her new guardians felt that—with continuous supervision-she could try public school.

She would catch the bus in front of my grandmother's house, travel to school, and attempt the arduous process of gaining not only an academic education, but also a social one—something that doesn't come easy for a child conditioned to see little value in herself. The girl found herself in a world of children whose unwritten rules and social mores were difficult for her to grasp.

Grandmother occasionally watched her leaving for and arriving from school, but suspected nothing when the girl's guardian knocked on her door.

"Have you noticed things missing?" The neighbor asked. Grandmother couldn't remember if anything of value had been taken.

"Things like soda?" The neighbor asked. And then my grandmother realized that the cooler she kept by the porch and filled with Cokes for outdoor work breaks had been emptying much faster than usual.

The neighbor revealed that in an effort to win friends, the little girl had been sneaking cans each morning to give to other children. And Grandmother hadn't been the only victim: dollar bills and other small items had come up missing.

And Grandmother hadn't been the only one—something that doesn't come easy for a child prone to outbursts and rages, that she had become a mother at a very young age and later suffering several health-shattering miscarriages, that she had battled the nightmares of depression longer than she cared to remember, and that she had undergone a risky brain surgery less than a year before. And she would not know that this woman had questioned her own worth many, many times.

But there are miracles in connections.

With one look, the girl saw someone who knew her, and a woman saw a child who needed gentleness in a world filled with anger and inequity. Empathy draws one soul to another—reaches out and does God's work to heal and strengthen. And it is through people that God's quietest and most meaningful miracles are wrought.

MARY ELLEN GREENWOOD
American Fork, Utah

IX YEARS AGO, my wife Pat and I went to our ward high priests' BBQ social and ate hamburgers. Late that night, something "snapped" in my chest and hurt like blazes. I knew it wasn't good and told Pat to call 9-1-1. Soon several fire trucks and ambulances were lined up in front of our house, and paramedics filled the room. They treated me for a possible heart attack and said they would transport me to the hospital. Pat told them to take me to LDS Hospital, a seemingly insignificant move that may have been the first "small miracle" of the night. It turns out that LDS had the best facilities and personnel at that time of night to do what needed to be done to save my life, which I consider a pretty "big miracle."

Spotting a dissecting aortic aneurysm, the doctors told my wife to call our family together as I needed to undergo immediate, serious, emergency surgery. After receiving a priesthood blessing from anonymous volunteers, I was wheeled into the OR and came out ten hours later with new hardware in my chest. Later the doctor said I had been hours, if not minutes, from death; that 60 percent of victims of aortic aneurysms do not survive, and many who have this surgery, die.

My last conscious thought before going into surgery was that I would either wake up in the recovery room or in an entirely different dimension. I felt no fear (was the morphine part of that?) but rather a sense of wonder. Later a good friend, who had come to see me in the ICU, said I had waved him over to my bed and mainly uttered nonsensical words (not atypical for me in the best of circumstances) but that twice I clearly said "spirit world." I wonder if I had been trying to explain where I had just been, relating my last conscious thoughts before surgery, or attempting to be funny.

During my twelve days in the hospital and a long recovery period, I reflected on what had happened, and what could have happened, to me. Why didn't I die as so many victims have? How much of the reason was the competence and skill of the doctors doing what they're trained to do, and how much was God's intervention? I don't know,
Mistake. Oh, and no more hamburgers at dinner. By now I had come to understand how fragile life is, that we are not invincible. I became more aware of those who really cared about me and were important in my life. I came to better recognize and appreciate the deep level of love, concern, and caring that my wife, family, and friends had for me and I for them. Not to sound trite, but at least for a while, I learned to stop and smell the roses, to listen to the birds and to the people around me. I had taken far too much for granted, and now that I had been given an opportunity to listen to the birds and to the people around me, I had taken far too much for granted, and now that I had been given another chance, I resolved not to repeat that mistake. Oh, and no more hamburgers at ward suppers.

Curt Bench
Salt Lake City, Utah

When I was a little girl, my brother gave me two quarters so I could buy cotton candy at the fair the next day. I lived on a practical farm and had never had cotton candy before (nor did it seem the type of thing my whole-grain mother was likely to buy me). In great anticipation, I cherished those quarters with my stubby little four-year-old hands and heart.

It wasn't long, of course, before I misplaced them and was completely beside myself about it. I remembered a recent Primary lesson that if I prayed in a private place, God would answer me. I went to the privatest place I knew—the small bathroom—and kneeling over the toilet uttered my first little heartfelt prayer.

After praying, I got up and wandered about, wondering how God would tell me where the quarters were (my teacher hadn't gotten to the part about how prayers are answered, and I didn't know). Mind and heart open, within minutes, I got a picture in my head, clear as day, of the quarters lying under the pillow on my bed. I went directly to the bed and looked under the pillow and, behold! Quarters!

I realize that it would be easy to explain away the spiritual significance of that event: I mean, maybe I just needed some focus and time to remember where I had put them. And it would be easy to think that I self-manufactured the idea that God had answered me, simply because I wanted it so badly. But almost all of my "spiritual experiences" to date are similarly simple: a feeling of peace, quiet assurances, wind at the right moment on a mountaintop, a bird stopping by for a significant moment—things that are unmiraculous and known only to me. Does my wanting such experiences somehow create and therefore invalidate them? Our commonly used definition of faith—"things hoped for but not seen"—inherently implies, by the word "hope," an actual desire, not just willingness. So the very ingredients of faith make it easy to dismiss.

I don't remember the cotton candy I bought with the quarters anymore, nor do I remember the fair. But I have never forgotten my first answer to my first prayer. And while sometimes I think it's a silly story, I also realize that the desires of our hearts, however simple, are of great interest to God. He lost nothing by reaching out to a four-year-old girl, in a four-year-old mindset, with four-year-old desires. He gained a lifelong friend in me.

Skye Pixton Engstrom
Portland, Oregon

During the years my husband and I lived in the San Francisco Bay area, we usually made our annual trek to visit family in Utah in the summer. But in 1974, we skipped the summer trip and went instead at Christmas time. It was twilight and a light snow was falling as we left Battle Mountain, Nevada, on I-80. We had all-weather tires on our small sedan but no chains. East of Battle Mountain, the road begins a gradual climb, and as the snow increased, the surface became slick. Suddenly we slid off onto the right shoulder beside a considerable drop-off.

By now it was dark, and although we had the flashers on and should have been very visible, the cars that came up behind us just rushed past. Concerned about our infant and toddler who were awake, but not fussing yet, I didn't think of getting out and trying to flag someone down. Neither did my husband, more an acting than a thinking person. Trying to get traction, he spun and spun the tires. Then frustrated and panicked, he got out of the car and pushed first on the rear and then on the front, trying to free the vehicle.

He'd often told me he didn't believe God answers prayers. But I didn't believe that. And I also didn't believe that my babies and I would end our lives this way. I sat in the car and prayed.

Of course many kinds of answers can follow prayer—and not always instantly. Simply focusing their thoughts may sometimes prompt people to solve their own problem. Sometimes help comes through another person. And many testify that their rescue was undeniably divine.

Hands numb, my husband got back in the car, and with the engine off, we waited, shivering. Not long afterward, a snowplow scattering sand ground nosily up the mountain behind us. Although he should have been able to see us, the driver didn't stop. But the sand had sprayed out far enough that my husband could let the car roll backwards until the tires got traction. By the time we reached Wendover, the road was dry.

It was a difficult marriage, and my husband's faithless attitude ultimately rubbed off on me. I began to feel like a forgotten child, wondering where God was, thinking there were no miracles in my life. Sometimes, it's just perspective. Or retrospective.

Phyllis Baker
Salt Lake City, Utah
TRANSCRIPTS FROM HOLY GHOST TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Welcome to the Holy Ghost technical support hotline. This is Jim. What's the problem you're experiencing?

In the grocery store? Just around the peas?

Well, coverage can get spotty in some of the bigger stores. We've been getting a lot of calls about lack of inspiration concerning food products, but we're working on it. For future reference, usually Green Giant wins out as far as peas are concerned.

You're kidding—nothing in Victoria's Secret either? That is strange. I haven't gotten any complaints about lack of coverage there. I'll send that up the line, and we'll see what we can do about it. For now, I'd just suggest you duck into the nearest Disney Store. For some reason, the reception there is just flawless.

OK. Sorry I couldn't help more. OK, bye.

Holy Ghost tech support, this is Jim. What problems are you experiencing?

Which version are you using?

That might be the problem right there. Pretty old stuff. Tongues of fire, cherubim with six wings, apocalyptic visions, right? Man. You might be able to unload it on eBay or something, but we don't support that version anymore. Naw, it had too many problems: erratic healings, inappropriate displays of zealotry, gradual loss of inspiration—general all-around apostasy. It was a mess.

You're right, we shipped the newest version a bit late—you know, 1800 years in the making—but it's more efficient, fewer fainting spells, more user-friendly interface, no more of that confusing three-in-one bit, and a newly added stupor-of-thought firewall. You really need to get the newest version if you don't want it crashing on you all the time.

Hey Mort, can you believe it, someone still operating on HG 3.3? That's what I said. Amazing he hasn't been martyred yet, or at least stoned for blasphemy.

Holy Ghost tech support, this is Jim. What's the difficulty?


Geez. This is a strange one. Try to think here, what could it possibly be?

Uhh huh... Oh... Ummm... I see.

Sir?

Sir? I'm going to transfer you to the mortal sin department, all right? Just listen to what the guy there tells you, and do it, all right? This is important. Don't hang up, OK?

All right?... I'm transferring you now.

Holy cow, Mort. Why do I always get the SUNSTONE subscribers?

The Sugar Beet

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

The Sugar Beet’s first book, The Mormon Tabernacle Enquirer, will be off the press soon. You can pre-order at Zarahemlabooks.com or through Amazon. Your bishop will be very pleased if you do. The book received a terrific review in Publisher’s Weekly (http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6368867.html?nid=2287#review2). Not that we’re bragging.

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Views from the Street

It’s your turn to prophesy! Go!

“Behold, Richard Ducher said, ‘Let there be lights, camera, action!’ And he saw that it was good. God’s Army begat Brigham City and they were fruitful and multiplied. But, The Singles Ward came forth, and darkness spread upon the face of the earth, and Ducher wept.”

“Verily, if my husband drags one more of his dead elk through the kitchen, I say unto you there will be burnt offerings of countless big game trophies, the smoke of which will block the sun.”

“Hmm. It sure is dark in my hat here.”

“And it shall come to pass that Orrin Hatch will convert Arnold Schwarzenegger to the one and only true church just in time for him to save the Constitution from terrorists, who will have hung it by a thread from the top of the Washington Monument.”

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FROM THE EDITOR

THROUGH THESE PEOPLE

By Dan Wotherspoon

I WAS IN one of those “feeling the weight of the world” moods as I read the Book of Mormon one morning near the end of my mission. From time to time in those final mission months, I had been thinking about the future—imagining my return to “normal life,” school, eventual marriage, family, job, mortgage, church responsibilities. I wasn’t going to be able to put off “growing up” much longer. My thoughts were drifting along those lines again that morning as I read, my focus returning to the scriptures right as I was reading Mosiah 4:14–16:

And ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry, or naked; neither will ye suffer that they transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil, who is the master of sin, or who is the evil spirit which hath been spoken of by our fathers, he being an enemy to all righteousness.

But ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another.

And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar puttheth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish.

Panic! Man, there are so many things to do to get this life right! It’s too much!

On and on I went, riling myself up, imagining all the balls I’d have to juggle some day, and turning the development of even basic character traits into monumental, tedious chores.

Feeling exhausted after ten minutes or so of internal ranting about everything God requires of us, I reluctantly willed myself back to my scripture reading. Where was I? Oh yeah, Mosiah 4, King Benjamin.

As I turned my attention back to the text, I realized I couldn’t remember anything I’d read up to those verses that had sent me into my momentary crisis of confidence and will, and so I began again at the top of the chapter.

As I did, I discerned a much gentler voice than the one I’d heard by tuning in only at verse 14. In verse 9, I heard the call to “believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things . . .; that he has all wisdom, . . . that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend.”

That’s cool. I believe that.

In verse 10, that I should believe in the need to repent of my sins and to humble myself before God, to ask in sincerity for forgiveness. A bit tougher, given my raging ego. But, yeah, I believe that’s important. I can do that.

Verse 11 reminded me of God’s goodness to me in the past, the love I’ve felt from him, the joy of repentance and a clean start. It then asked me to keep all of this in remembrance daily. All right. I’m feeling that. I can handle that.

Then magic! I saw the shift I’d missed earlier. I saw verses 12 and 13 for what they are—descriptions of what naturally flows from following those gentler commandments:

And behold, I say unto you that if ye do [these things] ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God, and always retain a remission of your sins; and ye shall grow in the knowledge of the glory of him that created you, or in the knowledge of that which is just and true.

And ye will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due.

I saw how this shift from commandment to consequence led into my scary verses—that the love I’d feel and the mind I’d acquire through right remembrance would naturally cause me to teach and care for my children, to succor those who need succor, to administer my substance, and not suffer the beggar to petition me in vain. If I believe and do as those earlier verses remind me, all these “things to do” will simply come forth; I’ll do them because they’ll be character traits.

What had started as a rant ended up being one of my most exciting encounters with scripture ever. All that day, and for the next few weeks, everything was infused with light. I forgot my worries about the future; I taught and served with greater clarity and intention; I loved easily.

I HAVE never forgotten those moments with these verses. They drove home to me how genuine understanding of the nature of things and remembering our blessings and their source are the key to turn “dang things I’m supposed to do” into actions and attitudes that flow naturally from within. I recall the verses whenever I read of Lehi tasting the fruit of the tree of life or Enos receiving forgiveness of his sins and their immediately wanting to share it with all others—even enemies. I think of these verses every time I hear from the pulpit, “Oh, brothers and sisters, if only we could see things the way God sees them, we’d rush out to do our home and visiting teaching, to magnify our callings, to . . .”

I recall these verses when I read the determinism in Plato’s ethics—summed up in the phrase, “knowledge equals virtue”—and think about his notion that those who truly see things as they are (the philosopher-kings) will naturally make the best rulers, that enlightenment is always accompanied by a desire to help others escape the suffering brought on by ignorance.

Whenever I consider Mosiah 4 today, I’m struck deeply by the strong resonance between these insights and certain Buddhist teachings, especially the notions encapsulated in the “Eightfold Path.” According to Gautama, to receive genuine enlightenment, we must come to fully understand the relationship between desire and suffering laid out in his Four Noble Truths, but these can only truly become transformative through our attaining and practicing:

1. Right view.
2. Right intention.
3. Right speech.
4. Right conduct.
5. Right livelihood.
6. Right effort.
7. Right mindfulness.
8. Right concentration.

Buddhists typically divide these eight qualities into three sections. Qualities 1 and 2 deal with attaining wisdom (pañña), a correct view of all things in their proper relationships. Qualities 3 through 5 focus on ethical action (sila), our conduct toward others, including what we say and how we behave in our lifestyle and jobs (even teaching that some ways of earning a living will never be conducive to enlightenment). Qualities 6 through 8 focus on mental training (samadhi),
“YOU’RE MISSING THE POINT. THE VALUE LIES NOT IN MY COMING BUT IN YOUR WATCHING.”

our proceeding at the proper pace and intensity; disciplining our awareness, continually contemplating with our deep mind, and being mindful, living always in the present moment.

Though one finds a few Old Testament-like warnings about one’s eternal welfare here and there within Mosiah 4, the chapter contains direct parallels to every part of the Eightfold Path. One match, between verse 27 and Buddha’s quality number 6, I find particularly helpful at times.

For fledgling buddhas and fledgling saints, it’s a long haul. And though desire prompts us to hurry, we’ll invariably exhaust our strength, stumble in will, and backslide. But with the right view, intention, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration, each continually reinforcing all the others, we’ll be transformed.

SUNSTONE issues come together in different ways, and as each one advances toward publication, I always come to notice deep connections and rich cross-fertilization between the various elements that weren’t necessarily apparent as each piece was selected individually. Sometimes, we’ll deliberately group pieces to create sections on particular topics. At times, we’ll select enough pieces on a similar subject to give the impression that we decided to do a “theme issue.”

When this happens, we usually do it with a decent amount of forethought. I’ll pursue symposium presentations to publish, and I’ll invite authors I know are doing interesting work on the topic to write something specifically to include alongside the other pieces.

This magazine issue, with its cluster of submissions for publication. Marylee and I are good friends, and she was simply sharing with me an essay she’d written nearly twenty years ago that had been published in Commonweal, along with a companion piece she’d written just recently telling the story of the earlier essay and her journey into Mormonism, which had occurred in the intervening years.

Not until June, when I received the fascinating article by P. D. Mallamo detailing his experiences talking with every street person in Salt Lake City he could during a several-week period this past spring, did I hit upon the idea of talking with Ken and Marylee about lifting up some of the personal stories in their pieces and reshaping them into more direct reflections on their experiences of learning to see beyond the violence and horrors so readily apparent in their work with clients in the court and prison system, and patients in psychiatric wards; to glimpse the fuller truths about them, their lives—who they truly are. Each agreed, and suddenly, we had the makings for a neat magazine section.

Then Frances Lee Menlove focused her devotional sermon at this year’s Salt Lake symposium on Christ’s parable of the sheep and goats, and how in serving the very least of God’s children, we are serving him. The next short story in the publishing lineup, Lewis Horns’s powerful “Healthy Partners,” happened to be about a street person who is invited by a goodhearted Latter-day Saint into his home to join his family for dinner. It is a fascinating study of the inner life of this difficult individual and the ever-so-slight shift that occurs because of his up-close encounter with goodness. In the winning essay of the 2006 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest, Stephen Carter tells of his journey learning to really “see” his younger brother Ron—the gentleness and integrity in the life of his family’s death-metal-rocking “black sheep.”

Through these many coincidences, a “theme issue” was born. When I decided to fully embrace this fact, I realized this would also be the perfect issue in which to run a beautiful talk given by Chris Kemp, a long-time Sunstone volunteer who several years ago passed away from colon cancer, which discusses life’s seeming unfairness in a very humble and extremely powerful way.

Andean Watts says of composers who claim their music is “inspired,” coming through them exactly as created by the angels in heaven: “That’s too heavy a trip for my taste.” Mine, too—so please don’t read too much into what I’ve shared above. I offer it simply as a tale of how we arrived at the pieces assembled into this magazine, and with the hope that you’ll get even a small taste of the sweetness we’ve known as some of the stars have seemed to align in producing this issue.

BEIDES my two-decade-long journey with Mosiah 4’s insights into the relationship between right vision and right ethics toward beggars who petition us, my thinking on this issue of recognizing deeper truths about difficult people has been impacted by two other texts in particular. The one I encountered first is V. Stanley Benfell’s powerful observational essay, “Falling,” in the Fall 1993 Dialogue.

In much the same style as P. D. Mallamo’s piece in this SUNSTONE, Benfell describes brief encounters with New York City street persons, criminals, crazies, and other down-and-outers, interspersing these anecdotal snippets with apocalyptic scriptural verses. He then brings us into his study as he prepares his next day’s Gospel Doctrine lesson on Matthew 24 and 25, which, because of their apocalyptic emphases, are two of his “least favorite chapters in the New Testament.”

As he prepares, he begins an imaginary dialogue with Christ about the very-distant-to-Benfell Second Coming. He challenges Christ for teaching in such a way so as to lead believers to think his return was imminent, and for the vagueness of supposed “signs of the times” and the ridiculousness of such things as looking for the “number of the beast.”

In his imagination, Christ replies that Benfell is approaching the whole matter of his coming in the wrong way: “But you’re missing the point. The value lies not in my coming but in your watching.”

Benfell remains confused for a while longer until Christ calls him to look near the end of the Matthean discourses he’s preparing to teach the next day. There Benfell sees the story of Christ’s being hungry and thirsty but then fed and quenched, of being a stranger who was taken in, of being naked but then clothed, and of being sick and imprisoned yet visited even in his duress. And also Christ’s response to those who didn’t remember ever serving him in those ways: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40).

In the imaginary dialogue, Christ then tells Benfell:

Don’t you see? They watched for me, they saw me in those around

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In the imaginary dialogue, Christ then tells Benfell:

Don’t you see? They watched for me, they saw me in those around
them. I have come again every time a new child has come into the world. My light lights each one. They are the signs you should watch for. Watch for me and you will find me. My coming is this—when all of you see me in each other, I will already have come.1

My other favorite text on this challenge to see light instead of darkness in the hard-to-love is the film Entertaining Angels, which depicts the early life and ministry of Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement.2 Day’s life is a parable in itself—a tale of a bohemian and radical journalist who, before her conversion to Catholicism while in her thirties and coming to understand her calling to serve the downtrodden, had an abortion as well as lived in a common-law marriage that produced a daughter.

The film has many wonderful moments, with terrific lines from her associate Peter Maurin about how the problem with the world is that “the people who don’t think, act, and the people who do think, don’t act” (ouch!) and how “God is as close as the closest human being—especially the poor.” But the most powerful moment comes as an extremely discouraged Day—in crisis over a revolt of her coworkers, who want to abandon the messiness and difficulties in running soup kitchens and shelters and instead focus solely on changing things through the Catholic Worker newspaper—wanders into a cathedral and confronts Christ in the form of the church’s large crucifix.

These brothers and sisters of yours—the ones you want me to love. Let me tell you something: They smell. They have lice and tuberculosis. Am I to find you in them? Well, you’re ugly. You drink, and you wet your pants, and you vomit. How could anyone ever love you?

Still floundering after her rant against God’s demands on her, Day goes home only to catch a woman she’s been helping in the act of stealing money from her. In hysterics, this woman begins to beat Day with a cane. Finally grabbing control of the weapon, Day is about to strike back when her demeanor softens, and she exclaims: “I can see the light in you.”

Over this woman’s protests that no, she can’t, that “I stole from you—the only person who ever really cared about me,” Day continues: “[I can see] the courage and the love. You’re very beautiful. I love you.” As the staff and tenants gather in response to the commotion, she continues, “We all love you. We’re going to get you upstairs, get you cleaned up, and something to eat.”

In a wonderful song, Joan Osborne asks, “What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us? Just a stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home?”3

As we’re able to ask such questions ourselves, we enter the current that runs through all true religion. May we not only ask if this might be the case, but also watch for God in each stranger we meet.

In Entertaining Angels, Day states that she believes that whatever God wants her to do, “It begins with these people—the ones that nobody else wants, the ones that hurt and are angry and have nothing left to give. They are my meetingplace with God. And if I will just give him a chance, I know God will fill me with love, fill me through these people.”

NOTES
2. Entertaining Angels (Paulist Pictures, 1996). The film’s title is a reference to Hebrews 13:2, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”
FROM THE PULPIT

BECAUSE HE LOVED US THROUGH EVERYTHING

By Chris Kemp

The Scriptures are full of pronouncements of blessings for the righteous. So why do bad things happen to good people?

It is a question that thinkers such as St. Augustine, Martin Luther, the Psalmists, Joseph Smith, and others have discussed for centuries. I doubt that I can add anything new to the discussion. I can barely understand some of the ideas already out there. But what I can do, and what someone in the stake was foolish enough to let me do, is share my story.

I’ve gone through enough to know that my story is not unique. In fact, I’m certain that there are stories among those in this room that are much more inspirational and much more sobering than mine. You’re just smarter than I am, as evidenced by the fact that you’re down there and I’m up here. But let me begin with a quick summary of the last three years of my life. If you want more of the exciting details later, I’ll tell you, because I never grow tired of sharing how courageous I’ve been in my suffering.

I’m dying. Oh, we’re all dying. I just happen to be doing it with lots of test results and doctors pronouncing odds. In March 2000, I was diagnosed with colon cancer and given less than a 10 percent chance to live five years. Although none of the doctors I consulted confessed it at the time, every one five years. Although none of the doctors I consulted confessed it at the time, every one of them was above 90 degrees, I still needed a coat and blanket to keep warm. One day, I fell and tried to push myself up to my knees. I couldn’t do it. I just stayed there until help arrived. My oncologist suggested I re-enter the hospital to see if intravenous fluids would stop my weight loss. He didn’t confess it until later, but at that time, he felt he was sending me to the hospital to die.

But I didn’t die. The intravenous fluids stabilized me, and during the next two months, my wife hooked me up nightly to 2,000 calories of intravenous fluids. I started to gain weight. One night, I decided to test my strength and see how many pushups I could do, and I got almost to five. I was on my way.

When we lived outside of Utah, we participated in ward fasts for individuals, so we asked our bishop about having a ward fast for me. So one fast Sunday, I was the focus. Because my chemotherapy schedule usually left me feeling very ill on the weekends, I had not been to church for many months. But on this morning, I felt well enough to get ready. When my then-thirteen-year-old daughter saw me, she said, “Isn’t this one of you ‘bad days?’” I replied that it should be, but lots of people are fasting and praying for me, and maybe that was helping me to feel well enough to go to church. She was silent for a moment, then said, “Oh, cool!” and went to tell my wife.

I still have good days and bad days. I still go to chemotherapy. I started an additional chemo drug last year, and after a test at the Huntsman Cancer Center, I asked my oncologist if I should try something else since it didn’t seem to be working. He said that in the time I’ve been taking the new drug, it has become the standard, and a test group of Stage 4 colon cancer patients showed that those not using the new drug lived twelve to fourteen months, while those that used the drug lived fourteen to seventeen months. “But
they all still died, right?” I asked. “Well, yeah, they all died.”

NOW, what did I do to deserve this? Why did I suffer from colitis? Why didn’t I die from peritonitis in the hospital only to be diagnosed with cancer? Why did I have to suffer and nearly die again but then recover? Why do I likely have terminal cancer yet am defying the odds?

Of course, asking these questions in the context of asking why bad things happen to good people assumes that I’m good, which is usually contested by my teenage daughters. If you want to talk to someone who thinks life is unfair, talk to a teenager. Once, when my daughter was frustrated with me, she told me that my cancer was really messing up her social life.

But if I believe that I am a good person, or at least no worse than the neighbors, do I have a right to question God, to hope for a satisfactory explanation? The issue behind the question is that we want to know that our lives matter to God. I think we as humans want to be judged; we want to know where we stand. We are like little children saying, “Daddy, watch me. Watch me! Was that good?”

A story tells of a man who dies and finds himself in front of two doors, one marked Heaven, the other Hell, with an usher in front who tells him to pick a door and go in. The man says, “Wait a minute. Where is the trial? Where is the judgment? When will I be told whether I was good or bad?”

“You don’t know how that rumor got started,” says the usher. “We don’t do that, never had time for it. Please move ahead and choose.”

“But,” the man stammers, “I want to be held accountable. I want to be told if I did more good than bad, if I deserve to go to Heaven.”

“It has nothing to do with deserving—just choose a door and move on.” So the man chooses the door marked Hell.

The message of this story is that we want to be judged, not because we are sure we will pass, but because we want to know that our behavior matters to God, that the choices we agonize over and the decisions we make are taken seriously. God has set forth rules of good behavior, and we want to know that it matters that we choose to follow them. So what do we do when it seems that our choices don’t matter, that God doesn’t care? What do we do then?

For mortal intelligence, which is all we have to work with so far, some things are unfair. Sometimes I wish we would just admit that. But we try to rationalize God’s behavior, as if God needed to be justified by us. In fact, I hope God is not disappointed with all the machinations we go through to try to remove injustice from everything over which we believe God has control.

You’re familiar with the reasons we usually give about why things happen: God’s will, God’s punishments, God’s whim; our need to be taught, to learn, to experience something; natural consequences of nature and agency; all part of the grand scheme of things; and so forth. And these are genuine answers. I’ll bet each of us can tell of times when we’ve been punished for our actions, blessed for our kindness, learned something we know we could not have learned any other way, or seen someone else’s agency bless or curse the life of another.

The danger lies in using these reasons as blanket statements, because each of us can also think of people we love who are tormented by these same answers. All too often, the answers that sound so wonderful from the pulpit and in Sunday classes fall far short when we try to apply them to particular instances of suffering.

In his book, When Bad Things Happen To Good People, Rabbi Harold Kushner relates a saying from Iran: “If you see a blind man, kick him. Why should you be kinder than God?” That sounds barbaric, but it does state the ultimate conclusion that can be drawn from the belief that if something bad happens, it means the person must deserve it. Not too long ago, Jesse Martinez was simply a twelve-year-old boy attending a church picnic in Ogden when he was killed by a stray bullet from a gang fight a quarter of a mile away. Did friends attending the funeral console the family by telling them their son had been justly dealt with for his sins? Of course not.

OUR church teaches something that has helped me accept things. A huge limitation in our trying to understand God without the benefit of modern revelations is the belief that the afterlife is only a reward for behavior in this life. This
faiths have told me that their congregations think my name is on the prayer roll of at least one I
stopped and helped him cry.”

“A lot of people have been very kind,” the mother said. “On the way home, I saw a boy crying because his bike had broken, so I stopped to help him.”

I didn’t know you knew how to fix bikes,” the mother said.

“Oh, I don’t,” replied the boy. “I just made up a bit of what I have lived for.”

I am humbled by those who have helped me cry. Family and friends pray for me, and I think my name is on the prayer roll of at least twenty-five temples. Friends of different faiths have told me that their congregations are praying for me. My old ward in Connecticut joined my current ward’s fast, as did the mission branch of a missionary from my ward. Many friends from out of state go out of their way to visit. I wrote to a Jewish friend about my situation, and a month later, when he was at a business convention in Las Vegas, he flew up to spend the night. I have been the focus of cancer walks by several friends throughout the country. What did I do to deserve this?

Reckoning I’m not owed anything, has God been fair with me? If someone said, “You can hold your children, visit with friends, love your wife, but the price you have to pay is cancer,” would I sign up again?

During my hospital stay, I had a notebook in which I would write down my thoughts when I couldn’t sleep. On one particularly restless night, I began to prepare my case against God. From my morphine-induced state, my reasoning was impeccable. My plan was to point out all the bad things that were happening and show God how unfair he had been. So I began writing. The list soon grew beyond my cancer to everything bad I could think of—from lousy dates to losing money. But after some time, I was struck by the thought that I’d better write down some of the good things also, in case God countered with those. (It is best to be prepared when confronting God.) I didn’t get very far before I realized that just the few good things I’d written so far outweighed all of the bad, and that I would beg for more suffering if it meant keeping even some of the good things. I put my notebook away and fell asleep.

I recognize some people don’t feel that way. And when I hear how much worse their situations are, I wonder if I would not also curse God. I’ve learned not to judge people’s burdens. Big or small, suffering is suffering. Sometimes it means just standing beside them and feeling the weight of their burdens with them.

One day, a little boy came home quite late from school. “Where have you been?” his mother asked.

“On the way home, I saw a boy crying because his bike had broken, so I stopped to help him.”

I didn’t know you knew how to fix bikes,” the mother said.

“Oh, I don’t,” replied the boy. “I just stopped and helped him cry.”

Am I lucky? I don’t know. But I like the God cancer has given me. There are so many times I wish I didn’t have cancer, but the relationship I have with God now compared to the one before is one of those things I would not trade for anything in the world.

I have a feeling that when we get to heaven and stand before Christ, armed with our lists of all the suffering and despair we’ve endured and ready to do battle for our reward, in the end we will happily accept Christ’s judgment. Not because he’s endured everything and is just, nor because he’s suffered for us already and is merciful, although that is a big part of it. No, when that time comes, I believe that we will freely give our lives over to him because as he rises to embrace us we will know, through our sobs of joy, that this man truly loved us through everything.

BENCHMARK

A soft chime of light sifts over the edge of a dark, bear-hump hill. The distant freeway hums, the white postal truck jumps its measured laps up the street, and a white-booted cat slinks across the driveway.

I look to find my benchmark for the day and to do an exact thing beyond the previous day’s work, a thing that excites me enough to make me feel good about myself, and invites me to understand.

So when the blanket-night of stars drifts back over my time zone, what I have done may be a bit of what I have lived for.

—RICHARD SHORTEN
MATTHEW'S PARABLE OF the final great division of the sheep and goats is a discomforting story. It shakes us awake. This parable pushes us to ask ourselves, ‘What if God isn’t playing by our rules?’

You remember how it goes. Matthew places Jesus inside the story and describes the great separation. The Son of Man will separate people, one from another, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The sheep will go on the right, the goats on the left. He will then say to those on his right:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

To those on his left he will say:

You that are accursed, depart from me into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. (Matthew 25:34–36; 41–43, NRSV)

The reaction of those on either side is identical. They are nonplussed, thunderstruck. Neither the sheep nor the goats have identical. They are nonplussed, thunderstruck.

The reaction of those on either side of him is different. To those on his left he will say:

When was it that we saw you, Lord? The identical question from the sheep, who are totally unaware of the good they did, and from the goats, who are unaware they did anything wrong.

In this story, the final performance appraisal reduces all criteria to compassion. There is not a whisper about creeds or doctrine. There is not a word about cursing, or attendance at church meetings, or homosexuality. Nothing about fame, knowledge, or fortune. It is so simple it’s scary.

Actually, that’s not quite correct. It does not simply reduce to compassion. The difference between the sheep and the goats is action. It is compassion with action. The goats are goats because of inaction. They did nothing. There is no indication they had hostility or any ill will. They didn’t do anything wicked, they just failed to do good. Those who take action—feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, and visit the imprisoned—are the sheep. They’re in. People who don’t are the goats. They’re out.

Like most parables, this one is subversive. It subverts the common understanding of the last judgment. In the final analysis, what counts is not about belonging to the right group or believing the right things. Even good intentions don’t cut it. What counts is action. Compassion with action.

I imagine all of us here have at times been sheep, and probably we have all been goats. We are seldom all good or all bad, but the point is stark. When we fail the needy, we fail Jesus. When we neglect the homeless, we neglect Jesus. When we persecute outcasts, we are persecuting Jesus. This story makes judgment present and continuous, and in essence makes the needy our judge. I heard the Reverend James Forbes make this point a different way. “Nobody,” he asserted, “gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.”

The whole biblical tradition involves special care for victims, the poor, the widow, the stranger, the oppressed, the dispossessed. Kings are held accountable for how the poor fare. Prophets rail about the gap between the rich and the poor as a reason for God’s judgment.

But the Bible is concerned not only with suffering but also with causes of suffering. In fact, it could be argued that “the Bible is less concerned with alleviating the effects of injustice, than in eliminating its causes.”

William Sloan Coffin puts it this way: “Said prophet Amos, ‘Let justice—‘roll down like mighty waters,’ and for good reason: whereas charity alleviates the effects of poverty, justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it.”

IT is a lot easier to talk about charity than about social justice. Social justice talk leads to political controversy. But ignoring social justice issues because they raise political issues is itself a very political position in favor of the status quo. We are called on to be more than an effective and compassionate ambulance service. It is important to save poor orphans from burning buildings, but it is also vital to work toward a society where orphans are not poor and buildings adhere to fire codes.

In other words, as followers of Jesus, we are called not only to care for those who are suffering, but also to transform the conditions that bring about suffering. Social justice is different from charity. Charity is often the Band-Aid that covers injustice.

What makes a society just? The philosopher John Rawls proposes a thought experiment for teasing out the answer—in fact,
what he proposes feels rather like a Mormon kind of thought experiment. Pretend with me for a moment that we are in heaven, waiting to get our earthly bodies. We are all sitting around that great conference table in the sky with several other spirits-in-waiting. Our group is given the assignment of designing the basic social contract for the society in which we will live. We are not permitted to know our class, our race, our gender, our religion, our genetic make-up, nor our gifts or handicaps. We are behind what Rawls calls a “veil of ignorance.” We don’t know if we will be a sharecropper or a musician, a board chair or janitor, sighted or blind, or the parent of a severely handicapped child. In other words, our initial earthly circumstances will depend on the luck of the draw.

Where does this little thought experiment take us? I’ve tried it with church groups and philosophy classes. Put people in small groups and ask them to spend a couple of hours hashing out the kind of society they think we are to be dropped into, and the results are pretty consistent. First, our spirits-in-waiting have to take luck seriously—very seriously. Luck is all those gifts and all those curses for which we can take neither credit nor blame. If we take luck seriously, the boundaries of empathy are enlarged, and good schools for poor children, clean drinking water, living wages, and affordable, accessible health care take on a new urgency. When we are forced to ignore all knowledge that might lead us to self-interest rather than our sense of social justice, when we don’t know who we will be, we sign up only for arrangements that protect us no matter the luck of the draw. In other words, a vision for the general good, a vision of justice as fairness. A remembrance that we live in community.

So what do these people of good will actually decide behind this veil of ignorance? They generally opt for traditional religious liberties and political liberties with protections for the equality of all citizens. Economically they permit inequalities, but only when the circumstances that create inequality also provide opportunities for the least of them to improve their lot as well. “Capitalism with a human face” was the way one student expressed it. One salty old journalist told the group at the end of a half-day session that for him, the exercise was very disconcerting, even destabilizing. He said he was going to have to rethink his opposition to universal health care.

“Strong safety nets” is another frequently heard phrase in these thought experiment discussions. My favorite comment came from a young college student: “Social policy must at least ensure that we are equal to become equal.”

Rawls contends that the moral point of view, justice as fairness, is the position that reasonable people are forced to take when placed deliberately behind a veil of ignorance. Rawls comes up with two principles of social justice: first, each person should have the right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a like liberty for others; and, second, social and economic inequalities should be arranged so they advantage the worst off.

This thought experiment is a little like the instruction we heard as children and then used as parents when there were two kids and only one coveted brownie left in the pan. “Okay, you two kids, quit arguing. One of you gets to cut the brownie; the other gets to choose. That settles it.”

One divides; the other chooses. This clever little rule of division harnesses greed and makes for fairness. If people don’t know if they will be a winner or loser, smart or dumb, Christian or Jew, Muslim or atheist, straight or gay, they sign on to arrangements that protect them whatever happens. They design public institutions to ameliorate some of the burdens of bad luck. They take luck seriously. Luck—all the gifts and all the curses for which we can take neither credit nor blame. The lottery of life.

And the point is to understand that Jesus is always standing around us in the disguise of those who suffer.

PONTIUS’ PUDDLE

IT WONDER IF GOD CAN REALLY HEAR ME.

HELLO GOD! WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH MY LIFE?

FEED THE HUNGRY RIGHT INJUSTICE WORK FOR PEACE!

JUST TESTING!

SAME HERE

Taking luck seriously is hard. Do you know the most frequently quoted Bible verse that is not in the Bible? It is this: “God helps those who help themselves.” Three-quarters of Americans believe this phrase is in the Bible. It’s not. Actually, Benjamin Franklin said it, and it is counter-biblical.

It certainly doesn’t sound like Jesus as he separates the sheep and the goats. ‘God helps those who help themselves” also doesn’t sound much like “love your neighbor as yourself,” or “love your enemies,” or “bless them that curse you,” or “when you do it to the least of them, you do it to me.” It is hard for us to be reminded that so much of what we have is due to luck—the good luck of family, health, talents, timing. It can be unsettling to abandon that rather American myth that rich people are divinely entitled to their wealth and poor people are to blame for their want.

The notion that poverty is simply a reward for sin or laziness cannot survive what we now know about the dynamics that shape human societies. We know about the effects of racism, of sexism, of discrimination, and we know unfairness happens, and it...
happens more regularly and more routinely if the social systems aren’t alert to their effects. Systems matter. It is no longer possible to maintain the simplistic notion that people get what they deserve. We have to take luck seriously. The world is not fair. The rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45). Natural disasters harm anyone in their path.

Remember Job’s friends, who marveled how wicked he must be to deserve so much punishment? Those “comforters” tried to explain Job’s apparently undeserved suffering by arguing that he really did deserve it, that it was God’s punishment. Job resisted this pious orthodoxy, and it was shot out of the water by God’s rebuke from the whirlwind.

We are called to see Jesus in other people, even the sick whom we disdain because we believe their illness is a result of their lifestyle, even the prisoner whom we find reprehensible, even the stranger whom we fear, and even the hungry, who after all, should be able to take care of themselves.

If we hope to attend to the impact of systems on people’s lives, we must examine our political positions not just from our own point of view, but from the viewpoint of the least among us. We need to look beyond self-interest and work toward the common interest. We need to ask why people are hungry or thirsty or naked or in need of medical care or in prison. We are called to look at the structures that keep people from earning the food they need, the policies that keep people from having clean drinking water, the injustices in our criminal justice system.

For any policy we must ask: Does this policy seek the common good? Does it reflect care for the poor and protect the vulnerable? Who benefits and who suffers? Who wins and who loses? Indifference to the public sphere is anti-biblical.

Charity and almsgiving are indispensable in our world. But systemic problems can’t be solved by charity and almsgiving. The scandals of workplace safety come to mind. Collective action is needed to find solutions to problems that are beyond the power of any of us to deal with as individuals or as churches. Strong levees, clean air and water, truth-telling on financial reports, building codes that keep buildings standing during earthquakes, excellent schools. Collective action is needed to solve what Martin Luther King Jr. described as the most shocking and inhumane injustice: injustice in health care. And, since watching the movie An Inconvenient Truth recently, I have been wondering if we are now not only called to hear the groaning of the poor, but also the groaning of our planet.

The story of the sheep and the goats subverts our usual understanding of the last judgment, our understanding of what really counts. Why? The point, I believe, is to help us squelch our inner goat and nourish our inner sheep, to live like Jesus taught us, even in his absence. And the point is to understand that Jesus is always standing around us in the disguise of those who suffer. This is a daunting task, and I believe taking luck seriously helps.

We have to resist the narrow vision that makes us eager to do charity only. We are called to deal also with what causes people to need charity. If we took luck seriously, we would be on our way to fixing some of our fixable injustices. Remember Micah’s injunction: “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8) It we took luck seriously, we might have an easier time with the “do justice” part of that admonition. A healthy awe for luck might help us move toward being a little more sheeplike and a little less goatish.

In what may well be a first for any Sunstone forum, I am going to quote Bono, U2’s lead singer. Listen to what Bono said as he addressed the National Prayer Breakfast.

Look, whatever thoughts you have about God, most will agree that, if there is a God, He has a special place for the poor. In fact, the poor are where God lives. Check Judaism. Check Islam. Check pretty much anyone. I mean, God may well be with us in our mansions on the hill . . . I hope so. He may well be with us as in all manner of controversial stuff maybe, maybe not. But the one thing we can all agree, all faiths and ideologies, is that God is with the vulnerable and poor. God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. . . . God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. . . . God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war . . . God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us, if we are with them. And God is with us, if we are with them.

At the foot of the cross her face redraws the scars of sacrifice. Sorrow soaks her to the ground like a bended S.

Brackish with her first born’s blood, her tears shower earth for hours, laving bone-dry landscapes lost since the dawn of time until the slope of human hope finds bedrock footing in her steely yes.

The axis of the world tilts the aerial of earth toward home when she rises with the sun from the chrism plash.

—JEROME L. MCELROY

From my Salt Lake City office window, I see them struggle along with their bundles and bags, their shabby bedrolls and old thick coats which I can see are filthy even from this altitude. During a morning walk a week ago, I watched a man spread bread and cheese on the southeast steps of Gallivan Plaza, next to the Marriott Hotel. Had he been a Yale M.F.A. with a good publicist, I would likely have considered his installation quite a piece of social commentary, an edible Christo if you will. I happened upon another of his lunchable creations on another set of steps a block away and wondered who was caring for this man, making sure he did not hurt himself and was eating properly and taking his medications. Who had decided that today they’d turn him lose to spread bread and cheese all over Salt Lake City? Who would see to it that he returned safely from his labors and was protected from weather and the perils of darkness?

Who are they? And who are we who can give our last dollar and actually weep for them or do the fanciest little two-step you ever saw to avoid their pleading eyes and the lies that make liars of ourselves:

“Can you spare a dollar for an old veteran?”

“Sorry buddy, I don’t have a dime.”

For two weeks, I talked with the Street People of Salt Lake and tried to bypass the filter of deceit that often characterizes face-to-face communication between widely disparate classes—in this case, the largely mentally ill and the largely mentally healthy. I asked them to tell me the story of their lives. Of course, there was no way for me to ascertain if their stories were truthful. It doesn’t really matter, I suppose, since their words reflected, if not their lives, then their ideas of one. A lie holds its own truth—which is the reason behind the lie. For us, as we face them on the sidewalk, our lies reflect our unwillingness to admit that we don’t want to give our money to someone who doesn’t deserve it, or our unwillingness to admit that we don’t want them on our streets and in our city, or that we wish they’d go someplace else and die. Lying about the loose change we carry in our pockets can be painful; it makes me curious about the awful truths they carry that cause them to tell much bigger ones, lies so enormous that they obscure the very essence of their lives: home, family, youth, God, dreams. “Judge not,” we are commanded, yet judge we do, daily, as a matter of sanity and, sometimes, survival. Opening oneself to Chaos is dangerous, which is a reason, I think, that so many of us look the other way. I felt that dark side, too, even from where I stood, feet planted firmly on the workaday sidewalks of Salt Lake City, with only a toe or two temporarily in their murky worlds.

A SMALL BEGINNING

Saturday, 8 April 2006, 1:45 p.m., Main Street, in front of Sam Weller’s Zion Bookstore. I am approached by a young man with a pale beard and the long, mournful face of an Orthodox saint. He is shabby and dirty and takes small, hesitant steps in my direction. Softly and apologetically he asks for a dollar, and I agree if he’ll talk with me for a few minutes. We sit at a sidewalk table, and he immediately says, “Some of us are just hungry, that’s all. We’re not scammers; we’re not trying to get over. We’re just hungry.” He thinks for a minute then says, “All I need is a pair of work boots, and I can go back to work.”

He tells me that he gets enough Social Security to pay rent, gas, and electric, but there’s nothing left after that. I ask how he got to Salt Lake City. “My parents live here.” Why don’t you live with them? “I smoke.” Are they Mormon? “They’re

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“Those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honor . . . ” —I CORINTHIANS 12:22–23
Different places.

"You swallow a lot of pride, some people are real helpful." Drugs & Alcohol? She gives me a sly glance and drops her eyes but denies everything. I think I see meth in her skin and eyes but do not challenge her. What will you tell me about your life? ‘I’m just a plain, simple person, you know, and sometimes I don’t understand why there is so much greed and hatred. There’s a lot of kind hearts out there, though.’ I ask if she is ever mistaken for a prostitute? She is briefly taken aback, but then says, “No, not really.”

When she speaks, I see that her teeth are crooked and in desperate need of hygiene. She won’t keep them for long like this. I ask her, How will your life come together? She says, “I’m going to Welfare Square to see if I can make some connections. I’m just a simple person.” What name would you like me to use in my story? She thinks for a few seconds and says, “Heather. I’ve always liked that name.” She says it so sadly that I wonder about the family she left in Ohio, about the protections and tyrannies it offered that she could no longer endure. I give her the dollar I promised.

Sunday, 9 April 2006, 11:19 a.m., Main Street. Too cool in the shadows, too warm in the sun. I am again across the street from Sam Weller’s, watching people on the large TRAX landing. In my bag, along with my laptop, cell phone, tablets, books, and food is the book Charles Darwin and the Great Bird Continent—The Importance of Everything and Other Lessons from Darwin’s Lost Notebooks by Lyanda Lynn Haupt. She purports to illustrate how Darwin eventually trained himself to notice the tiniest details, how he learned that nothing was unimportant, how he crawled in the mud for half a day to observe a small bird. He approached his ornithological work with little formal training and few preconceptions, though at the beginning attempted to overlay what training he had on the things he saw.

I have to urinate badly and wonder where my subjects urinate. Automatically I think of something I need or want to buy that will provide a plausible pretext for using a men’s room. What if I had no money, if I’d just drifted into town with a bulky pack, an empty stomach, and a full bladder or worse—where would I go?

I choose a Starbucks at 200 South & State. I’ve walked all over Salt Lake this morning, so I figure a bagel with cream cheese won’t hurt me—a concern I imagine to be unimaginable to someone who does not eat regularly. The men’s room, which adjoins the Marriott hotel, is luxurious.

I will see if “Heather” has resumed her post at North Temple & Main. I called a friend last night, a journalism professor at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, and I told him about this woman, dividing the well-dressed Saints like Moses at the Red Sea but with a little cardboard sign and a face that will soon look like an old boot. He asks, “What did the sign say?” Not having read it, I cannot answer. How could I have missed something so obvious? I want to find her today and read it. I want to ask where she stayed last night and what she’s eaten since I talked with her. I will ask about her “husband” and, once again, where she’s from, the family from which she has apparently fled, the tale entire of shipwreck and ruin.
WHAT IF I HAD NO MONEY, IF I’D just drifted into town with a bulky pack, an empty stomach, and a full bladder or worse—where would I go?

12:04 p.m., 50 South Main. A busker has set up shop in front of Key Bank. He has brought a variety of wooden flutes, a generator, microphone, amp, speakers, taped accompaniment. He plays songs lovely and sad from an area I guess to be Andean South America. Thirty feet away, near the entrance to Crossroads Plaza, a man sets his white hat on the ground and dances around it, gracelessly, unselfconsciously. I watch from the other side of Main, hearing also the soft whir of the generator. I count my dollars to see if I can give him one and maybe ask about his music, but he leaves everything, even his small pail of money, and walks into Crossroads.

“Shane” suddenly shuffles by, and I call out to him. He doesn’t recognize me. Do you want to continue our conversation from yesterday? Now he remembers but says he doesn’t really have a minute right now, maybe some other time.

The flutist returns, and I head north.

12:22 p.m., North Temple & Main. “Heather” is not there, but I see a woman obviously panhandling at the more westerly Temple Square entrance and walk over to see if it’s her. It is not, but she asks me for money; and I say, Sure, if you’ll talk with me for a moment. She eyes me suspiciously and says no, she won’t talk; she doesn’t want anyone to feel sorry for her. I tell her I won’t use her name, I won’t record her, but I need to write a few things down, would that be OK? She considers this for a moment, and then I make the mistake of asking her again. She walks quickly east, finds a spot on the Temple Square wall and presses her face to it, excluding me. Her hair, I have noticed, is clean and combed, and she’s obviously well-fed, though her face is sunburned.

I enter Temple Square to find a place to sit and record what I have seen. Female missionaries from Sacramento and the Philippines approach me. I ask them about Street People and if they receive special training to deal with them. No special training, they say. The American checks out my shoes; it’s obvious she’s deciding if I’m on the street myself. I ask the sister from the Philippines if she’s from Manila? “No.” She pronounces the name of another city. I don’t know where that is, I say, apparently giving the impression that I am personally familiar with the country. “Have you been to the Philippines?” No, but I have friends there. This is a terrible lie that I can’t really explain.

I walk south through the Square, and when I emerge onto
South Temple I am directly confronted by a man dressed head-
to-toe in black who asks if I can help with a dollar. I ask if he
can help with an interview, and he readily consents, even to
recording. He tells me he's 58 and from Hell's Kitchen. He
came to Utah with Green Construction and worked eight
years. A crane hit him in the back, and he sustained damage to
both back and hip; he's had surgery. He is disabled and does
not work. Not a veteran. He lives beneath a railroad bridge five
or six blocks from here and prefers that to a shelter where they
"control you." He has not worked in three years and will not
work because that will screw up the Social Security for which
he is applying. They turn you down three times, he says, but
he will get it eventually.

How do you deal with the looks and pity out here, I ask.

"Don't pay no attention to them."

Is it embarrassing for you to stand here and ask for money?

"No. If I don't ask, I'm going to starve to death." He men-
tions the Bishop's Storehouse and Brigham Center: "They help
so many, but they can't help everybody."

I ask him about drugs and alcohol, and he says no. I ask
him about family, and he says he's the last.

Where do you see yourself in five or ten years?

"Hopefully somewhere retired, you know."

He says he sees a doctor twice a month for pain medication.

He gets a little help from PCN, an insurance company that
pays for meds and visits.

Living on the street?

"It's rough. No easy task. Mormons are helpful. There's good
Mormons and bad. That's all I'm asking for—to survive. Some
people don't care about themselves, but I do."

He was not obviously mentally ill. He spoke clearly,
thoughtfully, and pointedly. I gave him a dollar.

I walk back inside Temple Square, through the iron gates
which to Street People may as well lead to Kathmandu—a
whole new world, amazingly, only a few feet away. A mature
sister in pink sits in the visitor's booth while her husband in a
dark business suit patrols nearby. I ask her about the beings
across the fence with their hands out, and she tells me about
professionals for whom begging is a choice or a lifestyle. I
wonder at the divide that separates the godly from the dis-
carded. What good things could they bring into each other's
lives? To the Saints, perhaps a bit of humility and perspective,
not to mention a dose of reality on the notions of choice and
free will; to the homeless, examples of industry and material
success and some idea of the attitudes required to negotiate the
world—a kind of "Bring a Bum to Work" program, have and
have-nots, side-by-side in Zion.

I retrace my steps and walk north through the square. I
emerge back onto North Temple at 1:25 p.m., and at the inter-
section with Main I see a large man and tiny decept woman
sitting close together on the low wall of a flower bed. He has
his arm around her and in front of them has placed a small
metal bowl for donations; in front of that are three orange
pharmacy bottles with white lids. His cardboard sign: Homeless
& Disabled, Need Medicine, God Bless.

Regarding them a few feet away, a brown couple watches
and confers in whispers. The woman approaches them and
drops a few coins into the bowl. I ask them why they have
given money, and the man looks at me like I can't see daylight.
He motions to them with his hand. "They need medicine!" I
ask where he and his wife are from, and he says Peru. Are there
street people in Peru? Yes, he says, many, especially in Lima.

I walk over to the man and woman with the sign, bottles,
and bowl and ask if they will talk with me. The man refuses
outright, his emphatic response precluding any possibility of
negotiation. I deposit a few coins in the bowl and walk away.
Not quite sure what I'm seeing, I circle around and walk by
them again and hear the small woman declare in a loud voice,
"I swearrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr to the Lord Jesusuuss."

Again I retrace my steps, south through Temple Square (I'm
surprised security does not question my rapid back and forth)
and stop at South Temple & Main. A young man I've seen sev-
eral times begging on the first block of Main crosses the street in
front of me and turns west on South Temple. I consider chasing
him for an interview but decide, for no good reason, against it.
I watch him walk west on South Temple and stop a woman
coming the other way. She reaches into her purse and gives him
something, then continues in my direction. He disappears,
walking steadily west along the tall gray wall of Temple Square.

As she approaches, I see she is weeping. She dabs her eyes
with a balled-up tissue, and I ask what she gave him. (I nod
my head in the young man's direction.) "I gave him twenty
dollars," she says. "I'm already broke, so it doesn't matter. I
have a husband and three beautiful daughters, and that's the
greatest blessing there is."

She supposed it was better to give her money to the shel-
ters, but she recalls her father, who seemed to have no com-
punction about giving it away on the street. When his children
asked him about this, he told them that it was his responsi-
bility to give, but it was up to the homeless how to spend it.

She wonders aloud if I am homeless, too—how could she
know if I were not? She has come from the North Visitor's
Center, where she's seen The Testaments of One Fold and One
Shepherd. She admits that her feelings were already on the sur-
face when she was approached by the young man. She says
that she has a strong belief in Christ and hopes the money will
mean something to him—she's only followed her heart.

We cross South Temple and walk south together, all the way
to the Andean busker, who is back at his post and playing full
volume. I'm going to give this guy a buck, I say. I've been list-
ening to him all morning. She says, I don't have any more
money: It's all right, I reply. I'll give him this for both of us.

She asks me to see Testaments in exchange for the interview
she has granted, and I agree.

She crosses over to ZCMI Center and disappears. I do not
feel well, something upper respiratory, but the day is so beau-
tiful I can't stay inside. I have to spit something unpleasant
coming up from my airway but resist zipping it into a flower
bed because I saw people cultivating these a few days ago,
hands in soil that I assume they assume is reasonably clean. I
wait until I come upon a tree well and discreetly shoot it
through the iron footgrates.
Choppers have been in the air for an hour or two now, and I wonder what's going on. At Main & Something, I look east and see an enormous crowd of brown people in white shirts waving American flags on State Street. The parade is moving north, and I can see neither its beginning nor its end. I meet them on State and march with them until North Temple, then run west and go north on Main. Just past the North Temple intersection, I come upon an image stenciled onto the sidewalk: the head of Lady Liberty with words beneath, Worship Me Instead.

I wait for the demonstrators on 300 North, after they have rounded the capitol and are heading back to State. A contingent of anti-illegal immigration demonstrators waits for them; a fairly heavy police presence separates the two sides. I note how vociferously, even joyously, these strong Hispanics from southern countries advocate for themselves, how they march, shout, cheer, act, work—and I realize that they are Americans indeed, far more similar to the anti-immigration protesters who want them back in Mexico, Peru, El Salvador, than to those other Americans who live on the streets and forage through trash cans and can barely negotiate TRAX without getting run over. Above and below chants and laughter, I hear them yell Spanish into cell phones, describing to someone, maybe family back home, the wonderful spectacle in Salt Lake City, of all places. They have jobs, homes, savings accounts, cell phones, cars, children in school. Their tenure on the street has been temporary. The real aliens are born right here.

I am exhausted and feeling even worse. I decide to head home and begin walking south on Main. An emaciated young man walks toward me, veers hard left and strides to the sidewalk ashtray in front of a law firm office, which he scours quickly for butts.

Trust is essential when empathy is impossible. This line comes to me as I contemplate the reasons for homelessness. The default position among the Citizens of Salt Lake, especially the Faithful, is that this condition generally, though not exclusively, occurs as the result of poor choices. This is certainly correct, but it is only the end of the story, not its beginning. Everybody makes poor choices, but most of these do not put us on the street. We’re talking about really poor choices here, the kind that, say, mentally ill people can make. But not all street people are mentally ill. Which leads me to the following musings:

SPECULATIONS ON THE CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS
or
A few conditions that result in the individual making very poor decisions:

1. Inherited schizophrenia
2. Inherited personality disorders (antisocial or borderline personality disorders, for instance) that make conformity, respect for authority, and a reasonable work ethic impossible, while at the same time rendering the person immune to the embarrassment and onus of begging
3. Interuterine exposure to drugs and alcohol
4. Parental abuse or neglect so severe that it destroys a significant portion of the ego and makes sustained effort (school, work), not to mention consistently good decisions, impossible
5. Birth into a homeless family and adoption of family norms
6. Generational poverty
7. Drug and alcohol addiction
8. Low intelligence
9. Bad luck
10. No safety net
11. # 3 & 8
12. # 4 & 7
13. #2 & 10
14. All the above
15. Without purse or scrip

SPECULATIONS ON OTHER CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS
or
What to consider as you stroll down Main discussing Product with your officemates when a foul-smelling, mumbling man with spittle dried in his beard blocks your path and demands a dollar:

1. If shutting down, instead of reforming, state asylums was a good decision
2. If believing that any kind of so-called “community-based” mental health system will serve the needs of chronically mentally ill people is a rational or even sane belief
3. If believing that any kind of drug for mental illness will be taken by the mentally ill consistently without close supervision is a rational or even sane belief
4. If believing that any kind of drug is a substitute for human touch is a rational or even sane belief
5. Why the new Salt Lake City Library on 4th South is a de facto homeless shelter first, library second

RANDOM SIGHTINGS

HERE IS SOMETHING so persistently American about a genius drinking or drugging himself to death that I sometimes wonder who I’m actually meeting on the streets of Salt Lake City—Jack Kerouac, John Coltrane, Jackson Pollock, Lost Zoroastrians, an Unknown Bringer of the Eschaton, or even one of the Three Nephites who has somehow gone astray. I try to keep an open mind.

Wednesday, 12 April 2006, 12:07 p.m., 700 East & 400 South near Starbucks. A small black man adjusts to my quick two-step and gets in my face. “Excuse me. Will you help me and my wife get something to eat for lunch?” It’s an obvious lie, but I give him some change anyway, which he accepts without thanks.
Thursday, 13 April 2006, 1:45 p.m., Broadway & Main. A large white woman approaches me: “Can you give me a dollar for some lunch?” I don’t have any money, sweetie. (A lie).

Friday, 14 April 2006, afternoon, South Temple in front of Borders Books. A man sits slumped on a planter with a sign that mentions coffee. He looks terrible, like he’s fallen out of a car or lost a fight. I bring him a cup of coffee from Borders and he thanks me. I look at him later and try to ascertain if he’s tasted the coffee. It does not look like he’s touched it.

Easter Sunday, 16 April, noon. The man and woman with the begging bowl and bottles of pills are back at North Temple & Main. Today there are only two bottles of pills instead of three.

1 p.m., State Street & 200 South. A man disengages himself from a small group and asks me if I’ll buy him a hamburger. There is a Starbucks on the corner, and I ask him if he’d like a cup of coffee. “No man, I’m hungry. A hamburger doesn’t cost that much.” Since there are no hamburgers around, I ask him if he’d like a bagel or something. “Sure, man—anything.” I buy him a blueberry scone at Starbucks, which he accepts reluctantly but gratefully.

Monday, 17 April 2006, 10:16 a.m. A big man with a large, round, red face and oxygen tubes snaking to his nostrils from somewhere on his person asks, “Can you spare a few coins?” Sorry, buddy, I don’t have any money. (A lie.) I continue walking and hear him say, “Have a nice day.”

7:45 p.m., South Temple & 500 East. “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Psalms 51:7). Spring snow and cold air have freshened the city, and I can’t stay inside. I walk west on South Temple from my home on 700 East to Temple Square. I walk into the North Visitors Center to get Saturday screening times for The Testaments. Returning east on South Temple, I see a tall, thin Native American man staggering towards me near 500 East. His is the most amazingly succinct request I have ever received: “HURTS! USED TO PLAY FOOTBALL. YOU GOT SOME PAIN PILLS?” If I’d had more presence of mind, I would have congratulated him for so entirely cutting out the middle man (money, in this case) but instead patted him on the shoulder and told him I had to go.

Tuesday, 18 April 2006, 10:30 a.m. A man with no legs sits in a wheelchair at the intersection of Main & North Temple. I’m in my car checking out this popular venue and make a note to return later on foot. I can’t see what his sign says.

1:26 p.m., 210 South & 700 East. A one-legged man on crutches with a small dog walks north. His sign hangs from his back by a string: Disabled Vet & Family Need Help.

3:40 p.m., 50 South Main. A young man with the craggy facial features one might see in pictures of Civil War soldiers, and which I associate with an independent and forceful personality, stands with a sign in front of ZCMI Center. It is neatly lettered, and parts are underlined in orange: Family Needs Help! Please; We may lose our home if too few read our plea for assistance. Standing by him is a woman and an infant in a stroller. Another woman, who appears pregnant, is crouching by a planter. All are well-groomed and neatly dressed. They unabashedly face shoppers emerging from the doors.

4:00 p.m., Main & North Temple. The man and woman with bowl and pill bottles are calling it a day and pulling up stakes. They pack their things into a suitcase with wheels and proceed rapidly south through Temple Square. I wonder if the woman is mother, wife, sister, friend.

Later on NPR, I hear that Utah’s unemployment rate is just about as low as it’s ever been. If you can walk, you can get a job.

Thursday, 20 April 2006, 10:54 a.m., the 100 block of Main. A young man in a leg brace, with blond hair bursting from beneath a blue baseball hat, shouts at me, “Spare a penny, sir?” I make a quick transaction at Key Bank and walk over to him. He tells me he’s from St. Charles, Illinois. He reeks of strong drink. He says: “I want to make a permanent residence here because I’m a Christian. Not so much that I’m scared of the End Times, but Salt Lake’s where I want to be.” What kind of problems do you have? “Right now my main problem is poverty.” Have you looked for work? “Yes.” “You can make good bucks doing this.” He taps his sign. “People get their lives together like this; that’s why the Lord allows it in Salt Lake City.”

Do you have family? “Yes, but almost all gone. A dad, I guess, in St. Charles. He’s got diabetes—so he believes.” Then what’s his real problem? “He’s got an insecure problem.”

His sign reads, Spare Change God Bless Jesus Loves You.

Drugs or alcohol? “No, no. I’m coming up on 40 myself, I use but don’t abuse.” When is the last time you had a drink? “Four months ago.” Where do you live? “Road Home, 235 South Rio Grande.”

His T-shirt: OTAKO Get your Freak On

Did you eat breakfast? “No. I’m fasting. I will be fasting Saturday. I’ll have a burrito today. I’ve gone nine days without food fourteen times. I won’t fast during Easter because I’m afraid I’m going to get crucified by the Hell’s Angels. People laugh at it, but it’s a government thing. We had a guy where I’m from, fasted 28 days. I got family in the Mafia. The government and president kicked him down a million bucks.”

I give him a dollar.

11:14 a.m. I walk up to Main & North Temple to see who’s hanging out. The legless man in the wheelchair I’d seen two days earlier from my car. He’s got an umbrella, a money can, and a sign that looks like it came from a printer: I’m grateful for any contribution that you can help me with. I am able to get treatment for my liver and diabetes. In addition to that it pays for rent and food.
A tall, lovely bride in flowing white stands nearby with people I take to be her parents. Looks like they will take or have already taken photographs on Temple Square. I give the legless man a dollar. I probably should have given her one, too.

11:17 a.m. I walk to the northwest gate of Temple Square. It is being worked by the same woman who refused to talk with me a few days before. She skulks back and forth in pink coat, blue sweat pants, backpack, but does not ask anything of me.

The day is beautifully sunny—a day for optimism and energy. It is hard for me to imagine the begging life on a day like this. I walk through Temple Square to the southwest gate, where I meet the man in black who lives under the railroad bridge. He recognizes me, and I ask him to tell me about the last few days. "I just got out of the hospital," he says, then takes a paper out of his coat pocket and waves it at me triumphantly. "It took me nine months to a year to get this—I just got approved for a colonoscopy!"

Why were you in the hospital? "I had a burr on my backbone hitting a nerve, making my leg spaz out. I was in there for three days. U of U." (He has a pink hospital bracelet around his left wrist.) Are you still under the tracks? He nods and says, "All the motels in this area want $45 a night." What about a shelter? "They won't put me in a shelter because of my condition. They don't want the responsibility." What is your condition? "It ain't very good. Just got done with throat cancer; now I got colon cancer. Now I got this burr on my nerve. Sometimes I can walk; sometimes I can't."

His speech is a little slurred, something I did not notice during our first conversation. I give him a dollar.

I think: In two hours, any of us could be swan-diving off the 90th floor. In that light, nothing at all seems like a big deal.

ON PATROL

11:45 a.m., the 100 block of Main. Please Help Anything Will Do Jesus Loves You.

This sign is held by a gray-haired woman with what appears to be all her earthly belongings piled in a baby carriage, which seems a telling feminine touch. I think you'd be hard pressed to find a homeless man with a baby carriage. I want to speak with her but someone's beat me to it.

Noon. "Excuse me sir, but would you be willing to help me with a dollar or two, please?" She is the large, baby-faced woman who hit me up a few days before near Main & Broadway. Nothing new is revealed in this encounter, and I don't have the presence of mind to ask if she'll speak with me. This is another person whose understated approach takes many by surprise. One is usually able to prepare for the Full Monte medical appliance/cardboard sign/refugee performance from half a block away, but she is upon you before you know what's happening. I glance back as she proceeds south down Main and see a Citizen hand her something.

12:04 p.m., South Temple near Borders. The man I'd purchased coffee for earlier is sitting on the same planter. Same cardboard sign. His wounds are somewhat healed. I do not offer him more coffee.
It mentions, 12:15 p.m., Temple Square, southeast gate. Man with the wheelchair with no legs.

12:12 p.m., Temple Square, northeast gate. Man in the wheelchair. I tell her that if she'll talk to me, I'll give her a buck. She refuses, and I tell her to let me know if she changes her mind. I wonder how much it will take to get her to talk.

12:15 p.m., Temple Square, southeast gate. Man with the medicine bottles, except no bottles this time—and the sign is new. It mentions, Need Medicine, but also includes Bus Short $22. He does not have the tiny woman with him but wears a heavy coat and has brought all his luggage.

12:19 p.m., Main Street, in front of Meier & Frank. Sign: Student Trying to Better Self. Female, anywhere from 30 to 50, impossible for me to tell. She agrees to talk. I ask her where she's going to school. "Eagle Gate College, three terms." What are you studying? "Medical Assistant." Where do you sleep? She motions around her, "I just find someplace warm."

She says her family disowned her because she won't talk to her mother. She won't talk to her mother because mother bad-mouthed her (presumably) ex-husband. What kind of reaction do you get out here? "Nothing, like they got blinders on, or they walk across the street to get out of my way." Claims she's LDS but does not receive help from the Church. Denies drug or alcohol use. Are you mistaken for a prostitute? "I hope not—nobody's asked, anyway." Life out here? "It's hard. I wish I had chosen for him by forces they, and likely he, are now entirely unable to influence—a lifetime of trauma, self-inflicted passions to extend their Christian love yet acutely aware, if they pass this way regularly, that this is the life he has chosen—or had chosen for him by forces they, and likely he, are now entirely unable to influence—a lifetime of trauma, self-inflicted and otherwise, coming every day with his signs, luggage, bowl, pill bottles, and sometimes his woman, to beg on Temple Square. He is pleading for medicine, a bus ticket, or food, and he sits there day after day, unsightly, in jarring juxtaposition with the comely modern female swathed in snug-knit dress and the handsome modern male in well-tailored suit. He is anachronistic even in an anachronistic city, for all the world like a beggar in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, and, I imagine, scarcely more welcome here.

Yes, the sheer unsightliness of it, which is rather the point, isn't it?—to shock us into doing something that goes against all our instincts, giving money for nothing?

3:14 p.m., at that same Starbucks. The place is full of suits. Conversations overheard: "Psychiatrists...." "He's got three of those market areas where he's got speakers coming in...."

There is a man knitting by the window. He wears a heavy coat with the hood pulled over his head, a bag between his feet. The suits closest to me: "Asset management and capital planning...." "Forecast the slow period...." I observe the variety of tasteful neckties.

I walk over to the knitting man and find a chair opposite him. He is a she, a large black woman from Long Beach, California. She is lucid, friendly, serene, and when I ask if I can talk to her for a moment, she readily agrees. I tell her I'm a writer, and she guesses I'm doing a piece on the street. "Everything's a victory," she says. "What others take for granted, I struggle for: getting the laundry done, books back to the library on time." She says she had a terrible breakdown six years ago, a psychotic episode. She is knitting a blanket and drinking coffee because this provides a focus that is calming. Her work is spread over two plush Starbucks chairs. She has family here and there but will not impose, and asks me what I think of Salt Lake City since she's not able to get a fix on the place. I ask if she'd be offended if I give her a buck or two. She shakes her head: "I don't need money."

When I walk back across the floor to my bag, I see that I've left my two cell phones out on the table. I could tell the woman that the good Citizens of Salt Lake City are honest. At any rate, they don't steal cell phones. But I don't.

The suits are gone—no one wasting time in a coffee shop with a stupid laptop. I, too, go back to work.

PATROL #2

Nothing going on at the office, so I leave early and run my route again.

4:49 p.m., Temple Square, northeast gate. Our man with the pill bottles is back on station with all his luggage but no little woman. A man in a suit passes him and stares aggressively. Passersby look long and hard or give barely a glance. Behind him, jubilant tulips erupt into April.

I wonder at the dilemma he must pose for the Saints, anxious to extend their Christian love yet acutely aware, if they pass this way regularly, that this is the life he has chosen—or had chosen for him by forces they, and likely he, are now entirely unable to influence—a lifetime of trauma, self-inflicted and otherwise, coming every day with his signs, luggage, bowl, pill bottles, and sometimes his woman, to beg on Temple Square. He is pleading for medicine, a bus ticket, or food, and he sits there day after day, unsightly, in jarring juxtaposition with the comely modern female swathed in snug-knit dress and the handsome modern male in well-tailored suit. He is anachronistic even in an anachronistic city, for all the world like a beggar in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, and, I imagine, scarcely more welcome here.

Yes, the sheer unsightliness of it, which is rather the point, isn't it?—to shock us into doing something that goes against all our instincts, giving money for nothing?

4:55 p.m., Temple Square, northwest gate. Heather! At last! Do you remember me, I ask? She looks at me for a moment and says, “The Writer.” She has a new sign—perkier, she says. It concludes with the plea, Anythang Will Help. I ask where she's been staying, "Motels." Before she saw me, I had watched her sad face, her bad teeth, holding the little sign before her. She begged with dignity, stoic and quietly determined, like the men.
in black suits with faces like masks who walk across Temple Square like little machines, making the world go round. I tell her I’ll get her a dollar or two if I can remember. I have a meeting with an old friend in Borders Books on South Temple. But I forget the money. When I remember, I ask myself, Shall I hike back down to the bank and withdraw what I’m not sure I want to give, not having an idea in the world what she’ll do with it? No, not tonight. It is so easy.

5:30 p.m., the 300 block of South Main. A woman stands on the TRAX platform hawking an ugly red necktie in a narrow little box. She continues her pitch even when there’s nobody around, turning this way and that as if to multitudes. A hobbling old man and his wife, who has false eyelashes and purple mascara and is charming, pass by; the wife gives her a few coins, and we cross the street together. They live, they say, in a condominium almost above us, and have watched this woman for twenty years. The man says it’s up to us to give, not to judge how they spend it—something I heard almost verbatim a few days earlier. I tell him about the woman in Starbucks who would take no money, and he said she’s probably DEA. Go on with your work, he says as they walk away.

**RANDOM NOTES AND SIGHTINGS**

In his book *Class—A Guide Through the American Status System*, Paul Fussell observes the similarities between the top of the Upper Class and the bottom of the Lower, a kind of proof, he believes, of the Principle That Extremes Meet—very nearly a brotherhood of pauper and king. For instance, neither is happy to have their name in the paper; neither earns their money through actual work; both carry very little cash on their persons; both are largely invisible. In Salt Lake, this odd couple is joined by the presence of Religious Elites, whose behavior in many ways mimics that of the Upper Class—and so the dynamic persists as durably in Salt Lake as in Manhattan or Chicago.

The truth of the street is revealed by its comings and goings, not by anything we say or they say. If anything, words are camouflage. I have more difficulty approaching well-dressed Citizens for interviews than I do Street People, and in conversation with Citizens, I find myself constantly editorializing, commenting on what creates and sustains life on the street. I spoke with a cop near the bike station on Main near South Temple and asked him about begging. He told me the police intervene only for aggression or potential for self-harm; the rest is protected by the First Amendment.

Saturday, 22 April 2006. A gorgeous spring day, gentle breeze, yellow sun. I walk from my parking spot on Broadway to Main and turn north. Main Street is almost empty, which I find a bit surprising. I cut through Gallivan Plaza, walk by Mark Strand’s poetry cut in rock on a path by windows: *Visions of the end may secretly seduce our thoughts like water sinking into water, air drifting into air . . . I find a bench near 200 South where white blossoms are falling from trees, drifting like snow on the dark stone. A security guard saunters over and gets around to telling me that he’s allergic to the blossoms; also, that he’s going to buy a fishing license now and tell his wife about it later. She gets upset when he spends $26 on nothing. I tell him to remind her of that the next time she gets her hair cut.

My tablet is eyed suspiciously by Citizen and Street Person alike; they wonder, I suppose, if I’m another mad Whitman or a troublemaker of the journalistic stripe.

12:57 p.m., in front of the ZCMI Center doors. A man I’ve not seen before is sitting on his bundles with a sign lettered in red and blue: *Homeless Vet Disabled Please Help God Bless You*, plus three of four characters in imitation Chinese. His expression I’ve seen only on newborns fresh from the ordeal of the birth canal. The Andean busker plays a hundred feet away, his deep melodies resonating around us and far along the sunlit urban canyon.

I cross the street to the Key Bank ATM. A woman I spoke with yesterday, the one who identified herself as a medical assistant student at Eagle Gate College, is camped on the sidewalk outside with her sign. I expect she’ll hit me up when I return with cash in hand, but she has turned her back and lets me pass unmolested.

1:05 p.m. I look across the street and see the man who wouldn’t fast on Easter because he was afraid he’d be crucified by the Hells Angels. He’s still wearing the same T-shirt and still, undoubtedly, getting his Freak on. He walks stiffly in his leg brace and stops in front of the busker. He reaches into his pocket and brings out a handful of change, which he sorts carefully, then tosses into the busker’s can. It is a sweet gesture, made all the more poignant by the sad music and the ethereal spring day. I gave this man a dollar yesterday. He crosses Main to my side of the road and proceeds south. I watch him until he disappears from my view.

1:15 p.m., near Main & South Temple. A man sits on a planter, drawing. Passersby have dropped coins into the tin box that holds his colored pencils. I ask him if he’d like to go around the corner to Borders Books for a cup of coffee, and he assents.

We sit on the second floor of the bookshop by the north windows looking over Temple Square, and he shows me his art: small precise drawings of faces, flowers, a crucifix, eyes, demons, a rose wrapped in barbed wire—pencil and pen, in subtle colors or black and white. He tells me he’s seven months from an associate degree in graphic arts at Eagle Gate College; that he’s been clean and sober for a year; that he avoids shelters and the Regis (a flophouse where many Street People live) because of the availability and temptation of drugs (he’ll always want drugs, he says, even thirty years from now); that he lives in a tent camp by the Jordan River; that he served seven years of a ten-year sentence for burglary in Arkansas (“Ninety-seven houses in three months to feed a crack habit,” he says with a hint of pride); that he has a dead father who didn’t want him and a son he wants to support. He has a mother, brother, and sister out of state he calls every week but tells none of them that he lives by a river.
He has Hepatitis C and high cholesterol (he would not put cream in his coffee) and survived prison by making tattoos for other inmates. He did this with the surreptitious support of a guard captain whose back he tattooed with the image of a dream catcher. He describes his prison machine: a needle made from the sharpened spring of a Bic lighter; barrel from a Bic pen; tip from the lighter’s fuel jet; electric motor from a cassette recorder; and six AA batteries. The guard brought him ink.

He wears a red, white, and blue bandanna with stars. He’s LDS and still a believer. He says he’s a priesthood holder and tells me about a bishop and bishop’s wife in Arkansas who visited him every week for seven years in prison. He attends a ward in Salt Lake. He says there are so many services for the homeless here that it’s almost a trap: medical, dental, and vision care (he got back surgery through the 4th Street Clinic); food stamps and soup kitchens; clothing, shelters, education (he tells me he’s taken out a Stafford Loan and Pell Grant for his college program). Life, actually, is not bad. No incentive to get off the streets? He thinks maybe not, though he says he’s embarrassed by his own situation.

Do you have a girlfriend? He laughs at me: “It’s hard enough taking care of myself.”

We walk out of Borders, past the book stands by the front door. Do you read, I ask? “I got my authors,” he replies. “James Patterson, Dean Koontz, John Grisham, Tom Clancy.” I recommend Scott Turow, and we part company.

2:05 p.m. I walk back through Temple Square to the North Visitor’s Center and pick up another schedule for The Testaments. Maybe I’ll see it tomorrow.

2:06 p.m. The Woman Who Will Not Talk With Me is back at her post, northwest gate. My ex-con friend told me to watch for her, a bishop and bishop’s wife in Arkansas who visited him every week for seven years in prison. He attends a ward in Salt Lake. He says there are so many services for the homeless here that it’s almost a trap: medical, dental, and vision care (he got back surgery through the 4th Street Clinic); food stamps and soup kitchens; clothing, shelters, education (he tells me he’s taken out a Stafford Loan and Pell Grant for his college program). Life, actually, is not bad. No incentive to get off the streets? He thinks maybe not, though he says he’s embarrassed by his own situation.

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2:06 p.m. The Woman Who Will Not Talk With Me is back at her post, northwest gate. My ex-con friend told me to watch for her husband, who, he says, observes her labors from the other side of the street, in front of the Conference Center. I don’t see anybody.

People emerging from Temple Square bump into one another in embarrassment as they negotiate their way past the crosswalk for the Conference Center. I see her hit up a family unit, speaking with the dad, a muscular man in a blue shirt. He demurs, and they cross the street. I also cross and climb the stairs by the waterfall, from which I watch her.

2:12 p.m. I begin counting the groups and individuals she approaches. Number 13, an older man in a white shirt and tie, engages her in conversation for about thirty seconds but gives her nothing. A few minutes later, Number 18 gives her some money, then nobody until Number 27, who is the blue shirt with the family, new crossing back into Temple Square. I can only imagine his thought process in the intervening minutes but bet I come pretty close.

At 12:27 p.m., I make a count: In fifteen minutes, she’s approached thirty-two individuals or groups. Two have given her money, for a success rate of almost 6 percent. I’m thinking this woman should be training the sisters from Korea, Sweden, Japan, Germany, Ghana, Mexico, and the USA who labor on the Temple grounds and whose approaches are not nearly so effective. Her simple, intense belief in the goodness and generosity (not to mention gullibility) of mankind has brought her a rate of success that is as enviable as it is deplorable but certainly a model that could be successfully superimposed on more worthy endeavors.

ANOTHER BRIEF ASIDE

MY PARENTS TAUGHT that you can’t judge a book by its cover—but there are a lot of polished, artful covers out here today. To serve God or Mammon, one’s shoes must shine and match one’s trousers. Compared with them, I look pretty bad. I wear old shorts, a Jayhawk T-Shirt, a blue baseball cap (ragged around the edges), and black Nike runners with ankle socks. I tell the Citizens I’m from Lawrence, where the University of Kansas is located, and that I’m here working and doing a story on the homeless. Clearly, many do not believe me and stiffen as they wait for me to hit them up, too. Missionaries abruptly terminate conversations. Some stare, but I stare right back, angry that I’m still embarrassed by their condescension and ignorance.

I could mention to the Citizens that William Burroughs lived the last years of his life in Lawrence and wrote most of The Western Lands there, but I’m thinking this won’t impress anybody in Salt Lake City.

2:33 p.m. A man I’ve not seen before is sitting against the corner of the wall around Temple Square, at the northeast gate. His sign is written on the blank side of a USPS 9x12 envelope:

Hungry Need Help With Bus Ticket To Sacramento CA So I Can Go Home To My Family God Will Bless You.
I ask him if he'll talk with me, but he says he doesn't want to leave the shade. I say, If you sit right there with me—I point to a section of the sidewalk planter beneath a tree—I'll give you a buck. "How about $20?" he asks. I motion to him again: Just five minutes. He asks: "$5?" I walk away and ask, Sure you don't want to talk? He reiterates: "Not for a dollar. For $20 I will."

2:42 p.m. There are brides and bridal parties all over Temple Square's warm, manicured grounds, a million blooms and the perfumes of earth—such a spectacle of culture and beauty, I think, that one might witness it only rarely on earth. This is my culture, too, and I must confess that I love it.

3:15 p.m. I surrender all of my loose change to a violin busker bravely scratching near the east crosswalk into Gallivan Plaza. Mine is the only money in the blue felt lining of his violin case.

3:17 p.m., Broadway & Main. An older woman I've not seen before speaks so softly that I ask her to repeat: "Have change you can spare?" I do not and tell her so. She walks unsteadily away, then back and forth over the same little territory.

At the same time, I watch police and paramedics work with a wizened little man who is obviously so intoxicated he's a danger to himself. Two police cars and an ambulance. A gurney has been placed on the TRAX landing. Another police car arrives, then a fire truck. Quite a response for a tiny, very drunk, gray-colored white man who looks for all the world like walking death. A woman from the fire truck joins the fray, then (if my math is correct) two more paramedics (hard to keep count). City cops, transit cops, paramedics, firemen and firewomen. Two burly cops lead him away shouting and gently push him to the hood of a cruiser where they pat him down and handcuff him. I notice his footwear: white and brown saddle shoes. Maybe something you'd wear to a wedding.

Sunday, 23 April 2006, 10:14 a.m. I breathe the otherworldliness of Salt Lake City this morning and a beat so slow you could mistake it for Savannah or Charleston if not for the cool dry air and a sky so deeply blue it is oceanic. A pair of small birds with iridescent black feathers and yellow bills traverse the grass in front of me on Gallivan Plaza, probing the roots for morsels. White blossoms from yesterday have gathered beneath my bench, mixed with leaves and the small detritus of civilization. Birdsong from all over, soft hiss of traffic in no hurry at all. My friend the security guard is across the way; I surrender all of my loose change to a violin busker bravely scratching near the east crosswalk into Gallivan Plaza. Mine is the only money in the blue felt lining of his violin case.

I follow him through Temple Square, then west on South Temple to Crossroads Plaza. He's on the south side of the street, I'm on the north. He's large and light on his feet and swivels quickly left, through the first available door and downstairs out of sight. While I'm waiting for the light to change, the Hell's Angels/crucifixion guy with the OTAKO—Get Your
Freak On T-shirt draws up beside me. He’s still limping, has his pack. So far as I can tell, this is the third day he’s worn the same shirt. He looks good, skin color actually pink today, and he does not smell of alcohol. I greet him and compliment him on his lucid condition. He mentions, none too coherently, that his leg is certainly fractured and he should stay off of it, and other things that by this point in the project I am too exhausted to remember, then announces that he’s off to The Bar. He invites me along. I regretfully decline. He does not ask for money.

I enter Crossroads and find the escalator. The bottom floor is dim and almost deserted; I can’t imagine that ice cream is for sale there. I look behind myself twice, and after walking the better part of a hundred yards, see “Mr. Heather” at a tiny stand called The Kind. I find a bench about fifty feet away, when he walks by, I greet him, and he asks, “Are you doing an article on the homeless?” Yes. I motion to the bench, and he sits down, nervous.

He is clean-shaven, clear-skinned, large, powerful, intelligent—someone who is obviously able to take care of himself. If he’d been aggressive, I’d have had my hands full. “I’ll tell you the truth,” he says, “we make more money running that sign than we’d make working for seven dollars an hour.” He decried the disparity between the incomes of the educated and uneducated; he said that even though the local shelters take in hundreds of thousands of dollars each year, they still feed the homeless rice and beans—it’s a political thing, he thinks. They live in a camp; he won’t live in a shelter. I tell him I’d half expected him to take a swing at me. He laughs and says he’s not the violent type. Those guys live at the shelters.

I ask him where he sees himself in five years. He licks his cone and shakes his head. It’s hard on her, I say, standing out there in the sun. He nods. I stupidly ask if he loves her, and he shakes his head. It’s hard on her, I say, standing out for the first time that day, and walk outside into the golden sunshine. The pretty sister from Austria and another from Honduras walks halfway down an aisle in front of us and introduces the film. The lights go down, and I unholster my tablet. These are the notes I scribbled in the dark:

- Cinematically speaking, you know you’re in trouble when Jesus looks like he’s from Amsterdam
- This struggle between faith and faithlessness
- Be thou healed, says Jesus
- Korihor: To create the best society, my young friend, one must surround himself with the best of everything
- And it’s true: The heathen are much better dressed than the faithful
- The deeply subversive message of the Christ we worship and celebrate
- The Sun God!
- Ending this project by scribbling notes in the dark: a similitude
- He ministers unto the least of these
- The great catastrophe and the young artist who repents
- His blind father who can’t see what he most wants to see until Christ literally puts his thumbs in his eyes
- The Messiah has come and He will come again

The lights go up. I fish my ragged hat out of my bag, put it on for the first time that day, and walk outside into the golden sunshine. The pretty sister from Austria and another from California ask me how I liked the film. I am polite and tell them, truly, that I have taken from the film what it was designed to impart. I walk out the northwest gate and turn east to see if “Heather” is at her post. Mercifully, she is not.

Moroni blazes in a perfect sky. How could someone like me ever measure up to such great beings who hover above our earth like silent starships? I am less than, always, and my life is colored by this, the glory of what the Saints have built against the sparkling days, a garden so beautiful it defies description. I am, like my brothers and sisters on the streets, both at home and in a strange land far from home. I look south through the gate and to the far end of Temple Square. Not a soul in sight. I am finished. I fit the tablet into the bag and, like everybody, begin again.

THE END

WRITE MY notes and check the clock: 11:51 a.m. Just enough time to hurry to the noon showing of Testaments. I use the men’s room, get lost, run up the down escalator, find a door to outside, and re-enter Temple Square.

Noon. There are three of us in the theatre. I’ve been guided there first by a sister from Austria then by one from Honduras. Both are quite attractive. The couple sitting behind me appear to be Japanese. More people enter, and two pass in the aisle behind me speaking a language I cannot identify. The sister from Honduras walks halfway down an aisle in front of us and introduces the film. The lights go down, and I unholster my tablet. These are the notes I scribbled in the dark:

- We adjust to the grim realities of a universe that giveth and taketh
- The constant renewal of religion—renewal or stagnation?

POSTSCRIPT

Tuesday, 25 April 2006, 10:30 a.m. The bedraggled little man with saddle shoes, recently arrested, hits me up at Broadway & Main. I give him nothing and may have lied to him as well. A statuesque blond with a face so smooth and impassive she could be a mannequin passes close by. She must have spent two hours putting herself together. I make a point of ignoring her. No matter, she’ll find other lookers in abundance. Even in Zion.
I am a sixth-generation Mormon, raised with very conventional Latter-day Saint views on free agency and individual responsibility. I was always especially impressed with the Second Article of Faith, setting out that “we believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression.” Mine was a very comfortable upper-class family. My father was a university professor of psychology; my mother, a government administrator. I grew up in privilege and comfort. Moderate social, political, and racial views were taught in my home. It wasn’t until I graduated from law school in 1980 and became a public defender that I began to reconsider my views on agency and sin. I fear some Mormons understand LDS teachings as implying that all human beings have unrestricted free will and the same life choices before them.

Since 1981, I have been a public defender specializing in mentally ill defendants, an interest I inherited from my father. Since 2000, I have been a public defender in metro-Atlanta with a regular felony caseload who also represents one death penalty client at a time. I handle 150–175 felons a year, people whose misdeeds range from minor drug and theft crimes up through a good many armed robberies, rapes, aggravated assaults, and murders. My case load seems to run two to four times what a lawyer in private practice would carry.

From 1990 to 2000, all I handled were death penalty cases in Florida, Texas, and Georgia. I came to death penalty work partly because mental health issues are so predominant there. Including those I have consulted on, I have worked some 75 death penalty cases in my career. More than a dozen of my clients have been executed, and some of those executions I have witnessed, including two in Texas whom I believed to be innocent.

In my death penalty work, I specialize in the punishment phase—the second part of the trial that follows after the jury has convicted the defendant and must now decide if he or she is to live or die. My job as defense counsel is to develop and present a social and psychological history of the defendant and argue the mitigation present. Preparation involves a detailed investigation of the defendant’s past. We look into everything from genetics to educational, social, psychological, institutional histories, and especially family experience.

Describing My Clients

In Dekalb County, Georgia, anyone in our 3,000-bed jail who cannot bond out will qualify to receive a county public defender. The great majority of these are simply too poor to post bond. For many, a $100 cash bond is out of reach. To qualify for court-appointed counsel, those who have bonded out must fill out a financial affidavit showing their income is below the federal poverty line.

Obvious poverty is the norm for public defender clients. Rarely do I represent someone who graduated from high school or even has a GED. A substantial number do not have permanent residences. In Atlanta, thousands of people live in motels they rent by the day or week, in small informal boarding houses, or in homeless shelters. Many bounce from one relative or acquaintance to another, moving from place to place as they wear out their welcome. Under every stretch of elevated interstate is a campsite of homeless huddled under dirty blankets or inside cardboard boxes with grocery carts holding their possessions nearby. Many simply sleep in the streets.

Very few of my clients have extended work histories, and even those who do generally are laborers with few skills. The types of employment they most often report to me are landscaping, lawn care, and construction. Many find work by flagging down contractors at the street corners where day laborers congregate. The public defender’s office has a used-clothing closet which I have to draw from for nearly all my clients’ needs.
clients’ trials. It’s rare that I represent someone who owns a suit or even a dress shirt. Most can’t even tell me their clothing sizes. The great majority are in their late teens or twenties.

One thing I notice among a good many of my clients is their very limited verbal skills. Very often, they have such limited means of expression that they have a difficult time relating information to me about their crime and their lives. They cannot explain themselves to judges. They often get very frustrated by their inability to be understood. I believe that this limited power of self-expression is directly related to the violent interpersonal conflicts for which so many of them find themselves in trouble.

We have both a culture of the poor and a culture of the comfortable in our society. Much of what I have observed as a public defender is the result of the friction created as these cultures collide.

No matter how long I do this work, I am still regularly stunned by the ignorance of some of my clients, manifested by their foolish, often self-destructive, decisions in their cases. As often as not, I am appointed to represent someone who has a lifetime of bad decision-making, and my job becomes an effort to try to get them to make rational decisions about how to handle their criminal case. It’s a tough sell. On a purely intellectual level, I feel I have insight into the forces which brought them to this point in their lives, but the reality of dealing with this client base can be frustrating and, at times, infuriating. At least once a week, I have to suppress the urge to strangle someone.

My public defender clients fall roughly into the following groupings (though there is considerable overlap, with many falling into several of these descriptions).

The Real Anti-Socials. These are the truly mean, those whom mental health professionals would likely classify as having an Anti-Social Personality Disorder. Fortunately, they are a very small slice of my client base. Generally, they do not or cannot feel empathy for other people. They do not concern themselves with the physical fear or pain, or the psychological terror, economic hardship, inconvenience, or just plain damage that they do to others. A few twisted individuals seem to take pleasure in inflicting pain and fear. It gives them a sense of power or control they don’t otherwise feel in life.

This delight in hurting others does not make them especially accomplished criminals because they get caught often with minimal effort by law enforcement. Much of their conduct is self-defeating. Usually the gain they realize, or hope to realize, for their criminal behavior is minimal: fifty-dollar armed robberies, five-hundred-dollar forged check scams, sexual assault in a world where consensual sex is easy to find.

Included in this group are those filled with rage. I see a lot of anger targeted at almost anyone they see as an authority figure or who just seems to be in their path. The more angry and defiant they are, the more likely they are to be self-destructive in their behavior. I suspect there is often a lot of self-loathing behind their anger.

Not surprisingly, this group includes some of the murderers I have defended in capital cases, but it’s a minority of them. If I had to make a mental note of the meanest people I have represented through the years, very few of them would be murderers, and in those cases, they would be the chronic, violent young men whose lives are filled with conflict and almost no meaningful relationships.

Substance Abusers. A substantial portion of those charged with drug crimes are either addicts, who are often small-time dealers simply trying to support their own habits, or the mentally ill and the damaged who are self-medicating. Many people in this category live lives of complete disaster. They are poor, have no job skills, few interpersonal skills; they have terrible diseases such as AIDS or schizophrenia with little or no treatment; they are not part of intact families, sometimes for reasons completely beyond their control; they have been raped or abused as children; they are simply overwhelmed by the challenges of life. They drown in hopelessness and see nothing but more despair in their future. Drugs and alcohol serve as an opiate to make the hours tolerable.

Another part of this subset is the mentally ill who for reasons we are still trying to understand are disabled by hallucinations, extreme anxiety, deep pits of depression, or manic episodes. The beer and the crack dampen the voices in their heads, quiet the jangled nerves, or bring sleep or stupor.

There is a much smaller group who use various illegal drugs and alcohol primarily, they say, because they enjoy the sensation, but I am rarely called upon to represent one of them. Typically, I interact only with such a user when they run over someone while under the influence.

Because of my Mormon upbringing, it has been hard for me to fully understand the pull of substance abuse. Other than minimal college experimentation in the 1960s—I did inhale—I simply have no personal experience to measure against what I learn about these clients’ lives. One addicted client described his relapse into cocaine use as his “being possessed by unclean spirits.” He had been in a faith-based treatment program and meant it literally, but it struck me as a very apt metaphor. He was one of the fortunate few with a supportive middle-class family who made sure he was admitted to a residential treatment facility.

While handling a Florida death penalty case, I first encountered the devastating condition of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and the less-often-diagnosed, and therefore more sinister, Fetal Alcohol Effects. These devastating disorders of the brain and neurological system that affect behavior result from their mother’s alcohol consumption during pregnancy. There is no cure. All of their lives, these children are disabled by conduct that occurred while they were in the womb.

The Mentally Retarded and Mentally Ill. Only rarely are criminal defendants evaluated to determine the extent of mental retardation or mental illness. Defendants can be very disadvantaged in these ways yet still be competent to stand trial. An insanity defense requires that their mental illness com-
NO ONE PRESENT HAD ANY DOUBT that their friend was in heaven with Jesus, finally relieved of his pain. The only evil recognized there was that of the mental illness that came to possess him.

Mental retardation is defined as having an IQ below 70 from childhood, in contrast to diminished capacity due to subsequent brain injury. It took the United States Supreme Court until 2002 to decide that executing the mentally retarded violated the Eighth Amendment prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment.

Mental illness is much more difficult to quantify than mental retardation, but it is present in a disabling way in a substantial portion of my clients. I had a highly publicized Americus, Georgia, client who, after more than a decade and a half of being tormented by an especially evil mental illness, psychiatrists have classified as Schizoaffective Disorder, shot to death two strangers in a Wal-Mart parking lot. In his confession to police that day, he said he sought to commit suicide by being executed in the state’s electric chair. He came to this point in spite of a very close, loving, deeply religious family that did everything they knew of to address his illness. In high school and college, he had been a football player of considerable ability, but all the while, the illness was growing at his center until it completely destroyed his ability to lead anything remotely resembling a normal life. Preceding the fatal shootings were several attempts at suicide, much strange behavior, many psychiatric hospitalizations, and a growing morbid desire to die.

A competency evaluation undertaken shortly after his arrest found him experiencing chronic depression and exhibiting a profile of people who feel unhappy, sad, and pessimistic about the future. They often feel guilty and are self-critical. Suicidal ideation is common. These individuals often feel inadequate and helpless and lack self-confidence. They tend to be socially withdrawn with poor concentration and sleep and appetite disturbances.

The state psychologists opined that such people “generally feel that it is futile to try to make improvements in themselves, in their relationships, or in any significant aspects in their lives because they have come to accept their depressive symptoms as their lot in life.” The doctors reported that they believed my client was competent to stand trial but that because of his depression he was unlikely to work with defense attorneys. They concluded with the observation: “Whether a defendant can choose to forgo a defense in order to bring about his own demise is a legal question.”

I distinctly recall my first meeting with him. He was in the Sumter County Jail shortly after his arrest for the two murders. He was so deep in depression that he could not clean himself, lift his head to look me in the eye, nor construct a
paragraph of speech. I have never seen a human being in so much agony. A great, dark presence of despair filled his space.

After months in a maximum security unit of the Central State Hospital at Milledgeville, he was declared competent to stand trial, though he was far from cured of the illness. In court, he said he still wanted to die in the electric chair, but at other times, he expressed a desire to live if he could get adequate mental health treatment. In the end, he insisted on pleading guilty and demanded that the jury sentence him to death. In dramatic testimony, he threatened the jury if they did not do so.\textsuperscript{13} Twelve citizens of the small community that once cheered him on the football field agreed and sentenced him to death.

His severe mental illness was so apparent that the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill filed a direct appeal amicus brief in the Georgia Supreme Court opposing his execution, but the court affirmed his death sentence without any meaningful discussion of his illness.\textsuperscript{14} He again changed his mind and asked lawyers to help him challenge his conviction and death sentence in the final set of appeals. Before we could mount this challenge, he hung himself with a bed sheet in his Jackson, Georgia, death row cell.\textsuperscript{15}

His funeral was held in Plains, Georgia, at a small African-American Baptist church where his family had been respected members for generations. During the two-hour service, those who knew him as a friend, family member, and local football hero spoke movingly of their experiences with him. I spoke briefly but sobbed through my remarks. No one present had any doubt that their friend was in heaven with Jesus, finally relieved of his pain. The only evil recognized there was that of the mental illness that came to possess him. I certainly felt that way.

That funeral was one of the most moving and validating days of my life. It is difficult to express the emotions I felt when, at the urging of the pastor, the congregation stood to applaud me and the other lawyers who had represented this young man.

\textit{The Inadequate.} The great majority of my public defender clients could best be described as “inadequate.” They just do not have the skills to cope in our demanding society. They have poor communication or interpersonal skills that lead them to misunderstand others and often to argue and fight when it is completely unnecessary. They are impulsive. They lash out in anger without thinking. Self-defeating outbursts in court are not uncommon. For instance, you don’t curse and insult the judge or rant at your lawyer while seeking a shorter prison sentence! They cannot analyze and understand the consequences of their conduct, thinking things through to points B, C, and D that will follow naturally from their point A behavior. It is not so much a matter of being hot-blooded—more dull and foolish. Maybe it is a matter of their just not learning from past conduct and consequences, which is a feature of mental retardation. They are easily led by vocal and stronger-willed acquaintances. 

\textit{Those from Dysfunctional Families.} Rarely do I see in the families of my clients anything which even remotely resembles the ideal set forth in the Church’s Proclamation on the Family. The norm among my clients is being raised by a mother who often is a substance abuser and/or who gravitates to abusive and predatory men or by grandmothers who often are well-intentioned but overmatched. Often it’s someone who has been shuffled around in our dreadful foster care system. Their formative years are most often dominated by arguing and violence, substance abuse, lack of economic planning and motivation, as well as a variety of ills that do not produce healthy children. They grow up in chaos. Some are runaways, growing up in the just-as-chaotic and predatory streets. They learn that they have no value as human beings, that the world is an angry and violent place, and that in order to survive, they must act accordingly. So often, they are people whom we as a society have thrown away.

Trouble with the law often seems to run in families. “A study by the U.S. Department of Justice found that about half of the nation’s inmates are parents of children under eighteen. The study also found that almost 1.5 million children had a parent in prison, an increase of more than 500,000 children since 1991.”\textsuperscript{16} I rarely ask my clients if they have relatives with criminal histories, but if the subject comes up, the answer is usually yes.

It wasn’t until I represented a Florida death row inmate who grew up as an alcoholic and heroin addict that I fully appreciated what a destructive influence battling parents can have on a child. My client was never beaten himself. He was mostly ignored while his parents drank, screamed, and threw things at each other nearly every day. He grew up to become a fragile adult with no sense of self-worth, one who could not deal with any kind of stress in his life and had to stay intoxicated to survive. He was so intoxicated at the time of the murder that he could not recall bashing in the head of a drinking companion in front of a half-dozen witnesses, for no apparent reason. This man had also been an LDS convert earlier in his life and, as far as I know, is still carried on the Church’s membership roles.

\textit{The Survivors.} Running through all these types to varying degrees are those I’ll call “the survivors.” These are the poor and unskilled who steal and burglarize to eat and to find a place to sleep. Those who sell sex to survive often have ever-present predatory “drug boys” lurking nearby, taking their prostitution earnings as payment for drugs. Survivors often take advantage of criminal opportunities they can rationalize as simply “lucky” for them. By and large these criminals do not physically hurt anyone else. Many engage in or make a living from so-called “victimless crimes.”

\textit{Women.} Women constitute a small portion of my caseload, less than one in twenty. However I have observed some noteworthy differences between them and my male clients. Some of the most pathetic, broken human beings I have ever en-
RARELY DO I SEE IN THE FAMILIES OF my clients anything which even remotely resembles the ideal set forth in the Church’s Proclamation on the Family.

countered have been female clients with histories of abusive relationships that have resulted in violent injury and severe substance abuse problems, as well as in their no longer having an intact family to turn to for support.

I have heard forensic social workers remark: “Boys act out; girls act up. That’s why boys fight and girls get pregnant.” Whereas men are more likely to lash out at the world, women tend to turn their anger against themselves. My women clients are more likely to be substance abusers or mentally ill. When I have our office social worker prepare a social history, more often than not, I find a great deal of sexual molestation and violent abuse, along with a lot of self-medicating. My own reading is that there is a lot of learned self-loathing among these women.17

Criminal lawyers often joke about the “bad boyfriend defense.” Though often said cynically, the phrase also recognizes that many women are so needy where relationships are concerned that they are vulnerable to strong personalities whom they are anxious to please. Just as many women stay in abusive relationships, many follow men into criminal acts. And even if they are minor players, they are still criminally liable under conspiracy, aider and abetter (or party to the crime), laws.

I recently represented a very pretty, personable, and smart young woman whose life contained all these shortcomings, leading her by age seventeen to come under the control of a predatory Atlanta pimp. Using false identification, she became a nude dancer at sixteen. Within a year, and pregnant, she was captured by this pimp. After months of manipulation and brutality, he ordered her to rob and murder three johns. With the help of another of the pimp’s prostitutes, she did so over a twelve-hour period. She was just shy of nineteen.

Shortly after her twentieth birthday, our team was able to save her life by working out three consecutive sentences of life without parole. As I write this, the pimp has not been prosecuted for the murders; he continued to ply his trade until finally locked up, all too briefly, on drug charges. As we pieced this client’s life together, her extreme neediness for male relationships became obvious. The whole case was a tragedy. In spite of the three murders, I still consider this woman to be one of the nicest people I have ever represented.18

Another stress in my criminal defense work involves fielding calls from girlfriends, wives, and mothers who are upset that the defendant has been accused of a crime or continues to be held on what they believe are minor matters. Usually, the defendants have lied to these women about the case against them as well as about their past criminal history. These callers have often blinded themselves to the real nature of their loved ones. Yet my clients have not authorized me to speak candidly with the people in their lives, so I often get yelled at for not being a zealous advocate by people who have very little accurate information about the situation while I have no legal way to set them straight. This is yet another aspect of the socially dysfunctional lives so many of my clients lead.

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HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME THIS WAY?

AFTER A FEW years as a public defender working with client after client with these many types of problems, I began to wonder how apparently normal babies grow into adulthood with so much anger and potential violence in them. I found some clues in the work of forensic psychologist James Garbarino, who explains in his Lost Boys how children who grow up in lives of abuse, violence, and rejection often become the angry, violent adults whom criminal defense lawyers like me are called to represent. Early in his book, Garbarino observes:

Psychiatrist Leonard Shengold called his book on the effects of severe child abuse Soul Murder. He chose this title to reflect his belief that the catastrophically abused child, subject to so much internal devastation, is driven beyond the limits of humanness. I’m not in a position to debate the theological issue of whether or not souls can die or be killed, but I do believe that Shengold’s view contains an important insight: at the very least, souls can be wounded. At the extreme of human devastation and degradation, it may well be true that the human psyche can be so terribly mutilated that the soul departs, leaving behind something else to fill the void—or perhaps just leaving an unfilled void.

From what I have seen, the more likely course of development is that when forced to live in hell, the soul withdraws, perhaps shutting itself off from the world outside in a desperate attempt at preservation. Once hidden away, it covers itself with layers of insulation. As the years pass, this protective shell may harden to the point where eventually the soul seems dormant, so out of touch with the day-to-day self has it become even to the tormented person itself [sic].

There are such individuals in our midst, although most of them seem to end up in prisons or mental institutions.19

Abandonment by a significant adult in a child’s life is also a huge issue with some individuals. Most of us gain self-esteem as we grow up valued by someone important to us. Parental abandonment is destructive to self-esteem, communicative to a child that he was abandoned because he was not worthy of parental presence. Dr. Garbarino observes that “delegitimate abandonment evokes in boys a deep shame.”20 Studies have found that “although cultures differ in how they express rejection, rejected children everywhere are at heightened risk for a host of psychological problems ranging from low self-esteem, to truncated moral development, to difficulty handling aggression and sexuality.”21 A child who has not experienced the love of a parent, or a parent figure, surely has a more difficult time experiencing and appreciating God’s love.22

Some types of abandonment are not physical but social, as when a parent simply withdraws or becomes emotionally unavailable. Mental illness, substance abuse, family violence, and the pressures of extreme poverty can all effectively remove a physically present parent from a child’s emotional life. Absent fathers are a well-known topic, but absent mothers are surprisingly common as well. Every grandmother raising a child stands in for a missing mother.

In 2003, I attended a death penalty defense lawyer’s training in Austin, Texas, that included several sessions about investigating, understanding, and presenting the often toxic lives of capital defendants to juries. One session on abandonment issues in defendants’ lives especially struck home as one recent death penalty client of mine had been rejected by his father, who frequently questioned his paternity of his son and would pop in and out of his son’s life in extremely disruptive ways. My client had an obvious inability to emotionally connect with other people and a boiling internal anger that was specifically related to his father’s behavior.

DISCUSSION

AS LATTER-DAY SAINTS, we believe in eternal progression, spiritual movement—an eternal life where our spiritual state is not static. We learn, we grow, we apply what we have learned, we move to another level. We can also backslide, but we’re always in progress, heading one way or another. But in whatever direction we’re moving, we are not acting in a vacuum.

Every spirit is individual, with an individual past, individual future, and individual character. Our past contains individual decisions, and our present is very much determined by those past decisions. This is not predestination or predetermination, but influence. We are always free agents. God gave us the ability to make choices. “Thou mayest choose for thyself” (Moses 3:17). He cannot and will not take the power of choice away from us.

We will be judged by the knowledge and experience we have when we make the choices we do. The tests are individual. There is not one big “holy GRE” where each of us takes the same examination and will be graded on a curve with spiritual percentiles.

I believe Christ’s parable of the talents is about the life we each live. God has given each of us talents—skills, blessings, burdens, and opportunities, along with disabilities, blind spots, seeming curses. They come in tangible, temporal areas, in purely spiritual domains, as well as in areas we cannot possibly imagine on this side of the veil given our limited understanding. And despite my experiences working with some of God’s most difficult children, I do not believe in a God who is angry, petty, vengeful, rigid, or even crabby. My faith is in a God who is much better than all of us. He loves us, understands our weakness, and is pulling for us to succeed. He coaches us when we will listen. He is both loving and fair. I firmly believe we are each judged by what we know, by the opportunities we were given in this life, and what we did with those blessings. If we were not blessed with certain advantages, we will not be punished for not taking advantage of them. Returning to my personal experience, at a bare min-
NOT ALL HUMAN BEINGS HAVE THE SAME range of choices; we were not born into this life as equals. I am of the opinion that those who find it easy to pass judgment on their fellows are absolutely the wrong spirits to do so.

As I write this, I don’t want this essay to be read as an argument that dangerous individuals should be set free among us. Society has a right to protect itself from dangerous people, even if they are dangerous as the result of damage completely beyond their control. I believe in a medical model under which society has a right to protect itself by quarantine from the threat these individuals represent.

For the most part, however, I think we go about the business of protecting ourselves with minimal or no humanity in our juvenile corrections and adult prison systems, which seem to be designed to appease only the cruelest among us and guided by social science models a hundred and fifty years out of date. As a society, we seem willing to invest only the slightest resources in child welfare and family support, preferring to spend much more on prisons after the terrible damage is done. And I strongly believe that the use of the death penalty on these individuals is just as depraved as these individuals are said to be.

It is my personal opinion that we will judge ourselves when we pass through the veil. I suspect the resurrection and last judgment will be a time when our minds and spirits will be cleared, when we must confront the choices we made in this mortal existence and consider them against the advantages we had. The Church’s *Gospel Principles* lesson manual includes this thought:

President John Taylor taught this truth: “[The individual] tells the story himself, and bears witness against himself. . . . That record that is written by the man himself in the tablets of his own mind—that record that cannot lie—will in that day be unfolded before God and the angels, and those who sit as judges.”

God has given me a great deal—a good family, a good mind, all the educational advantages one can have, the ability to serve and make good, gospel-directed decisions. I am not poor; I am not stupid; I am not hungry; I have never been abused; I have never suffered racism; I have never wanted for anything. I live in the wealthiest, most privileged society in the world. “For of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation” (D&C 82:3). In that context, I anticipate I will judge my own conduct harshly.

While I recognize that many of my clients have done terrible things to other people and to themselves, they have often been so disadvantaged that I can’t see their judgment being so harsh. Even with their crimes, some have risen a long way from their beginnings.

Not all human beings have the same range of choices; we were not born into this life as equals. I’m pleased when I see anyone who rises above difficult circumstances, disappointed whenever I see someone give into their challenges, surrender the fight. But one conclusion I have reached throughout this journey is that I am not prepared to judge others. The
human condition, what blessings and burdens we carry in this mortal sphere, are far too complex for my puny mind to sort through. I have enough trouble evaluating the good and bad in my own life. I am of the opinion that those who find it easy to pass judgment on their fellows are absolutely the wrong spirits to do so.

As I continue my career representing those at the bottom of society, I have a better understanding of the forces that shape their lives—even the lives of those I feel like strangling. My advocacy is especially focused on learning about their lives and presenting their biography to the judge or jury who will decide their fate. I am both uplifted and distressed by what I see in my clients’ lives. What I observe does not diminish my faith in a kind, loving, and supportive Heavenly Father who wants his children to succeed and progress spiritually no matter what they struggle with.

NOTES

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Much of this essay has grown out of years of discussions with another LDS public defender specializing in the defense of death penalty cases, Dave Davis, a member of the Tallahassee Fourth Ward in the Tallahassee Florida Stake.


3. DeKalb County is a major part of metropolitan Atlanta. It contains about 677,000 people, 54% of whom are African-American, 36% white, and 8% Hispanic. The county seat is at Decatur. Metropolitan Atlanta had 4,112,198 inhabitants according to the 2000 census, a little more than half the population of Georgia.

4. My understanding of clients with these characteristics is very much influenced by the following books: James Garbarino, Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them (New York: Anchor Books, 1999) and Donald W. Black, Bad Boys, Bad Men: Confronting Antisocial Personality Disorder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).


6. The competency issue “is not, whether the defendant can distinguish between right and wrong, but is whether he is capable at the time of the trial of understanding the nature of and object of the proceedings going on against him and rightly comprehends his own condition in reference to such proceedings, and is capable of rendering his attorneys such assistance as a proper defense demands.” Eichols v. State, 149 Ga. App. 620, 620–621, 255 S.E 2d 92 (1979).

7. Harold I. Kaplan and Benjamin J. Sadock, Synopsis of Psychiatry, 8th ed. (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1998), 1138–1139. One description of those with an IQ in this range: “By their late teens, they can acquire academic skills up to approximately the sixth-grade level. During their adult years, they usually achieve social and vocational skills adequate for minimum self-support, but may need supervision, guidance, and assistance, especially when under social and economic stress.” See Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 43. Other experts ascribe a mental age range of 8 to 11 in adults with mild mental retardation. See John W. Jacobson and James A. Mulick, Manual of Diagnosis and Professional Practice in Mental Retardation, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1997), 18. Adding to the complexity of this issue is the correlation between poverty and mental retardation. "Low socioeconomic groups seem to be over represented in cases of mild mental retardation, the significance of which is unclear. Current knowledge suggests that genetic, environment, biological, and psychological factors work additively in mental retardation." See Kaplan and Sadock, Synopsis of Psychiatry, 110.


9. Psychiatrists understand this severe mental illness to be a mixture of schizophrenia and major depression. It will include uninterrupted periods of major depression and/or a manic episode, delusions or hallucinations for at least two weeks, may include disorganized speech, grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior, flat affect, and other symptoms. These conditions must not be the result of drugs or alcohol. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed., text revised [DSM-IV-TR], at 519–523.

10. The murder victims were Mickey Bell, 56, and his wife Judy Bell, 52, of Ellaville, Georgia. Americas police described my client as a “demented person.” Christopher Sheets, “Double-murder stuns community.” Americas Times-Record, 22 June 1996, 1.

11. Statements from the court-ordered competency evaluation by Dr. Karen Bailey-Smith and Mr. Margaret Fahey, 21 October 1996, presently in the court files.


17. For insights into the lives of women defendants, I recommend Wally Lamb, ed., Couldn’t Keep It To Myself (New York: Regan Books, 2003), a collection of biographical essays by women prison inmates.


20. Ibid., 49.

21. Ibid., 50.


23. Gospel Principles (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992), 296.

“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.” —I JOHN 3:2

CHRIST IN HIS DISTRESSING DISGUISE

By Marylee Mitcham

In 1982, my husband Carl and I, with four children, moved from rural Kentucky to Brooklyn, New York, following an intense, ten-year commitment to a back-to-the-land, monastic community for families called The Families of St. Benedict. Sharing more than a hundred acres of knob land with a changing assortment of families and single people, we had the adventure of a lifetime living in close proximity to the Trappist monks at Our Lady of Gethsemani. The children of FSB all attended Catholic schools in the area that mostly served the rural poor among whom we numbered ourselves.

We were idealistic about voluntary poverty as a response to Christ, for whom material possessions were more of a hindrance than a help. “Less is more” was our spiritual motto, and we added to that the monastic motto, “Ora et Labora” (prayer and work). We prayed, worked, and practiced virtue as best we could, putting our shoulder to the wheel as we tilled by hand and built simple but imaginative houses, which had no electricity or running water for years on end.

We also practiced hospitality, which brought many blessings, but the constant Martha-like work of visitors and community activity brought me lows that mirrored the highs of prayer as I was fortunate to know it in those days. Prayer was definitely “the best part”; I even had Jesus’ word on it. Solitude and silence meant something.

Once we got to Brooklyn in 1982, we began to enter the middle class, but our sympathies were still tender toward the poor and those who suffer. We had been humbled in Kentucky, and it was good for us. Plainly there was plenty for a seeker to learn in our new neighborhood, both on the street and in school.

Some months after we got to New York, I entered nursing school at Kingsborough Community College in Manhattan Beach, and I became an R.N. in 1985. The determined action of my Catholic life intensified as I offered a different kind of hospitality to the poor and needy, those both suicidal and homicidal, in a large and very disturbing hospital environment. At that point in my life, work was where I felt most led by the presence of a vigorous Spirit, perhaps because the hospital called out for the goodness of God in its battle-like misery of the overlooked and powerless. I have never been so ethically challenged as there.

I became an R.N. in middle age for two reasons. Besides helping to send our four children to college, I wanted to fulfill a childhood dream. My mother had been an R.N. and had taught me many things that led me to respect her way of making a living. As a little girl, I always told her I was going to be a nurse, and she would gently suggest it wasn’t quite right for me. “You’re a dreamer, not a doer,” she said. It didn’t hurt my feelings at all, but until I actually became a Mormon at age forty-six, I never really understood that most LDS people are doers, and they resemble her more than they do me. In fact, because of my mother, this church was a strangely familiar place.

My mother was never active as a Mormon in my lifetime and had no interest in talking about her religious past. She once told me that she’d left the Church as a nursing student, walking out one Sunday when someone she knew was denied the sacrament. Always having a soft spot for the underdog, she had gotten mad. Although she raised me Episcopalian in order to satisfy her mother-in-law, it was my impression that she didn’t like any church very much because of her low tolerance for “hypocrites and fanatics.” Unfortunately, that phrase basically satisfied her, and I couldn’t engage her in thoughtful discussion around the subject. However, a few months before she died, she initiated a conversation to tell me she had a testimony of Jesus Christ. Needless to say, her religious life was very private, so I appreciated what she had to say all the more.

From the time she became a nurse at twenty-one until she was too ill to work ever again, she directed her attention to...
Mercy was my hidden agenda. I was hired to be swift of hand, to help the hospital process its clientele as rapidly and non-litigiously as possible.

the sick, inspiring my idealism and respect by another route. When I was four, my father, a dentist serving in North Africa after my birth, was lobotomized as a result of a World War II breakdown, so with her marriage to him, my mother always had a lot on her hands. But she was not given to self-pity. I saw her best side everywhere in Mormon women who, like her, were practical, organized, chaste, hardworking, staunch, and very caring. This made me realize later that my upbringing was in some ways Mormon (although my mother allowed me to spend whole days reading in the summer).

Mother was no mystic, but the way she cared for her hospital patients came straight from the heart, and it affected my perception of all vulnerable people. For example, I remember the time she invited a patient seriously injured in an automobile accident into our small home—my bedroom—for two or three months as she underwent rehabilitation. Blanche was very bossy, and I didn’t like her, but she stayed with us until she could walk on her own, and I was able to observe something edifying.

Another time, when I was fourteen, my mother told me she would be bringing home a dying patient for a last meal out of the hospital. In her direct, non-prudish way, Mother told me to expect this woman to smell terrible because her digestive tract was eaten up with cancer. “When she eats a cracker, it comes out her vagina.” She created a memory with that sentence! I can still picture her struggling to get the woman in her wheelchair down narrow stairs and around a corner into our garden level apartment. I dislike small talk, but because we knew what we were trying to accomplish, we made it into a girls’ night out.

The year I got my driver’s license, Mother made sure I came to the hospital after school and checked in with her in order to introduce me to a comatose teenage girl, a crash victim. That is when I began to learn that things are not always what they seem. Mother showed me how to talk to this girl, kindly and with an affectionate touch in spite of her grotesque contractions. Her intent was that I drive safely, but I picked up more than caution. For all we knew, this girl could hear us, and we should speak to her deeper presence, which was worthy of all the consideration of a conscious patient.

My own father was no longer conscious in an ordinary way, because of my mother’s attitude, I knew his situation was not shameful, only sad. Many years later, Mother divorced him in order to marry again, and she asked me to carry on the role she had played for more than twenty years. I agreed to it, and although it took some growing into, it was a blessing of major proportion. My father died in 1989, the year I became a Mormon, which was almost a decade after Mom passed. He often addressed me by her name—Phyllis—but he knew I was his daughter and liked to dance or play pool with me at the V.A. hospital in Fort Lyon, Colorado.

While nursing the dying in India, Mother Teresa of Calcutta liked to speak of them as “Christ in His distressing disguise.” By the time I became a nurse, my mother, while not a Catholic, had primed me to take a point of view like that. Actually, even before my formal training, the first person I took care of was a very old woman in full-blown dementia, a neighbor of ours in Kentucky. For two months, I sat with her for six hours every day. It was difficult, but just the job for a dreamer.

Throughout my religious life, I’ve chosen to believe that we have to get two things right as Christians: the love of God, the love of neighbor. For me, this involves seeing our neighbor as Christ sees him or, as in the case of Mother Teresa, seeing Christ in my neighbor so thoroughly disguised that without the help of the Holy Spirit, I would only see “Trouble” with which I had to lovingly deal. Even that is far from easy, and I have failed at it many times, but nothing is sweeter or emotionally more rewarding than recognizing Christ within someone. “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). Here is the stuff of testimony.

If Carl Jung is right, that “hurry is not of the Devil but is the Devil,” then the so-called healers at the New York City hospital where I began my professional work as an R.N. were in big trouble. There was no time to do anything right. If precious minutes were found, they were mostly stolen from the patients themselves, who were such examples of suffering humanity that they expected the loss as their due. And they were trained to it right away, with a good portion of verbal abuse from the staff, though every now and then, one of them would say that the emperor has no clothes, proving once again that they were only crazy, not stupid.

Yet there were some Christians serving in this shamelessly dishonest, exploitive place. Happily for me, the director of...
psychiatric nursing was one of them. She became known to me when I happened into a Mass during my lunch break one day while I was staff nurse on a rehabilitation unit. She, her husband, and their young adopted daughter were presenting the hospital chapel with its own statue of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in thanksgiving for a miracle. This successful administrator, herself a middle-aged R.N., had prayed to Mother Seton on her feast day for a second child to adopt. And a year to the day later, these believing people were bringing him home. Let the world know it was a miracle! I was very moved to be present at this living crèche scene, so anomalous in that abortive environment. The memory gave me strength at work.

Why did I become a nurse? To do good and also earn money? To earn money and also do good? I was getting paid for practicing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, which as a Christian I must practice whether I get paid or not. Actually, mercy was my hidden agenda. I was hired to be swift of hand, to help the hospital process its clientele as rapidly and non-litigiously as possible. I was a mere cog in the machine.

Nursing is such a noble profession, but too often a sad one. In my unit, the staff were as spiritually needy as the patients. Before you can get to the sick themselves, you have this enormous stumbling block of burned-out caretakers who eat too much, smoke too much, and generally operate as though everything, including the patients, is the last straw. Partly this is style, partly self-defense. It’s a lot of things that are understandable, but it’s not therapeutic. On the contrary, it’s self-destructive as hell. Why do they do this to themselves? For money? Certainly their idea of treating themselves well seemed to revolve around getting more of the stuff. If they stayed at home, I was told, they only watched T.V. They seemed to have no inner life of which they were yet aware.

Finally and most important in all this are the patients themselves. It is not easy to romanticize a flighty, manipulative teenager four months pregnant who has stabbed herself in the belly with a kitchen knife to test her boyfriend’s love. Or an elderly and likable con man who has continued, even after years of therapy, to “talk the talk” rather than “walk the walk.” These were my borderline patients (often heavily into drugs), the ones whose syntax was still easily understood but whose lives appeared shattered. I didn’t know how to help these people—because I had not fully learned to avoid judging them. In a sense, it was they who helped me, by affording me the opportunity of this insight.

Then there were other patients—some of them deeply delusional and helpless—who shone with meaning, who were like Gospel parables brought to life, who were so transparent in their response to kindness or its opposite that it was easy to see Christ in them. It was sometimes possible to help these people in small ways. I think of one woman who said she couldn’t sleep in her bed any more because someone had practiced Voodoo in her room, causing waves of heat to em-
I had gotten there. Our priest served as chaplain for all faiths Rockview State Prison for men that I'd begun as soon as we Catholic past through a ministry to inmates at nearby SEPTEMBER 2006 PAGE 43 person might well be Christ handing me the only thing that came to me and shyly gave me a button "for good luck," that what little self they had in an attempt to connect with you. you were on their side; they were often brave enough to risk seen as the issue, although patients themselves knew when be called "obsessive compulsive." Helping people was not nourished if you will; yet, to take "extra care" at work was to the other direction to avoid me. I was heartened, spiritually another patient's shoes. "Thanks a lot," I said, shivering at the sound of his voice. I told him the drug. "How many mil-igrams?" My answer apparently satisfied him because he said "All right" and went back to an uncomfortable rigidity. We had begun to relate. A few days later, I actually saw him tying another patient's shoes. "Thanks a lot," I said, shivering at the sight. "That's a good thing to do." He didn't whip his head in the other direction to avoid me. I was heartened, spiritually nourished if you will; yet, to take "extra care" at work was to be called "obessive compulsive." Helping people was not seen as the issue, although patients themselves knew when you were on their side; they were often brave enough to risk what little self they had in an attempt to connect with you. But what did we really know about them? If someone came to me and shyly gave me a button "for good luck," that person might well be Christ handing me the only thing that matters. Things are not what they seem. In a mental ward, they are twice not what they seem.

In 1988, CARL was offered a visiting professorship in Puerto Rico, so we left Brooklyn for good. I felt we had stayed too long in terms of how spoiled we were by all the fine things life has to tempt one with, plus our children were all out of high school, so it was a good time to move on. After that year in Puerto Rico, my enterprising husband got an offer that was permanent, which took us to State College, Pennsylvania. There I again began work as a nurse—this time at a privately owned hospital where I was the only R.N. on the evening shift in an Adolescent II unit, meaning my patients were addicted to a substance on top of their diagnosed psychiatric illness.

Naturally I brought my Christianity with me. I wasn't fighting my own demons so much as I was listening to theirs, whose foul and abusive language called for a strong but compassionate heart capable of handling the grief of so many, so young, so lost. Within ten months of moving to Pennsylvania, I'd converted to Mormonism, But I remained connected to my Catholic past through a ministry to inmates at nearby Rockview State Prison for men that I'd begun as soon as we had gotten there. Our priest served as chaplain for all faiths there and had asked for the help of his parishioners because he wanted to give the inmates a sense of belonging to the wider community. That ministry turned out to be an easy segue for someone in my line of work, where there were many rules and locked units. Besides, I was used to visiting my father in VA. hospitals that were nothing if not institutional in character. Carl was a willing participant, too, bringing an energy and optimism over and above mine.

One of the reasons I kept up this ministry after my conversion to Mormonism was at the request of my former priest, who asked me to continue attending his prison service because there was a young LDS inmate he hoped I would mentor. Roy (not his real name) had been in prison since a teen, with years more of incarceration ahead of him. The rest of his siblings, I was told, had served or were currently serving LDS missions. Because there was no family nearby, my ex-priest was afraid this man would convert to Catholicism by default, to become part of a group for which he had no real feeling. After many hours of prayer, this priest had decided Roy should remain the Mormon he identified himself as being, in spite of his excommunication. The local leadership was not authorized, at least at that time, to keep in touch with him inside the prison.

So one of my first acts of service as a Mormon was to sit every month inside a prison with a sweet, handsome, chain-smoking inmate who had shot to death both of his Latter-day Saint parents while in a rage and under the influence of drugs. He told me this himself. I wasn't afraid of him, but the general environment felt dangerous. After the others had finished Mass, Roy and I joined them and headed for breakfast with the general population who did not choose to attend church. That dining hall always felt to me like barely contained chaos, but sitting glued to my husband helped.

I will take one particular memory to my grave. It was a Mother's Day celebration in which actual and surrogate mothers were presented potted plants of flowers by their sons. Roy asked me to be his mother. I almost couldn't fathom the situation. When he walked past the altar and I walked toward him from the aisle, I felt congested with the irony of it, but as I accepted the flowers and leaned forward to thank him, I whispered words pounding in my heart. "Son, your mother wants you to know she forgives you."

What form of spirituality was I using—Catholic or Mormon? It was the compassion of Jesus, who extends it to me directly so that I may extend it to others. Did I know his mother forgave him? My ex-priest told me Roy had a wonderful and forgiving family. Yes, my mother's heart knew it, and Heavenly Father brought me the opportunity, I suppose, in all its blended glory. One can go about His business so freely. It's in the air we breathe, which constantly restores us and moves us closer to Zion.

To comment on this article or read comments by others, please visit the Sunstone blog: www.SunstoneBlog.com.
RUDEN HAD NO TROUBLE sleeping at night, however hot and airless the house in August. Which some people might find strange since they wouldn’t think he hustled enough during the day to tire. But they couldn’t know how tiring his days were. Still, at night, the traffic on Circle Drive, two blocks away, and the noise from the bar around the corner, however rackete, didn’t jostle his steady, naked doze.

Even so, whenever Ian John came in, however quietly he moved in his stocking feet, as irregular as his dark hours were, Bruden’s eyes snapped open. The kitchen door would barely scrape the worn linoleum. The soles of Ian John’s feet would whisper by Bruden’s door, slip inaudibly past Wolfgang’s across the way. Scarcely a sound from the large bedroom Ian John had claimed—the only room in the house with a mattress on a bed-frame, a queen-size at that. Then, assured that Ian John had settled, sleep fell on Bruden again.

At first, Wolfgang had slept in the big room—after all, the house was his—but within a week of moving in, Ian John had suckered him out of it.

Tonight, Ian John stopped at Bruden’s door.

No word from the full boyish lips.

In the street light from outside, Bruden could see how spruce he looked. Like he’d stepped out of the Bessborough Hotel.

“What you want, man?” Bruden finally asked.

“I want some help. It’s heavy.”

Most of the stuff Ian John brought in was light—fishing equipment, leather clothing, air compressors, tools—or else for something like a big TV or filing cabinet, there was a dolly.

“A love seat. It’s awkward.”

As Bruden pulled on his faded trousers, Ian John said, “We could be partners, you know. I told you before.”

Bruden didn’t answer. Though he’d heard it before, he didn’t want to huddle too close to Ian John and his trespasses—his girls and loot and secrets. You’d never learn all Ian John’s secrets, and unless you did, you could never stand up to him, never be a full-fledged partner.

In the dark, Bruden made himself look into Ian John’s pale eyes. He shrugged his bare shoulders—no comment—at the renewed proposition and grinned what he knew was a sheepish grin. The less you said to Ian John, the less you committed.

Ian John wanted the love seat in the house instead of the garage with the padlocked double doors. They bumped the wall of the hallway twice on the way to the living room, almost upset a pile of wooden picture frames outside Wolfgang’s door.

“He won’t wake,” said Ian John. “He takes pills.”

They placed the love seat in a corner of the living room. Now he could watch TV in comfort, Ian John said. Though Bruden seldom saw him watching, seldom saw him in the house.

As Bruden turned, Ian John said, “Partners, man. Healthy ones. I could give you thirty percent.”

“I do okay,” said Bruden.

“Two is stronger than one. You think about it.”

NEXT DAY. HIS regular spot.

What should he think?

“No, I won’t give you money,” the man said, though he spoke in a pleasant manner with a pleasant smile in a pleasant healthy face.

Bruden watched a street-corner breeze lace thin hair. Usually, “Any change?” was all he could get out before the person crossed the street to enter the mall. But often enough, often enough to make it worth his hours out here, two or three times in the day, someone would slip him coins. Now, with a

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loenie—a one dollar coin—in circulation, sums increased. Pretty soon the two-dollar coin would be out.

(Think of that, Ian John.)

“But,” continued the man with his smile, “I’ll take you home and give you a meal. My wife cooks well. I don’t do bad either, for that matter.”

Bruden didn’t blink. “You think I’m asking for a handout.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Some people don’t approve of handouts. They say people should help themselves.”

“I’m willing to help you,” the man said.

“But no handout.”

“Not from me.”

Bruden—a thin-faced man with pale disheveled hair, straight and loose, some of it hanging over his forehead—said, “I guess I’ll take you up on it.”

“My car’s in the lot,” said the man. “I got off work early today. I work at furniture in Sears. Salary and commission. I worked late last night so I can take off early today.” He pointed up an alley. “My car’s in this lot.”

The car was an old-style luxury model. A Buick maybe. A crack ran across the passenger side of the windshield. But Bruden knew the man had never bought the car new. First of all, he wasn’t old enough to have afforded it when it was new. Second, his twisted tie and wrinkled white shirt didn’t go with a new car such as this one would have been. The tie and shirt went with the way it was now—used, unwashed.

“Dog hairs on the back seat,” said the man. “The dog’s dead, but we haven’t gotten rid of the dog hairs yet. My wife’s car is cleaner. You can toss those empty bags on the back seat.”

His wife’s car might be cleaner, Bruden decided, gathering up the garbage, but it wouldn’t hold any more promise than the four-door Buick. Hers would be an economy model more than likely, maybe foreign compact. Something for her to zip up an alley. “My car’s in this lot.”

As Horace began to tell it, Bruden said, “Yeah, I know it.”

“What’s that?”

“Good Samaritan,” said Horace.

“You know the story.”

As Horace began to tell it, Bruden said, “Yeah, I know it.”

“Sometimes you might be walking the road, healthy as can be. Other times, you might be in the ditch. So you do what you can when you can.”

“Good Samaritan,” said Horace.

“Not trying to offend,” said Horace.

“Some people don’t approve of handouts. They say people should help themselves.”

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“Sometimes you might be walking the road, healthy as can be. Other times, you might be in the ditch. So you do what you can when you can.”

“I guess I’m in the ditch.”

“Not trying to offend,” said Horace.

Bruden stared through the windshield at the traffic. He felt no offense, but he didn’t say so. He hoped Wolfgang would pay his taxes. Life’s a ten-cent magazine, and if you’ve only got a nickel, you go with the nickel.

“Got any music?” he said.

“Sorry,” said Horace and turned the knob on the car radio.

“Where you passing through from?”

“Edmonton.”

“I have a sister there,” said Horace.

“Me, too.”

“That right?”

“Another one in San Diego—and one in Thunder Bay. Then there’s one that lives outside Toronto—” The pictures kept flashing in Bruden’s head. But he stopped. They weren’t real
pictures. They were games. He had no sisters. He didn’t mind games. But you had to be credible with people. He added, “The last one lives in northern Idaho the last I heard. Haven’t seen her since I was a kid, not after she run away from home. She stays in touch with the sister in Edmonton—off and on.”

That was enough. He rubbed his fingers on his jeans, then the palms of his hands.

Horace had turned the car into a residential area, older frame houses with some large Manchurian elm trees. Some of the houses were narrow and two-story. Most were one story:

It looked to Bruden like Horace’s neighborhood as much as the old Buick looked like Horace’s car.

“Woozie and I have three children—”

“Woozie?”

“Her name’s Claire. But people call her Woozie.”

“What does she call you?”

“Horace.”

“Oh.”

Horace laughed. “It’s just Woozie—what her father and mother called her. I was always Horace.”

“That is good, isn’t it,” said Bruden as Horace came to a stop before one of the two-story houses.

“What is?”

“I don’t know. That you got Woozie. That her name is Woozie. That you got three kids.”

“Sid is the only one at home.”

“Sid and Woozie.”

Horace unbuckled his seatbelt. “His sisters have their own families. Sid was our accident. An afterthought. He’s in high school.”

The street was narrow, the houses across the way seeming close-up, as close-up as the two-story house with the glassed-in porch and the lawn that needed mowing.

Bruden said, “Maybe you should show me where the lawn-mower is.”

Horace took him seriously. “No, no. I invited you to supper—”

“Don’t want any handout.”

“An invitation to supper,” said Horace. “Fair and square.”

At the top of the front steps, Bruden found the glassed-in porch warm from the sun. A folded newspaper lay on one of the wicker chairs. A bag of fertilizer and a bag of peat moss, both opened, stood in one corner. Bruden left his shoes beside Horace’s outside the door. Horace’s shoes must smell, too. For sure, Bruden’s wingtips weren’t giving off all the stink.

As he followed Horace into the living room, stairs on the right next to a coat closet, he saw a room that matched the picture he’d already made in his head. What Ian John might notice. The couch, the chair that went with it, were possibly second-hand, maybe gotten from a relative, and had held up under a lot of butts, all shapes and sizes. The cushions’ dark floral pattern had faded too deep to show much anymore. The throw rugs on the floor, throw rugs on top of an oatmeal-colored wall-to-wall, were dark, too. Bruden could tell from the feel of the place—like the doors had been closed since morning—that no one else had been home all day.

“Woozie at work?”

“At the school board,” said Horace. “Something to drink?”

Bruden would have liked a beer, but he shook his head when Horace said, “I could mix up some lemonade. No problem.” Then he said, “I better call Woozie.”

Bruden couldn’t get a picture of Woozie, not even when he heard Horace saying, “Yeah, it’s like the last time, Woozie. It will all work out.” Silence on Woozie’s behalf. “Well, hon, it’s better than a handout. He even offered to mow the lawn.”

Horace appeared around the door. “Woozie told me to put potatoes in the oven. Why don’t you relax?”

Looking about from the chair he eased himself into, Bruden decided this was how the house of his sister in Edmonton would look. Over the fireplace was a colored photograph of a church-looking building. A big one. To its side was a framed photograph of three men. No surprise that Woozie and Horace were churchgoers.

Someone close at hand had drawn the framed picture above the couch, he decided, crouched figures with faces distorted like those in a cartoon except the faces were frightened, not funny. It was the Tower of Babel, he thought, and language was being confounded. His sister in Edmonton would have had mountains, maybe the Swiss Alps, from a furniture store where she bought her couch. By the front window that had lace curtains, Woozie had a table with a bowl of dry flowers on it, a big bowl with stiff blossoms.

Horace was humming in the kitchen as he scrubbed potatoes under running water.

Better than coins on the street? Ian John would say so. Wolfgang wanted to clear out his garage, but he couldn’t do it without Ian John taking care of the stuff he’d stacked there. Whenever Ian John took something out, he’d bring in something else to take its place. Computer, radio, bicycle, speakers. Best to know nothing of Ian John with his sweet smile.

Horace handed Bruden the folded newspaper. “Haven’t had a chance to read it myself. Sometimes I don’t care to know
what’s going on. Woozie thinks I’m too free and easy, not caring what’s going on. A free spirit, she calls me.”

“Because you don’t care what goes on?”

Horace grinned. “Yeah.”

Bruden noticed the bowl of shiny fruit on the dining room table. “That stuff real?” said Bruden.


After a few seconds, Horace yawned and lay back on the couch. “Don’t be upset if I doze off. Middle of the day—unless I keep moving—”

“I know the feeling.”

Horace talked a bit more. Woozie’s brother drew the picture above the couch, he said. Woozie had to stop at the store on the way home. Bruden mumbled as Horace commented. If he shifted, he could catch his own putrid odor, released from some enclosed part of his body, the sourness of his own folds and openings.

Then Horace’s eyes began to slip back into his head mid-sentence or his eyelids fluttered like they were fragile and light. Before long he was out, the couch sunken under his heavy body, his head on a pillow, his stocking feet on the upholstered arm, his mouth open.

BRUDEN LEFT THE newspaper on the chair. On the rug, his footsteps were as soundless as Ian John’s. The banana on the dining room table was wax, sure enough. In the kitchen, sunny with the afternoon light, he peeled one of the bananas from the basket there. It took him three bites, three bites that didn’t satisfy his belly. He dropped the peel in the kitchen sink, still wet from Horace’s scrubbing. He could feel the heat from the stove’s oven. A calendar on the refrigerator had days marked, notes entered. “Band practice.” “Young Men’s.” “Camp.” Sure enough, Woozie would an organized sort.

On top of the refrigerator was a quart-sized Mason jar more than half full of coins. A good supply of loonies along with quarters and dimes and pennies. The label on the jar read “Sidney’s mission.” Would Sidney miss a couple of loonies? Bruden’s long fingers caught one and then another. He replaced the jar and stared at the two coins in his hand. These were what Horace might have given him on the street, the sourness of his own folds and openings.

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The carpeted stairs creaked a couple of times, but Horace was dead to the universe.

What furniture Wolfgang had in his house was scarred by Wolfgang’s cigarettes. A table was wobbly from a fight Wolfgang had gotten into with two kids who’d broken into the house. That was one night before Ian John came and when Bruden was gone. Wolfgang’s house had an empty feel.

Because it had so much furniture, Horace’s house felt crowded. Photographs hung on one side of the upstairs hallway. Family photos. A nearly empty bookcase took up the other wall. The few books—Man’s Search for Happiness, The Miracle of Forgiveness, and others with titles like them—didn’t slow Bruden. Hardly any books did.

Behind one open doorway was Horace and Woozie’s bedroom, a large room almost filled by Horace and Woozie’s four-poster bed. It had a white spread over it and colored pillows piled against the headboard. The open drapes were white, and the walls had blue-and-green-striped wallpaper. Bruden knew he’d never have seen that, not this bedroom in his head—not the plush throw rugs, not the floor-to-ceiling mirrors on the closet doors. Hardly room in it to stroll.

He glanced in two more rooms. One on which the curtains were pulled was filled with boxes, extra chairs. In the other, a girl’s room, not lived in either, the bed was piled with clothes, with what looked like sleeping bags and tent poles.

Then, he came to Sid’s room at the end of the hall. Could have seen this one without a blink—if he’d tried. A pair of jeans and a couple of shirts tossed on a straight-back chair. A pair of rumpled jockey briefs on the floor with some athletic socks. Woozie must have made the bed. A wall closet along with a wardrobe. When he opened the wall closet, he saw a pile of junk—a discarded radio, tennis racket, baseball glove, CDs, some rolled-up posters, boxes of school paraphernalia.

Sid’s clothes hung in the wardrobe. The kind you didn’t notice because so many of the kids you saw wore them—baggy pants, baggy shirts, scuffy running shoes. You’d notice Bruden’s clothes because they were unwashed and worn. You’d notice the clothes other people wore because they were sometimes fresh and expensive get-ups. But you wouldn’t notice Sid’s clothes anymore than you would notice Horace’s. Maybe you wouldn’t notice Sid himself.

On Sid’s desk was a Bible. Not only that—an open Bible. Born again? And another one, except it was a Book of Mormon—also opened.

On his walls, Sid had posters. No rock musicians like Bruden would have seen if he’d formed anything in his head, but animals—a purple hippopotamus, some penguins, a wise-looking elephant—saying things you were supposed to laugh at. Maybe Sid was a boy who needed to laugh. Maybe he was a boy who laughed too much.

Bruden took up the discarded jeans from the chair. At first, they felt as though they might have something in the pockets, but a search with his thin fingers found him nothing.

“How are you? What are you doing here?”

Bruden didn’t drop the jeans. He had no intention of showing surprise. “You’re Sid.” A big boy, taller than his father, in a loose T-shirt half way to his knees. Still, baggy as the shirt was, Sid looked strong, lithe, quick. Bruden couldn’t remember whether he’d seen an athletic trophy or not. Sid had some of his father’s features, broad-planed cheekbones, brown eyes you’d call on another occasion “earnest,” maybe well-meaning. But now startled and angry.

Be glad I’m not Ian John, he could have said. With Ian John’s strong hands and knife-clean looks. Be glad it’s only this wobbly bundle of bones and sinew called Bruden.

“Did my father bring you here?”
“Your father’s napping.”
Sid snatched his jeans. “He brought you, didn’t he? Get out of here.”
“Your father’s invited me to supper.”
“Not in my room he didn’t.”
Passing Sid with his grim jaw—No, I’m not Ian John—Bruden stopped at a couple of the photos in the hallway: Horace and Sid with—Bruden assumed—Woozie and the two sisters. He peered closely at Woozie in shorts, squinting against the sun. The Grand Canyon. The Mormon temple in Salt Lake. Disneyland.
“Get going,” said Sid. “Don’t stare.”
“Family holidays?”
“You don’t need to know about me. It’s private.”
“What’s private?”
“Our lives. Us.”
Unhurried, Sid’s breath heavy behind him, though he remained at the top of the stairs, Bruden entered the living room. Horace had scarcely twitched, hands folded on his belly. After he sat in the matching chair, when he saw that Sid had moved into the kitchen, Bruden let his head rest on the back of the chair.

He must have dozed off because next thing he heard voices in the kitchen—voices and Horace’s snoring. Woozie must be home. “I got a salmon to poach,” he heard, though Bruden knew salmon was not the subject of the conversation. The two—Woozie and Sid—spoke softly. But not so he wouldn’t hear. More like they didn’t want to wake Horace. Sid didn’t care what buddy-Bruden heard.

“But our lives are private, Mom. We’re not on TV.”
He ate half the salmon, and he could have eaten a second baked potato. “A little man like that,” he could hear Woozie tell a neighbor later. “All that sour cream.” Tomatoes and lettuce from the garden, tumbled in a salad, went down like nothing. Fresh from his nap, Horace put it away, too. “Must have dozed,” he said, as though nobody had noticed.

Bruden didn’t flinch at Sid’s scowl. The more he ignored it, the deeper it went. But that was Sid’s business.

Sid sat across the dining room table from Bruden, Horace across from Woozie. Bruden would never have formed Woozie in his head. Woozie had a round face, healthy smooth skin and dark eyes with a crackle to them, and a smile bright as a puppet’s. She was tall as Horace and as heavy, though not so heavy from the waist up. She was heavy in the hips, wide in her denim skirt, her legs wide around.

She liked her free-spirited husband, Bruden could tell, tolerating his open ways with dinner plans. She didn’t pull a face when Bruden smelled when she shook his hand, giving his fingers a good squeeze.

“I’m Woozie. And I guess you’ve met Sid.”

“Yeah, we’ve met,” said Sid.
Bruden wasn’t a talker, so he nodded. He knew that his wasn’t an eye for seeing virtues in others. By habit, he’d shape the bad. But it was hard to see right away much bad in Woozie. Not like Sid. Seeing Sid reminded him that he sent out a stink, that his clothes hadn’t been changed since . . . the last time. He saw Sids of some sort every day of his life. “We’re private,” Sid had said. “Our lives are private.”

Woozie gave him store-bought ice cream for dessert. Sid said he didn’t want any.
“You sure? It’s chocolate ripple, one of your favorites.”
“I don’t want any.”
When Woozie put a bowl in front of Bruden, Sid said, “May I be excused. I want to check my bedroom again.”
“Maybe pick up a bit, too,” called Woozie as he stomped up the stairs. “Seems like I barely look back and there is he two years old and spoiled by his sisters. Ten and twelve they were then.”
“I never look back,” said Bruden. “No future in it.”
Horace laughed. “No future in it. That’s pretty good.”
Bruden started to say he hadn’t tried to be funny. You didn’t get ahead by looking back. Pure and simple.
Woozie told Horace he’d have to remember the line next time he gave a talk at church. Horace had a fine sense of humor, she said, and was always keen for a good clean joke.
After Bruden finished his ice cream, Horace said, “Whenever you’re ready I’ll drive you back downtown—or wherever you want to go. But take your time.”
“Downtown will be fine.”
Woozie stood at the door as he and Horace put on their shoes.
“Thanks for supper,” he said. “And—” he tacked it on as an afterthought, wishing Sid were there to hear—for letting me into your privacy.”

WOLFGANG WAS SITTING on the love seat, watching a TV newscast about a break-in the night before, someone hospitalized, but he followed Bruden into his room with its unmade mattress on the floor.
He listened with wide, unblinking eyes. “You mean he just invited you home for supper—this guy you never seen?”
Bruden patted his belly, putting it on for Wolfgang, who was missing half of what should be in his head. “Just like a five-star restaurant.” He fished the coins he’d collected earlier that day from his pocket and placed them in a bowl on a chair by his pillow. He’d hide them later. His own private doings.
The walls and floor were bare in Wolfgang’s house. If only Wolfgang could get it into his head about taxes. Too heavy for his feet with three toes missing from a thirty-below night outdoors, the little man would only squint and laugh, showing which teeth were gone.
“You had salmon,” he said, “and baked potato and sour cream. And what else?”
“Make that half of the salmon all to myself.”
“Like you said.”
“Half a salmon?” Ian John was suddenly in the room from out of doors. He was that way, appearing with a phrase, slipping forward without a creak. He sank to the floor next to Wolfgang, crossing his long legs like Wolfgang. If you knew Ian John and his ways, knew the real Ian John, you’d think he’d crawled out of a dirty river somewhere. But just looking at him, not knowing him, the young man with the basketball player’s build could have been using a private swimming pool.
Ian John smiled as Bruden repeated his story. Bruden had no fear of Ian John. What he didn’t like were Ian John’s smooth face and his groomed blond hair that one of his girlfriends trimmed for him. A face that looked open and honest, and eyes—hazel, green-tinted—that would convince an unwitting listener the words coming from his mouth were God’s truth. You can trust me, buddy.
Ian John whistled. “No lie. And his wife is named Woozie? What kind of house they have?”
Bruden described the house.
“Where is it, man?”
Bruden held back a second, looking into the deeply colored eyes. Then he shrugged. “Man, I don’t remember. I get lost in them residential areas. One street’s like another.”
“You’re bullshitting me. Where’s he live?”
“Why you want to know?”
Ian John chuckled. “Don’t make me say it.”
“I don’t want you to say it. I get lost in those residential areas. That’s all.”
Ian John glanced at Wolfgang, who was understanding—maybe understanding—with an open mouth. Ian John took Bruden’s arm. “Come with me,” he said. Bruden stumbled after him into the living room. Ian John turned on a floor lamp and sat on the love seat, his legs extended before him, crossed at the ankles. He gestured Bruden to sit beside him. “Now, let’s have it again. You forget. You get lost.”
“That’s right.”
“Then where’d you meet him? This Horace? Tell me about it.”
In the darkness last night, Bruden hadn’t been able to see how new, how well cared-for, the love seat was. He ran his fingers across the smooth, patterned surface, violet and dark green, the shapes that lay between him and Ian John.
Another shrug. “You know. Here and there.”
“Here-and-there where, man? Or is that your private affair?”
Bruden traced a flower. He remembered the way Woozie had squeezed his fingers, the way Horace’s tie twisted as he dozed. He could have drawn a map to their place. But then the picture came strong inside his head: Ian John on the stairs. Not here in this house, Wolfgang’s house, but in the hallway outside Horace and Woozie’s bedroom. Inside the bedroom, one head to a pillow. One chummy body to each side of the bed, amiable and true. The red numbers on the bedside clock at 2:45 a.m.
“What’s the matter, partner?” said Ian John. “You forget that, too?”
“I guess that’s it,” Bruden said. Horace and Woozie slept soundly, full of trust. Unlike Sid. Ian John might understand Sid. But Horace and Woozie—Bruden could see the rise and fall of their breathing, steady and calm. “I don’t remember. Like I forget that, too.”
SOMETIMES REVELATION WORKS THROUGH A void. Like the day I realized that I knew next to nothing about my little brother.

It’s been said that early in my life I held baby Ronnie (number four of nine) in the hospital just a few hours after he was born. But I don’t remember the incident. In fact, my memories of Ronnie seem more constructed than recalled, dominated by a composite image my mind probably cobbled together out of pictures from my mother’s photo albums and thousands of sandy memories buried in my subconscious. Ronnie had dark brown hair and matching eyes, like my father’s. Brown in the way your grandfather’s overcoat was brown. A pliable, supple leather; warmth. The ancient and the infant. And an oval face with a hint of baby fat. A hint that never left.

But the feature attraction was Ronnie’s mouth. We called it a Cheerio mouth. A perpetual O of many interpretations. An O of concentration; reciting the sacred Om; or caught by surprise, open for a sharp intake of breath. Or perhaps an awed whistle. But always, always his mouth was a tender shape. A mussel pried from its shell.

You’d think that being in the middle of the family, Ronnie would have been buffered from life by the caring siblings around him. But he wasn’t.

One twilit evening, I followed baby Ronnie up the stairs at the back of the house. All of one year old, he was a semi-professional walker, still in early training on stair climbing. My mom called out for me to hold Ronnie’s hand as he ascended the steps. Whether overly optimistic at Ronnie’s skills, or preadolescently under-enthused in the cooperation department, I decided he could do it himself.

You have ever looked back on a particular incident and felt you could discern an intricate web of weights and pulleys wheeling away toward a foreordained outcome? It’s the type of incident that makes you wonder if guardian angels have evil twins—the distant cousins of angels of destruction—yea, even the angels of stupid, preventable, lifetime guilt-inducing accidents. Well, this was one of those incidents.

For at just that second, little Ronnie tripped, driving his
round lips and baby teeth right into the ignorant corner of a concrete step. Blood, wailing, I-told-you-so's, and a front tooth that zombified into a dull gray during the course of the night.

I stared at the ruthlessly optimistic headlines on the cover of an old Readers' Digest holding down a rowdy batch of Field and Streams. Beneath the Digest's promises of immortalizing health tips and a daring rescue story lay a picture of a ravenous trout mere milliseconds from clamping its triangular jaws onto a deftly crafted fly, its subtle steel hook glinting inside. Little Ronnie's howls stabbed out of the dentist's office. The poor kid. Only one year old and getting his tooth yanked out. All my fault.

After the sacking of Ronnie's mouth, my dad carried him into the foyer. The dentist had bestowed a complimentary toothbrush upon my little brother, a reward for courage under pliers, and he had put it to immediate use, scrubbing the toothbrush vaguely in and out of his trampled mouth, staining the new, white bristles.

And that wasn't all Ronnie had to suffer. My sister has the distinction of accidentally helping him chop his pinky off with a slam of a door. He wore a cast for months afterward, and when it emerged, his finger had a question bent forever into its neck.

Through all this, Ronnie remained Ronnie. The quiet kid in the corner, hands in pockets, watching everything with his dark eyes, lips poised.

But as I said, somehow I missed him. Perhaps I was too busy fighting with David, or playing with the baby twins, or sinking into a state of New Wave-induced teenage torpor. Or being just plain gone. Any of these things.

W E SIT ON white chairs in a white room. Giant mirrors on the walls blaze at each other, reflecting our images infinitely until, oddly, they're lost in darkness. Each of us is wearing the sacred temple clothing. White robes; green satin aprons with fig leaves embroidered thereupon, reminding us of our mortality. Slippers to keep our feet warm and the white carpet sterile.

My mom and dad are here. My brother David and his wife Veronica. My sister Julie and her fiancé Paco.

We Mormons believe that each person who has lived on the earth needs to be sealed to one another. Linking together a long chain of human beings. To be more specific, Malachi said, "He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse" (Malachi 4:6). We need the entire human race to be sealed together as one gigantic family in order to find our-shoulders. To be more specific, Malachi said, "He shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse" (Malachi 4:6). We need the entire human race to be sealed together as one gigantic family in order to find our-

I WAS SO proud of you when you went on your mission," says Ron. Yeah. He's Ron now. Twenty-four years old, father of one, divorced of one, proud leader of his own death metal band. Smoker of cigarettes. Drinker of coffee. In two words: Black Sheep. All non-jailable acts that stop a person from being a temple-worthy Mormon, Ron has committed.

During that twenty-four-year period in which I had misplaced my brother, Ron had managed to move to Spokane under a vaguely gray cloud made up of "inappropriate" music, creative leather neckwear, midnight disappearances, parent-child stresses exacerbated by Ron's idiosyncratic view of financial responsibility, and finally a brush with death. A brush, Ron says, because his thick skull managed to withstand the impact of a swinging chair ala western saloon fight. I can still see the earthworm pink scar like a dripping of wax on his forehead.

"You know, I was running around in a white shirt and tie, too," Ron says, creaming his coffee, a serpent of white coiling
into its bitter black. "When I first got up here, I sold stuff door-to-door. I'd get into this shirt and tie, strap on this huge old duffel bag full of crap, and hit every store on the street."

A piece of the world suddenly falls into place for me. I had always understood the "No Soliciting" signs on private residences, the ones we missionaries so studiously ignored ("But we're not soliciting; we're not selling anything!"), but not the ones on businesses. They were to discourage people like my brother.

"I'd sell books, toys, candy, all this stuff that they could buy and then sell at a 'huge profit.'"

"So you'd just go into these stores..."

"And I'd dump my crap on the counter and talk and talk and talk." He takes a test sip of the coffee. "Man, I was a hard sell.

I try, but I just can't picture Ron as a hard sell.

"It wasn't easy," he says. "It was totally against my personality, but I had to do it. I had to survive."

Over a plate of sausage and eggs advertising the joys of trans fats, he tells me about the time he drove a supervisor to Montana, not realizing that his supervisor was leaving his wife to hook up with another woman.

"Course, when I got home, I found out my apartment building burned down. Everything I had was gone. My posters. CDs. Guitar." Ron shrugs his shoulders after the manner of one who has ceased being surprised at the cards life pulls from its sleeves.

In fact, as they couldn't account for him for a few days, the police wondered if he had been killed in the fire.

"What did you do?"

Ron shrugs and bites off a piece of glistening sausage. "I lived on the streets."

"Holy cow!" (I have a wife who keeps me on a Sesame Street vocabulary, otherwise that quote would have been rated PG-13.)

This has been a night of revelations. My brother was (1) a hard sell, (2) presumed dead, and (3) homeless. I look at him

Why is it so hard to look? Perhaps because in the curve of the jaw, the squint of the eye, the hold of the shoulder, are sown pieces of you. There are a million filaments connecting you two, and when either of you change, there's a pull.

"Course, when I got home, I found out my apartment building burned down. Everything I had was gone. My posters. CDs. Guitar." Ron shrugs his shoulders after the manner of one who has ceased being surprised at the cards life a little harder. Though I've been staying with him for the past four days, I haven't really looked at him. I've kept my childhood image of him in front of his face all this time.

I start to piece together his new face. A wispy Zen master goatee flows from the chin, eyes the same grandfather brown, but face leaner. Lips, curling next to each other as if for warmth, still occupy only a tiny space above the chin.

"Holy cow!" (I have a wife who keeps me on a Sesame Street vocabulary, otherwise that quote would have been rated PG-13.)

This has been a night of revelations. My brother was (1) a hard sell, (2) presumed dead, and (3) homeless. I look at him..."
I set up a work light to point toward the ceiling and mount my video camera on a tripod.

“Blow them into the light,” I say. Ron thinks it’s funny, but he humors me.

I watch the smoke’s fetal ballet, its blind, prophetic paths, as it conjures its way through the viewfinder.

**Julie’s Decision To** get married is quite a revolution. Her most intimate contact with boys until now has been to bat them away with a behemoth backpack. This guy Paco must be made of strong stuff. But also, this is the first time almost the entire family has been together in a year. We’ve kind of dispersed, as modern families seem to. Thus we’ve spent countless hours during the past few days racing in the hotel pool, stumping each other with questions from Battle of the Sexes, and generally acting like little kids. Even Ron is here. He took three days off work and drove twelve hours with his girlfriend in a rented car to make the event. No small sacrifice on his part.

Our grandparents are here too. The ones from my dad’s side. And this is important. It’s important because Grandma has been working nonstop for the past six months to get herself worthy to go to the temple.

“T’ve just spent too many weddings waiting outside the temple,” she says. She wants to be a part of the family. She wants to see that marriage ordinance again. The one that bound her to her husband more than fifty years ago. The one that promises to keep her family together in heaven forever. The one Julie and Paco are just about to enter. This is a time for all of us to be together. To bind ourselves to God, and thus to each other.

**Here Have Been five weddings in our family. Ron’s was the first one out of the temple. It was one of those affairs with protocol plastered everywhere. Brief, blunt, social rituals. Giddy words flying hard and fast—that is, when the air isn’t altogether dead. You know, the way a realtor works on a “fixer-upper” for one weekend to improve its curb appeal. Ron’s future parents-in-law lived in a house surrounded by a pasture that had been flooded by a nearby river. The day before the wedding, for the heck of it, Ron and I grabbed a canoe and paddled out into the middle of the pasture.

It was one of those moments that should mark the turning point in Hallmark holiday specials. I, the straight-arrow brother, with a mission, temple marriage and legitimate child under my belt, was supposed to reach out and help Ron see the world through a different pair of glasses. Give him the motivation to turn around and make something better of his life. But somehow I misplaced the script. My missionary instincts failed me. Turns out we were just two guys sitting out in the middle of an impromptu pond.

The Hallmark camera crew packed up and went home.

For lack of a better plan, we decided to paddle to the river that had overrun its banks. A fine time to discover that Ron had never technically been in a canoe before. I was still knocking the rust off my Boy Scout skills trying to remember how to steer the
darn thing when, sensing two suckers, the current caught us.

It was fun at first, zipping along the river. I felt a certain sense of freedom and adventure. But our lack of experience caught up with us, a disturbing lack of finesse. We crashed through some overhanging bushes and saw that we were heading straight for a culvert. Maybe high enough to let the canoe through. Maybe. And double-bounced with slugs, snails, spiders, and other icky sticky things.

It was worrying.

Ron made a grab for a bush. I paddled frantically for the shore. Finally getting my chance to be a wise big brother, I cried, “We might have to jump!”

“My new boots!” Ron cried back.

The culvert sucked us closer and closer to its dark mouth. Two idiots in the same boat.

JULIE AND PACO walk toward the temple door. Hands clasped. The Portland temple is white, an arc light to the world, projecting God upon the sky. Being weird, the couple has forged the tie and dress. Instead, they have donned long white shirts that looked vaguely Muslim over their slacks. To me, they look like modern Nazarites, children of covenant. They’re travelers now. Home will soon be in each other.

I can’t quite bring myself to go in with them. Ron and his girlfriend are sitting out in his car sharing a cigarette. I toy with the idea of staying out with him. But I wonder how it would look.

From my family’s point of view, it would be suspicious, perhaps even an act of betrayal. To come all this way to participate in a once-in-a-lifetime event and then duck out at the last minute. You don’t dis God, His ordinances, the salvation of the human race, or your sister (with or without her backpack).

I don’t know how it would look from Ron’s point of view. A needless sacrifice? A brotherly gesture?

From God’s point of view?
I don’t know. I don’t know at all.

I stand at Ron’s car window, making small talk. Feeling like an idiot. I’m supposed to be in the temple. I dressed for it; I prepared for it. My family is in there.

Most of it.

Ron exhales a stream of white smoke from circled lips. It curls like a fern into the air. A breeze catches it and carries it toward me. It hits my white shirt and settles, sealing itself among the fibers.

“You’ll be here when I come out?” I ask.

“If you don’t take too long.” Ron shrugs. Then he turns and grins at me.

So I walk into the temple. I feel its weight, its buoyancy. An elderly man dressed in a white suit looks at my recommend and sends me through. Straight into the house of God.

A filament of tobacco smoke trails from my body.

FAMILY GATHERING

Aunts and cousins gather at the kitchen table with stories of extinguished tribes, repeating the life of Kitty Grasshopper, grandmother’s grandmother on my mother’s side.

Before the white men, all Shasta women had the art of tanning deerskin, scraping hair and chewing the hide out of the hides. They buried them in thin loam beneath the pines, dug them up when the time was right, and chewed again. Before she’d blunted her teeth completely, Kitty walked out of the woods and found Pierre, son of a son of an escaped Acadian.

Details surface, are contradicted across the table, or conceded as they knit their tales. They lose the thread, match colors, then carry on as if taking turns at hand work.

Back to great, great, grandpa Milo, burned out of Illinois, and Mary Ann, his eleventh wife whose mother went running from the Great Hunger, and her parents who could clearly recall the heel of Cromwell. On and on they go, weaving their way back to longboats, through ancient clan connections, to speculation on some nameless Roman girl carted off by Visigoths. The blood may run, they say, back to Moabites, Sumerians, and citizens of Ur.

They pause when someone puts on a kettle. Chewing the fat is thirsty work. And in the lull they silently assent to put away the tales until the time has come to dig them up again.

—KEN RAINES
**ANXIOUSLY ENGAGED**

**HOW TO GIVE A SACRAMENT MEETING TALK**

**AN OPEN LETTER TO CONVERTS**

By Jana Riess

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Dear New Member,

Congratulations on your recent baptism! There is so much to rejoice in, and you will be glad of your decision to join the Church. The good news is that there will be fruitful discussions and Spirit-led testimony meetings. Not to mention awesome potlucks! (You will grow to love funeral potatoes.) The bad news is that sooner or later, the bishop is going to ask you to speak in sacrament meeting.

Now you may feel intimidated by this assignment, especially if you converted from a religious tradition that has professional preaching. But the good news is that Mormons have extremely low expectations for what constitutes an acceptable sacrament meeting talk, so if you just use the following guidelines, everything will go swimmingly. In fact, unless you or the bishop reveals it, I guarantee that no one will guess that you haven't been a member your whole life!

**BEFORE YOU GIVE YOUR TALK:**

1. **Behave appropriately when you receive the call.** A member of your bishopric will either corner you in a hallway between meetings or call you on the phone to extend the call to speak—usually for the following Sunday. Whatever you do, don’t sound excited or enthusiastic. Real Mormons always act as though they would rather have a root canal that day, and I know you want to start behaving like a birthright Latter-day Saint. Sounding too eager might scare your bishop, who may be elderly, under a good deal of pressure, and prone to stroke. Don’t be the reason he has one.

2. **Know your assignment as a talk and not a sermon.** Sermons require serious preparation, forethought, and study. A Mormon talk mainly requires that you show up. So don’t be frightened! You want to hastily assemble a few things the night before, but other than that, you can basically cruise through the week.

3. **The night before the talk, gather the following items:**
   - A dictionary: You will need this to orally define whatever topic the bishop has given you. This is necessary even if the topic seems self-evident, such as “family” or “service.”
   - Some printouts from the Internet. You will need at least two long quotations from general authorities (preferably living ones) and one inspiring urban legend of uncertain provenance. Check out the resources at www.snopes.com.
   - Your scriptures. What’s important to remember, especially if you have converted from a Protestant faith tradition, is that these scriptures are mostly window dressing. You will want to choose two short verses that seem to shore up what you will say about your topic. Be sure to keep them brief.

   Excellent! Now that you are so well prepared, I know that you will give an outstanding Mormon talk.

**GIVING THE TALK ITSELF**

Here are a few other elements to keep in mind so that your talk will blend in well with all the others that day.

1. Begin by explaining where you were and what you were doing when you got the call to speak. This should take up at least two minutes of your time. Since you are a new convert, your assigned time for speaking is unlikely to exceed ten minutes (and if you happen to be female, this may be the longest amount of time you will ever be given to speak), so you have just filled 20 percent of your allotted time—all with no preparation! Fantastic!

2. **Segue into a profuse apology, explaining that you are unworthy of the call to speak.** You can spend another two minutes (longer if you are a woman) apologizing for your many inadequacies as a communicator. Emphasize that your hands are sweating and your knees are wobbly. To break the tension, you might tell a joke that is wholly unrelated to your assigned topic. Conclude this portion of your talk by telling the congregation just how much you’ve learned since 11:58 last night when you first began thinking about the assigned topic, and how you hope you can do it justice. Then breathe deeply—you are now almost halfway through your talk!

3. **Define your topic using the aforementioned dictionary.** This will probably only take one minute, but you can drag it out by actually bringing the dictionary with you and thumbing to find the right page.

   - Note: Webster’s is the preferred tool among birthright Mormons, but they will cut you some slack if you use a non-canonical dictionary, especially as you are a convert.

   - A variant option if you are a woman: In addition to the dictionary, you may want to spend a little extra time beforehand making a poster to display, offering clip art or wholesome Ensign cutouts to define your topic visually.

4. **Read your two long general authority quotations in rapid succession without giving any context or otherwise personalizing the topic in any way.** This section is the crux of your talk and should take a good three to four minutes. If you are particularly skillful, you can weave the conference excerpts in with your inspiring urban legend. If not, just read the
KAY, friends. Can you tell I was in a grumpy mood when I wrote that letter? I am now laying aside the sarcasm and just want to speak plainly—make that plaintively—about Mormon preaching. And I insist on calling it preaching, because preaching the Word of God as revealed in the scriptures is what we Mormons always should aspire to do, despite the casualness with which our subculture seems to regard sacrament meeting “talks.” We have a holy calling. Christ has commissioned us to do no less than “preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15), and we could do a lot worse than emulate the apostle Paul, who would rather have “woe” befall him than fall short in that responsi-

story after the quotes. You will take more time if the story is so inspiring that you get choked up yourself and are unable to speak for twenty to thirty seconds. In any case, great news: You are almost finished!

5. Use your two scripture verses as the icing on the cake. You want to hammer home your point by appealing to the ultimate authority, the standard works. Just read the verses and be done with them. If you have not yet used up your allotted ten minutes, you can always slow this section down by waiting while the whole congregation finds the verses in their own scriptures.

6. Close your talk in the name of Jesus Christ, even if you have not referred to him once the entire time.

Sincerely,
A Fellow Convert

Openings. Let’s start with the way most talks begin. As my letter pointed out, too many Mormon speakers, particularly women, seem to fall all over themselves to apologize for their very existence, dragging out the tale of how they received the call to speak and why they aren’t up to the task. They usually close this extended mea culpa with some kind of plucky statement about how they’ll give it their best shot despite their many inadequacies. I think those who do this feel that when they dissemble in this way, they are demonstrating modesty and showing that they respect the honor of speaking in sacrament meeting. My concern, however, is that doing so actually has precisely the opposite effect: it puts more attention on themselves, not less. The talk begins by being all about them rather than, at best, the Savior or, at the very least, the assigned topic. They focus the spotlight on the self when they intend to deflect it.

Spiritual preparation. Many speakers share how they have prayed that Heavenly Father will calm their nerves and help them get through the talk. This is well and good, but why should it stop there? I’d much rather hear that they’ve prayed to know how they can minister to their listeners; for Heavenly Father to touch their hearts to know what people in the ward are struggling with; that they may know how to best serve the members. We are commanded to feed the lambs and tend the sheep. What happens when the shepherd worries only about himself?

Scriptures. I’m troubled by the way speakers so often use the scriptures only as a prop, a
weapon of sorts with which to shore up their position. All too often, I think we come to the text already knowing what we want to find, so it’s no surprise that we find it. Scholars call this eisegesis, the tendency to read our own culture and beliefs into the text. This is in contrast to exegesis, drawing from the text the culture and beliefs of the men and women who wrote the scriptures. It would be nice to see more Mormons come to the text with an open mind and use it as their primary source material for most talks. Now I’m not suggesting that everyone needs to be a scholar or consult commentaries, or even that they need to do any outside reading. I am suggesting that we delve more deeply into the scriptures themselves, choosing a passage or two that we can explore beyond mere proof-texting. It’s perfectly amazing the details that we notice when we read the same passage aloud carefully even as few as three times.

**Getting Personal.** In addition to a deeper use of the scriptures, I’d like to see more Latter-day Saint preachers draw upon their own experiences. We need to tell our own stories. The incredible opportunity that arises from having an entirely lay ministry is that each week we can be exposed to the raw and halting faith journeys of the people in our wards. Sacrament meeting provides the chance to grow closer to Christ through participating in the bread and water, and to one another through the personal sharing that can occur when we take turns preaching. Some of the best sacrament meeting talks I’ve ever heard involved people sharing their personal struggles—a disabled child, an illness, a battle with addiction—and “likening the scriptures unto themselves” by relating their own difficulties to the Atonement of Christ. We need to reveal some of our stories and own difficulties to the Atonement of Christ.

Studies have shown that people retain even a short-term memory of only about 16 percent of what they hear in a lecture, speech, or sermon. Moreover, most of that 16 percent is comprised of—you guessed it—personal stories. We won’t remember what Brother Jones said about the divine importance of food storage, but you can bet your last dollar we’ll recall the powerful, real-life tale of how his family lived comfortably off their food storage when a blizzard isolated them for nearly two weeks in rural Wyoming.

Once when I was teaching Gospel Doctrine, I opened class by asking people what had stood out most strongly to them when they had listened to general conference the week before. I thought it would be helpful for us to recap the conference highlights for those who weren’t able to hear it. Every single response involved a personal or scriptural story told by a speaker; they remembered the personal accounts, not just the more weighty or explicitly theological parts of the addresses.

The reasons for storytelling (what homileticians call “narrative preaching”) aren’t practical but theological. As Latter-day Saints, we pledge to follow the Savior’s example in all things, so let’s look a little more closely at how he preached. He never gave a platitude when a parable would do the job. And he never stopped teaching through stories.

If we desire a more contemporary example, we need look no further than President Hinckley’s moving talk in the 2006 April General Conference. Amidst all the rumors of his ill health, the whispers that this might be his last-ever conference, millions of Saints wondered what final wisdom President Hinckley would choose to impart. But what he did should serve as a model for all of us: he laid bare his life. He spoke of his mission, his marriage, his lifelong passion for mission, his marriage, his lifelong passion for the Church; he told us of lessons learned and service given. And in what I found to be one of the most moving aspects of the talk, he shared a portion of his patriarchal blessing, allowing those who love him to witness firsthand how the Holy Spirit has moved in his life. He gifted us with his story. We should go and do likewise.

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**Salamander Night**

_Elva Lauter_

Standing on the beach in the roaring dark, I seek water, want waves before sleeping.

Moon-burnished, I open my hands like pale sea anemones, gather the night’s secrets floating nearby.

In the sky—seven stars and a moon...

I stay awake to remember.

Where I grew up the sea was louder.

Black rocks stalked the shore.

I left that for Greece...

sands soft, light silky. Waves embraced the rising moon.

Now, the morning flames of sunrise consume me as they crackle over the sea.

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**The Flock**

_Jeanette Atwood_


A STRONG FOUNDATION

By Rick Jepson

The attempt to demarcate scientific knowledge from religious faith has been a perennial subject inviting varied approaches. For example, LDS scientist Henry Eyring denies any essential difference between the two, saying:

"Every proof in science depends on the postulates one accepts. The same is true of religion. The certitude one has about the existence of God ultimately comes from personal experience, the experience of others or logical deductions from the postulates one accepts. People sometimes get the idea that religion and science are different, but they are not different at all. There is nothing in science that does not hinge on some primitive constructs you take for granted. What is an electron? I can tell you some things about the electron we have learned from experiment, and if you accept these things, you will be able to make predictions. But ultimately you always get back to my postulates."

But an anonymous social scientist disagrees with him. Claiming that his specialty is less faith-promoting than a physical science like chemistry, he described the difficulty of claiming to know anything and suggested a different ambition altogether for religious faith:

"Now how does a scientist respond when he faces the query, "What do I know?" He can't go through a set of catechismic rituals that are implied by the year eight old or the twelve year old who is giving a testimony before a group—something approximating the memorized statement. He must make sharp, relative distinctions between "I would like to believe" and "I believe," and between "I had a past belief" and "I know." Now a testimony in the fullest sense seems to be introduced with the assertion, "I know." That is the most frequent rhetoric, "I know that," "I know that," "I know that," and "I know that." The characteristic of an educated man, on the other hand, is marked by the qualifications he puts on what he knows. . . . And the goal of religious development might not be the serenity of certainty, an absolute acceptance on faith, but the capacity to sustain the tension of not knowing. To be able to live with uncertainty, to be able to cope with the insecurities of an exceedingly complex world in order to control it would be a higher achievement religiously, I think. Now this is the description of a different kind of religion, but it is a religion that is consonant with progress, growth and development."

Struggling with this same dilemma, Robert Fletcher describes the balance he finally reached between the qualified hypotheses of science and the claims of knowledge common to many LDS testimonies:

"As I reflect back on my hesitance to use the word know in describing how I feel about the Church, I still feel that my use of the word is consistent with that described by Alma in Alma 32. We can know with some certainty of the burning within, or the enlargement of our souls, and yet have only faith in the truths of the Church. But at the same time, I’m not inclined to be critical of the culture in the Church which requires good members of the Church to say they know the Church is true. To me it reflects an indication of a strong degree of conviction about the Church. It’s not too hard for me to translate “I know the Church is true” to “I know I have had a burning in my bosom which confirms the goodness of the Church and the truth of the principles which it teaches.” This feeling can be so consuming as to eliminate all doubt."

Another common theme is the comfortable acceptance that science and faith would frequently be at odds—at least for now. John A. Widtsoe once wrote that “the struggle for reconciliation between the contending forces is not an easy one. It cuts deep into the soul and usually leaves scars that ache while life endures.” Yet Mormon literature is full of authors willing to bear that burden, scientists unfazed by the insecurities of an exceedingly complex world in order to control it would be a higher achievement religiously, I think. Now this is the description of a different kind of religion, but it is a religion that is consonant with progress, growth and development.
lined a philosophy of religion and science he called NOMA, or “non-overlapping magisteria,” wherein the two realms of science and religion are encouraged to maintain a respectful, strict separation. “NOMA seeks no false fusion,” he explains, “but urges two distinct sides to stay on their own turf” and to “develop their best solutions to designated parts of life’s totality.” In other words, faith and knowledge must remain entirely separate; any attempt at reconciliation invites disaster.

But Mormon literature demonstrates an alternate approach. With near consensus, LDS authors express something that might be called GOMA, or gradually overlapping magisteria. They seem to share a sentiment that while knowledge and faith may presently be at odds, once both are fully understood, they’ll harmonize perfectly. Richard P. Smith puts it best: “Since Mormonism and science are both basically true, they will converge perfectly. I’m thankful that my faith wasn’t subjected to that test and that I had help with my concerns about whether a scientist could be a Latter-day Saint. Are not today’s students and scientists in greater jeopardy of failing to develop strong faith in the Church?”

David Bailey echoes this concern and worries that we have replaced the pro-science doctrines of the early restoration with anti-science sentiment borrowed from traditional Christianity:

Latter-day Saint theology, with its rich tradition of naturalism and open-minded attitudes toward science, is to many intellectually minded members a major factor in their continued faith. There is no question that its foundation of natural law and rationality permits a significantly cleaner accommodation of the principles of science than most other theological systems.

However, this tradition may be in danger as the Church continues to experience exponential growth, bringing in converts whose beliefs are deeply rooted in the theologies of traditional Christianity. Current Church literature frequently includes statements about God’s absolute omnipotence and his ability to alter the laws of nature, even though these sectarian doctrines sharply disagree with traditional Mormon theology. Similarly, the conservatism that pervades modern creation beliefs in the Church seems to have more in common with certain Christian fundamentalist sects than with the open-minded philosophies of the early Church leaders.

Outside of these important themes, there have been numerous treatments of more specific matters: cosmology, evolution, psychology, and more. But in nearly all cases, even very specific topics are still related to or build upon the three themes I’ve listed here. And they are themes that will probably influence most future contributions as well.

It is exhilarating and daunting to begin a new column dedicated to the intersection of Mormonism with science and health. But discovering just how large and solid the foundation is, I’m all the more excited to start building. I invite your contributions to this important endeavor.

NOTES

COPING WITH A DEADLY PANDEMIC

By D. Jeff Burton

I WAS RECENTLY asked, "Who would you like to read your column? Borderlanders' seems like a broad term that might include almost everyone." 

My main focus is to try to help those who need or would like to stay peacefully involved with the Church. There are Borderlanders, for example, who though struggling with their faith and feelings of acceptability, work at BYU, the Church Office Building, or at Deseret Industries and who therefore "can't afford" not to be active and involved. Others have had a strong connection to Mormonism via family, spouse, parents, or children and need to maintain those relationships. Still others have found that the Church and the gospel have provided answers to important life questions in the past and don't want to leave that familiar source of inspiration and assistance, yet don't really know where to turn when help with doubts is needed. Some are natural skeptics, who always question authority and have faith in the scientific method but want to continue as faithful Mormons. Finally, others may simply like being "participating students of Mormonism" and want to be acceptable.

"I HAVE BELIEVED ALL MY LIFE"

BUD IS A reader of the "Braving the Borderlands" column and is willing to share his story with us. (Bud is not his real name, and his story has been edited to protect his identity and modified to fit into this space.) He represents the type of person for whom this column is written. Bud's story also illustrates the current "pandemic." I will discuss in what follows.

I was raised in the Church, am active, served a mission, married in the temple, helped my children go on missions, have served in high positions. In all these years, I have never had cause to disbelieve any claims related to the LDS religion. I have read the Book of Mormon in several languages and always believed it was true and accurate. As a missionary, I believed and taught that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God.

A year ago, I had the opportunity to purchase an authentic Kirtland Bank Note. It was signed by Joseph Smith in his own hand. To have and to feel the actual signature of God's Prophet—what a treasure! My curiosity about the bank note and how it was produced caused me to do some research about the bank in Kirtland. I had read about it in Church history, but it had been mentioned in passing as some trivial event.

This is how my interest in early Church history was sparked, and it has led me on a scary path to where I now have many questions about who Joseph Smith really was and if he was a true prophet of God as he claimed. I was surprised to find a lot of information that was not in the authorized Church history books.

Honestly, as I read and studied further, I was shocked and began to feel as if I had just been told (at age 58) by my mother that I was an illegitimate child. It has been terribly disturbing to me to discover aspects of Joseph Smith that are completely absent from the official history lessons we are taught in Church settings.

My daughter is on a mission at this time, and what is happening to me makes for a very difficult situation with her and my wife.

COPING WITH A DEADLY PANDEMIC

LIFE routinely exposes us to difficult situations and sometimes threatens our health and well-being. Take the widely anticipated bird flu. It is theorized that exposure to a human-transmittable form of the H4N1 virus may result in some very unhappy outcomes. Whether you or I will have an adverse reaction to this strain depends on three factors: virulence, dose, and susceptibility. Virulence relates to the relative infectiousness of the virus and its ability to overcome the body's natural defenses. Dose concerns concentration and duration of exposure. Susceptibility describes a person's body's ability to defend itself, or a person's immunity to the virus. One can escape the ravages of the flu by (1) avoiding exposure, or (2) being vaccinated (or exposed to a weakened virus) to enhance immunity and reduce susceptibility.

How does this relate to Latter-day Saints who find themselves in the Borderlands? As Bud found out, there are troubling historical facts and other issues that can threaten our emotional and religious lives when we're exposed to them. As in the case of a potentially deadly virus, to avoid adverse effects, we can...
As in the case of a potentially deadly virus, to avoid adverse effects, we can either isolate ourselves from the exposure source or be inoculated to increase our immunity.

(1) isolate ourselves from the exposure source or (2) be vaccinated or inoculated to increase our immunity.

Most active members (and historically, the Church itself) have routinely chosen approach (1)—avoidance. I have often heard the following statement made in reference to non-Church-approved historical writings: “I just don’t want to read any of it. I don’t want to know what happened.” This approach works reasonably well for three distinct groups of members: (1) the non-curious, (2) those without access to “non-approved” information, and (3) those who have access but carefully avoid exposure to non-approved information sources.

As we all know, the reach of the Internet threatens to effectively eliminate the possibility of staying in groups (2) or (3). One simply cannot avoid exposure in this day of instant, wide, and home-accessible information. Church statistics suggest that 80 percent of baptized members become estranged from the Church sometime during their lifetime. This sounds like a pandemic to me.

Unfortunately, a person who avoids exposure to flu virus all his life and then picks up a big dose through someone else’s unprotected bad cough or sneeze is likely to become very sick. Likewise, despite rigorous efforts at avoiding exposure, members such as Bud who chance upon non-faith-promoting aspects of the Joseph Smith story often experience traumatic and dangerous reactions (such as leaving the church, becoming anti-Mormon, being depressed, giving up important things such as friends and family, abandoning Christian principles, or becoming dishonest closet doubters.)

If you’ve read this column regularly, you’ll know that I favor the inoculation approach. Avoidance (as the only preventative) is too difficult for most of us these days.

Some potentially important immunity boosters have begun to arrive on the scene. Up until now, most of what purports to be a “vaccine” in Mormon apologetic literature has been more like a sugary placebo and, in the worst cases, Charles Dickenson’s “black liquid” quack remedy.

BOOSTING ONE’S IMMUNITY

Broadening our definition of truth. As Karen Armstrong notes in her writings, religion can be “true” when it is effectual in changing lives for the better and making a person happier, more honest, more generous, and so forth. For me as a Borderlander, the official Joseph Smith story would be nice if it could be proven “factual,” but it is not critical to “truth” by Armstrong’s larger definition. When I say, “the Church is true,” I mean it primarily in this second sense.

Finding good vaccines. For the fledgling Borderlanders I’ve encountered, I’ve begun to tentatively prescribe Richard Bushman’s new book Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling as a potential vaccine.2 I believe it might also act as a curative agent for those who have been exposed previously and are now suffering. The book provides plausible, credible, and positive explanations for many of the serious problems raised over the years about the Joseph Smith story.

The book has been described as the first balanced history of Joseph Smith,3 and yet it is one that is openly showcased at Deseret Book. One of my Bountiful ward high priests even quoted from it recently and met little resistance from Bountiful-brand “true believers”!

If you or someone you know and care about is likely to be exposed, or has already been infected by a pretty virulent testimony-killing virus, Rough Stone Rolling could be an effective vaccine (or curative) for those who wish to remain healthy or to get over a difficult problem more quickly and with less disruption in their lives.

Many have found my book, For Those Who Wonder, palliative.4 I recently received the following email from a reader:

Your book has literally saved me from spiritual death. You probably get told that quite often . . . by people who are searching. It has been four years with my closet crusade of yearning for answers to my questions. Your book has put names to my life processes that I have been going through. Who would have ever thought that I was going through a grieving stage? I think I am on the last step of this process, and it feels good to know someone understands me. Thank you!

NOTES
1. In my first column (this is the twenty-first), I introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief, and testimony, a different view of LDS history, some open questions about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria. See the figure.

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

D. Jeff Burton
jeff@eburton.com
CELEBRATING THE BACKSLIDER

CRIMINY! THE BACKSLIDER’S WILD AND GODLY LANDSCAPE

By Jeremy Ravi Mumford

The essays by Jeremy Mumford and Neal Chandler are the third and fourth reflections we’ve published in our twentieth-anniversary celebration of Levi Peterson’s novel The Backslider. We’ve also published a terrific letter by Ann Johnson in this issue. Please send your own responses, ruminations, and personal essays about your experience reading The Backslider to Cherie Woodworth at: CHERIE.WOODWORTH@GMAIL.COM.

Stunning discoveries of Mesoamerican cities seemed to promise great things but proved a mirage: they did not match either the Book of Mormon timeline or its ethnographic descriptions, nor could archaeologists find any traces of the horses and other animals described in scripture. Roberts, in fact, seems to have painfully lost his belief in the story’s literal truth.1

The next generation of scholars, led by Hugh Nibley, shifted their attention to the ancient Near East and to literary analysis, which proved more fruitful. Placing the Book of Mormon in a context of ancient Levantine literature seemed to yield remarkable parallels in names and literary forms, supporting believers’ faith in the narrative. Where Roberts had faltered, Nibley held firm. As the title of one of Nibley’s studies attested, there were Jaredites.

This shift in Mormon scholarship that Givens describes, from New World rocks to Old World texts, helps me understand the relationship between The Backslider’s two professors. The atheist paleontologist dominates the question of what one can learn from the landscape; his report on 250-million-year-old dinosaurs forces assent from everyone except crusty old Nathan (who stalks off disgusted). Faith-promoting scholarship has retreated to textual study in the person of Jeremy’s Book of Mormon teacher. Although this enthusiast for divine syntax “holds the line” against evolution, he does not seem able to challenge the paleontologist from a position of strength.

Like the Book of Mormon scholars, I felt that I had retreated from American spaces to Old World texts. What drew me to my work was the landscape of the Andes, both natural and human-made: winding roads and steep plunges in the mountains, colonial cities built on Inca foundations, green parrots in stone plazas. But the best archive for colonial Latin American history is in Seville. I found myself in Spain—a country less strange to me than the Andes but more alien—puzzling over impenetrable handwriting in sixteenth-century lawsuits.

In The Backslider, the reticent hero makes it clear that his loyalties lie with the land, not with words. While he acquires himself well on his visits to Provo, Las Vegas, and Salt Lake City, he is never tempted by city life, let alone the university. He loves horses, cattle, and the open southwestern landscape. That landscape, however, carries a threat—not from the rationalism of the paleontologist, but from a kind of dark magic in the land. Marianne points it out:
It's this country that drives people crazy. It's so pretty; it's wild and clean and godly. But sometimes it makes me feel so lonesome I can't stand it. It isn't just the polygamists who go crazy down here. Everybody has more or less gone crazy. (303)

Marianne's comment carries a sting for Frank, since the prime examples of crazy are his own kin—and perhaps himself.

The holy madness that runs in Frank's family stems from the wild and godly landscape, but it paradoxically rejects the values of the earth itself. His mother, who teaches her sons that holiness means asceticism, expands the prohibitions of the Word of Wisdom to include all sensory pleasure, from sex to meat-eating—and flavorful food in general. Frank's "natural man" loves the things that a being God made from soil might be expected to enjoy: good food, a hard day's work on horseback, going to a dance in a Stetson hat, bringing home the first steer for his future ranch, and lying down next to a wife who has some flesh on her bones.

Marianne loves the same pleasures, which is the strongest bond between them. But Frank's idea of what God demands puts them on a regimen of unsalted beans and separate beds, leaving them both profoundly depressed. This Mormon version of an Opus Dei lifestyle leads, in time, to Frank taking a cheese-grater to his own flesh. As Marianne notes, he's pulling her and himself down the path poor Jeremy has already walked, which ends in madness.

Frank's rescuer—a literal deus ex machina, who appears among the plumbing fixtures when Frank faces despair in a washroom—is the "Cowboy Jesus" who closes the novel. Jesus (who, startlingly, is a smoker) is more clearly a fellow Westerner than a fellow Mormon. He reconciles Frank to the innocent pleasures of the earth: work, play, and the love of a good woman. I found this ending a bit disappointing. I can't really weigh in on theological questions. I am no Mormon but an outsider drawn to the strange loveliness of Mormonism and therefore open to the charge of fetishizing the exotic. But what interests me is "how God [is] feeling this morning up on the royal star of Kolob" (253), not the cowboy Jesus' ecumenical, country-western reassurance. That message seems a retreat from the Mormon landscape's magical threats and promises. The cowboy Jesus seems to forget that the land is not just clean and godly, but also wild.

THAT'S how I thought about it, anyway, when I brought this beloved novel with me to the Andes after finishing my research in Spain. The Andean altiplano is an even larger version of the landscape that pushed Jamisons and polygamists into madness. A high plateau between mountain ranges covers southern Peru and Bolivia, with Lake Titicaca at the center, the Andes' answer to the Great Salt Lake. One afternoon I sat near a mine entrance at Potosí, an old silver-mining mountain from colonial times. I watched the miners cut the neck of a llama and splash the blood over the mine door to protect those who would enter the dangerous earth that year. I ate a little bit of that llama, half-cooked on an open fire. It reminded me of the polygamists of Johnson Valley who climb up the mountain to sacrifice a lamb at dawn, according to "the true Aaronic law" (306). "Criminy!"—as Marianne would have said.

NOTE

1. This statement is controversial, but the support for it seems convincing. For an overview of the controversy, see Brigham D. Madsen, "B.H. Roberts' Studies of the Book of Mormon," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 26, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 77-86.

GHOST STORIES

None were true so far as we knew: falling through ice or canoes capsized in rapids no one survives

thirteen kids out of inner city huddled shoulder to shoulder while we two counselors boys ourselves voices still changing told not who vanished but how gathering firewood say the fire quietly alive these stories made up of nothing but other stories maybe ghosts mistold it could be any one of us

—CHRISTIAN KNOELLER
CELEBRATING THE BACKSLIDER

PROPRIETY AND THE COWBOY JESUS

By Neal Chandler

The long-toothed fray over the cowboy Savior in Levi Peterson’s *The Backslider* has sometimes been waged among friends around the dinner table in my home. This altercation has not surprised me. It has, on the other hand, disappointed me a little—by its flat predictability, by the equally predictable avenues of complaint into which objections tend to fall, and finally on account of the glinheit with which details of the novel are often bulldozed under a long moraine of generalization. In the forms familiar to me, objections to this novel seem to frame an argument not so much about the Cowboy Jesus, nor about the characters or setting or plotting of the book, as about a wider preoccupation with theological decorum. We are engaged in a kind of Sunday School Board squeal over what kind of dress and behavior is to be permitted in this church—even to the almighty Lord of Hosts—and what kind decidedly is not.

Let me concede from the outset what is perhaps already apparent: that I belong to the admirers of the novel. I have read it several times and have never failed to be touched, to choke up, and to wish that First and Last things were among friends around the dinner table in my home. This altercation has not surprised me. It has, on the other hand, disappointed me a little—by its flat predictability, by the equally predictable avenues of complaint into which objections tend to fall, and finally on account of the glinheit with which details of the novel are often bulldozed under a long moraine of generalization. In the forms familiar to me, objections to this novel seem to frame an argument not so much about the Cowboy Jesus, nor about the characters or setting or plotting of the book, as about a wider preoccupation with theological decorum. We are engaged in a kind of Sunday School Board squeal over what kind of dress and behavior is to be permitted in this church—even to the almighty Lord of Hosts—and what kind decidedly is not.

Let me concede from the outset what is perhaps already apparent: that I belong to the admirers of the novel. I have read it several times and have never failed to be touched, to choke up, and to wish that First and Last things were

about spiritual propriety. They are offended by a heavenly vision emergent from the rushing waters of a urinal. It is no surprise that many cannot abide a deity who curses and breaks the Word of Wisdom. I would also guess that—though this remains unspoken—most do not much like his wearing a Stetson either or riding a sleepy-eyed roan. The truth is, we like our Jesuses the old-fashioned way: white-robed, sandal-clad, and Scandinavian. This vision is fixed in our religious art, our publications, our movies, our minds, our mythology. Even a Jesus in a dark general authority suit and red tie with male pattern baldness would—surely—seem embarrassing.

The Jesus of the New Testament, a man certain to have had far more Mediterranean coloring and Semitic physiognomy than would do for a visitors’ center movie, hung out with street rabble and sinners and the excommunicated agents of foreign tyranny. He cheated the Sabbath and also certain dietary laws, profaned Deity with outrageous kingdom claims, and mostly ignored the oppressions of the occupying Romans. Jesus of Nazareth was no patriot. He was, in fact, a thorn of embarrassment to those stalwart persons who would gladly have embraced a proper, decorous, and suitably commanding Messiah. When you think about it, this same New Testament Jesus has caused some embarrassment for Latter-day Saints, who have had to turn his six miraculous pots of wine at the wedding in Cana miraculously back into grape juice in order to rehabilitate the miracle worker for our Doctrine and Covenants.

The truth is, we want our Christian Gods narrowly Hellenic, which is to say Platonic and traditional, which is to say we want them pure, free of all idiosyncrasy, failing, or foible, any taint of experience, any and all suggestion of personality. We do not want a personal God to embarrass us by getting or being personal.

Even some friends of the Cowboy Jesus see his personal qualities as a kind of playful de-certification. He becomes a specifically fictional creation, a good and perhaps useful thing but something altogether different from and not to be confused with a heavenly creator. Hobbled by personality, he becomes all-too-human. Sort of like Samson with his hair cut. Engagingly muscular and entertaining, he is also temporarily harmless and, therefore, a disarming come-on for “non-members.” The famous milk before meat. The savoury bait that may precede an enlightened switch to a more meticulously flavorless deity.

Where, however, in all of this is the God become truly human who also remained

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God? And in what sense human? Did he ever sweat? Deal with acne or hair loss? Or, like Frank Windham, struggle with lust? Did he touch himself and long after girls? After boys, for that matter? Did he sometimes lie awake at night feeling alienated, resentful, and failed? The questions seem nearly unspeakable (I myself have resorted to euphemism), but where, then, do we look for the God revealed to Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail who had descended below all of Joseph's trials and failings and deeply compromising, all-too-human experience?

LEVI Peterson has written of the novel that its turning point hinges on unconditional grace and that this is implicit when the Cowboy Jesus asks Frank Windham, who has begun to flagellate his body and brood over blood atonement, why he can't let Jesus' blood alone suffice for sins. That, however, is the only formal gesture at soteriology in this scene. Otherwise, Jesus speaks neither of condemnation nor of forgiveness. He is just trying to help Frank rise above them, trying to be a friend, a counselor, a brother. For me, the astringent requirements of perfection, degrees of moral tidiness, seem as relevant here as a recipe for Lysol or instructions for achieving laboratory asepsis. Is it so beyond imagination to think of a puff of nasal spray might affect a woman's reproductive health to imagine a veil might be used as an abstinence-based education for chastity in the sixth century of the primitive church. The oh-so-carefully worded admonishment to chastity in the sixth and final lesson seemed to affect her as I imagine a puff of nasal spray might affect a blazing forest. She was desperate, burning, heartbroken and the craziness in his family, failed mother-in-law, to forgive God the one day by a beautiful young woman, a neighbor to a woman we were already teaching, who had suddenly seized upon the notion that these foreign missionaires and this new religion might be her salvation. She sat us down and told us what to do then was a harrowing story. She was, we learned, a kept woman—kept, in fact, by two or even three men. I could not get the count straight. These were, as you might suspect, married men of means, and they were also the entire source of support for her and her five-year-old son. She was stunning to look at. Far too lovely, I suppose, ever to have had to rely on anything beyond beauty for her livelihood. She lived comfortably, but she was not comfortable. She was frantic and deeply damaged. Her life arrangements had wounded and embittered her lesbian lover, the love of her life, as she told us, the only lover who had not purchased nor ever tried to exploit her. The circumstances was tearing her apart, and her desperation spilled over in what seemed clearly an unhealthy physical and obsessive relationship with her little boy.

I was twenty years old. My companion and I dutifully gave her the lessons, but she seemed somehow beyond consolation over the unfortunate multiplying of Christian denominations in the world or even over the loss of a foundation of prophets and apostles in the primitive Church. The oh-so-carefully veiled admonishment to chastity in the sixth and final lesson seemed to affect her as I imagine a puff of nasal spray might affect a blazing forest. She was desperate, burning, heartbroken and the craziness in his family, failed mother-in-law, to forgive God the one day by a beautiful young woman, a neighbor to a woman we were already teaching, who had suddenly seized upon the notion that these foreign missionaires and this new religion might be her salvation. She sat us down and told us what to do then was a harrowing story. She was, we learned, a kept woman—kept, in fact, by two or even three men. I could not get the count straight. These were, as you might suspect, married men of means, and they were also the entire source of support for her and her five-year-old son. She was stunning to look at. Far too lovely, I suppose, ever to have had to rely on anything beyond beauty for her livelihood. She lived comfortably, but she was not comfortable. She was frantic and deeply damaged. Her life arrangements had wounded and embittered her lesbian lover, the love of her life, as she told us, the only lover who had not purchased nor ever tried to exploit her. The circumstances was tearing her apart, and her desperation spilled over in what seemed clearly an unhealthy physical and obsessive relationship with her little boy.

WEN I was a missionary in Hamburg, Germany, I was cornered one day by a beautiful woman, her extremity and her insatiable vulnerability. I was struck then and have sometimes since been struck by the fastidious timidity of my one-and-only true religion in the face of enormous pain, human extremity, and collective evil. This too has been a source of some embarrassment. I wish today that, instead of me and my companion and six memorized lessons, that desperate young mother in Hamburg had encountered something much more like Levi's novel. What she got was good intentions and sound, safe, correlated doctrine. What she needed was a Cowboy Jesus.

NOTES

1. In a fleetingly famous devotional speech given at a twelve-stake fireside in February 1976, Apostle Boyd K. Packer identified an "unusual sense of spiritual propriety" as the touchstone of truly great and surpassing religious art. See Arts and Inspiration, ed. Steven P. Sundrup (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), 3–21.

2. It was, for example, with a note of awe that Keith Merrill, director of The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd, the Church's big-screen, two-continent saga of Christ's sojourn on earth, reported that the First Presidency had extended the casting process for Jesus of Nazareth well beyond his own timetable and casting criteria until, at last, in Denmark, an appropriate-looking actor was found for the role.
R

ON (not his real name), a Mormon gay man who just recently emailed me his story, ended it with, “I intend to take my life within the next few weeks.” He gave me a phone number and said to call him if I wanted to hear more. I called, and we talked for an hour. Ron had married, had four children, had occasionally acted on his ongoing homosexual impulses, had been thrown out of the house by his wife, who had begun divorce proceedings, had been told by his children not to contact them or show up at their school functions, and had been excommunicated from the Church. “I’m a monster,” he said. “My children look at me, and they see a monster.”

I got sympathetic, and then I got mad. “You don’t get to do this, Ron,” I said. “You don’t get to drop off the team and make me carry the load you’re supposed to be carrying. I and plenty of others are working as hard as we can to help us understand all this sexuality stuff better. To make the world and the Church safer for people like you to work things out. You have an assignment from life—from God—from whatever—and you’ve got to take that assignment and do your homework and learn whatever you’re supposed to learn and maybe even be able to help teach. Don’t you dare drop off the team and make me carry your part of the load! And what about your family, Ron? What would your killing yourself accomplish for them?”

He thought a moment. “I guess it would show them that I’m accepting the worst possible punishment.”

“You’re crazy,” I said. “It would just underline their belief that their dad’s a loser. It would give each of your kids ten more years of therapy. You know what your family really needs from you, Ron?”

“What?”

“They need you to become a man who is healed and whole. They need to see you become someone who will surprise the heck out of them by becoming the guy you’re supposed to be. Don’t you dare drop out. Your therapist is on your team. Your brother’s on your team. I’m on your team. God’s on your team. Choose life, and you know what? Even if you’re a guy who’s been there and failed—over there, like people who’ve been there and failed—they will know: They will feel it in the air. They will sense that something has changed about their dad. That’s what your family needs from you, Ron.”

He was silent. “And in conclusion, Ron, you don’t get to ‘move toward the light’—not over there, like people who’ve been there and failed to tell us about it. Not now. You get to ‘move toward the light’ right here.”

I happened to be planning a trip to Utah for the following week, and I asked Ron if he would go for a walk with me. So on a chilly March day when the sun was out between snowstorms, we walked for an hour and a half in suburban Sandy, where I was staying with my brother and his family.

Ron is a large man in his late forties, and I had to hustle to keep up with his pace. “So what have you been thinking about since our phone conversation?” I asked.

“Well,” he said matter-of-factly. “I still think I’m going to do it. In fact, I’ve chosen a date. April 1st. But the thing you said that has stayed with me is about my dropping off the team and making you do my work. I never thought of that.”

I learned more about Ron’s history as we walked and talked. Like so many of us, he had not had the ideal home life. Misunderstandings and neglect had been passed down from generation to generation. And unfortunate teachings about things sexual had scarred and scared him. “I died at age twelve,” he said. “That’s when I died inside.” He had masturbated, felt it to be a sin, but had not been able to stop doing it occasionally. He believed that God frowned and crossed him off the list. From then on, Ron felt he was deeply flawed. (It should not be necessary to mention that masturbation does not cause homosexuality; ask a few hundred million heterosexual people.)

As we approached my brother’s house, I said, “One more thing. I want you to listen carefully. You are positioned right now to do something remarkable. You stand between your healed ancestors and your posterity. You have the power to say, ‘It stops with me.’ You have the power to refuse to leave a legacy of failure to your children. Don’t be the name on their genealogy chart they describe as ‘gay suicide.’ Don’t give them that terrible gift. Give them a father who opted for healing and who came to terms with his homosexuality with self-respect. And you know what else, Ron?”

I stopped walking and grabbed his arm. “You can heal your family not only in the future, but in the past. I don’t know how this works, but I think about it a lot. Einstein proved that time is not what we think it is. Somehow you can do a work right now that will ripple forward and ripple backward and help to heal everyone who brought you here. A weird and awesome kind of work for the dead! I know you can!”

Tears were running down Ron’s face. “Wow,” he said. “Wow.”

I SPEAK NOW to those reading these pages who have contemplated or attempted suicide because of the torment they feel being both religious and gay. Especially to those who might be contemplating it now. I cannot say I know just how you feel. None of us can who have not truly been in that hopeless, helpless darkness. I have never
considered suicide. With three different events in my life, I have wished that all being, including my own, would cease forever. In the dark night, I have quoted to myself that awful, beautiful poem of Swinburne's that I memorized in college. I can write it here without even opening the book:

From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives forever,
That dead men rise up never,
That even the weirdest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea—

Then star nor sun shall waken
Nor any change of light
Nor sound of waters shaken
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,
Nor days nor things diurnal—
Only the sleep eternal
In an eternal night.

But I don't believe in eternal night. I believe in eternal light. The closest I ever came to acting on annihilation was the time I taped large posters over all the mirrors in the house so I would not have to see myself. But I find life irresistible. I find my own eyes irresistible.

If you are considering ending your life: walk with me. This I know: God loves you just as you are, and "abomination" is a word gone awry. We have been called to travel a hard frontier, but there is meaning in it and no one can play the part you or I came to play. Move toward the light here. Claim life. Claim love. Be love. Reach out. Trust. Trust tomorrow. Trust yourself. Walk with me. Let's all walk together.

TODAY IS APRIL 1st. Yesterday I called Ron and left a message on his voice mail. "Hi, Ron, it's Carol Lynn. Just noticed that tomorrow is April 1st. It's going to be a good day for living. Still raining at my house, but that's okay. I'm going to do my best tomorrow to give and take a little love, and I'm counting on you to do the same. You're on my prayer list, Ron..."

This morning I got a call from Ron. His voice sounded good, sounded strong. He was calling from the California coast, where he was on a business trip. "I'm feeling pretty good. Looking out the hotel window at the ocean right now."

"Ah, the ocean. The movement of eternity right in front of us."

I made him promise to call me next week. I'm counting on it, Ron.

RECENTLY I spent an evening reading a favorite play, All My Sons, one of Arthur Miller's best. It is a story about responsibility, and as I read I couldn't avoid thinking of the book you are now holding, which I had been working on during the day and would work on again tomorrow. In All My Sons, we meet Joe Keller, a successful, middle-aged, self-made man who has done something terrible and is now forced to pay the price. During World War II, rushing to meet an order from the Army, he knowingly shipped from his plant defective airplane parts, which caused the planes to crash and caused the death of twenty-two men. In a strange twist of fate, Joe learns years later that his son Larry, whose plane went missing in the war, actually took the plane on a suicide mission after he learned that his own father was responsible for the deaths of some of his fellow pilots. Joe finally understands that the other pilots, in the mind of Larry, were "all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were."

Joe Keller cannot bear the guilt, disappears inside the house, and in a moment we hear the sound of a gunshot.

I can't get the title of Miller's play out of my mind. The pain of being homosexual, especially in a religious community like mine, can be ravaging. You can find a partial list of Mormon gay suicides on the Affirmation website (www.affirmation.org), the tip of the iceberg, all the faces male. Many were returned missionaries, BYU students or graduates (one BYU professor); some were Eagle Scouts. Their average age was 31. It is a political and religious rhetoric around the "Protection of Marriage" concept provided the last layer of despair that drove Stuart Matis and others to take their lives. We must not allow this to happen again. Whatever our convictions about which unions are appropriate to legalize and which are inappropriate, we must recognize once and for all that in our universe of people there are many dear loved ones who happen to be homosexual and that we are responsible to them: responsible to see them as our own kind; to give them respect, Christlike love; to circle the wagons around them so that they too can be safe and warm.

I am hoping for that day soon.
NEWS AND COMMENTARY

WARREN JEFFS AND THE MORMON ART OF FORGETTING

By Hugo Olaiz

He was one of the best known leaders of polygamy in America and a wanted man. His picture was posted everywhere, with a substantial reward offered. When he was apprehended by federal agents in Nevada and returned to Utah to be jailed, the arrest set off a media frenzy, with stories appearing in the national media, in addition to the Deseret News and the Salt Lake Tribune. The news of his arrest came as a shock to his followers. He himself maintained that he was the victim of religious persecution.

I am speaking of George Q. Cannon, who in February 1886 was arrested in Humboldt Wells, Nevada, en route to Mexico. If you do not remember this episode from the LDS past, you are far from alone. "Mormons study the art of forgetting what they have seen and heard," U.S. district attorney P. T. Van Zile wrote sarcastically in 1887. "It often happens that a Mormon . . . goes upon the witness stand, and testifies that he cannot remember having performed a marriage ceremony that took place within a week past."

Just as our noble pioneer forebears had trouble remembering the polygamous marriages that could land them in jail, so we 21st-century Mormons cultivate the art of forgetting our polygamous past. And we are not just forgetting that past. We become outraged when someone dares to remind us of it.

In a section on the Church’s website, www.lds.org, titled "Comments on the News," LDS officials recently published a litany of protestations against media for sins ranging from calling Warren Jeffs a Mormon and using the expression "Mormon Polygamist," to airing a show on polygamy from Salt Lake City with Temple Square in the background. Are such protestations legitimate or a public relations ruse, part of the "we’re-not-ward" campaign?

Long after having abandoned polygamy, we wish we could forget it. Polygamy led to higher fertility rates in the LDS community. But in an ironic twist, the FLDS leaders reportedly announced that the world would end on 6 April 2005, an army of followers worked night and day in Eldorado, Texas, to finish an FLDS temple just in time for the momentous event.

Or consider how both conflicts quickly became national obsessions—the one sensationalized in anti-polygamy novels, the other in cable news, talk shows, and blogs. In the 19th century, national discourse bent toward fantastic claims about rape, incest, and genetic abnormalities. But in an ironic twist, current media stories about polygamy sug-
gest there may have been grounds for those nineteenth-century fears. Themes of sexual and domestic abuse may seem more imagined than real when we read them in Mormon Wives and other 1850s anti-polygamy novels—but not today, when polygamists are indicted for rape and incest. Predictions by scientists of the 1860s that polygamy would result in genetic abnormalities may not have been realized in the days of Brigham Young, but last February, both the Deseret News and the Salt Lake Tribune reported that perhaps as many as twenty FLDS children suffer severe mental retardation because of a rare genetic disorder blamed on inbreeding.

Or consider how, in both cases, the moral and legal campaigns against deviant sexual behavior (bigamy in the 19th century, sex abuse in the 21st) led men to disappear from their communities and turned religious leaders into wanted fugitives. “Those who did not submit to arrest had to be constantly on the move,” wrote Richard S. Van Wagoner in his description of the Raid that drove the LDS Church’s First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve into hiding.

Women and children were left to provide for themselves as best they could. Secret codes were employed in letters and messages, and children were taught to be evasive under questioning so as not to give away the details of polygamous relationships.

The same could have been written of the situation currently faced by FLDS families. Or consider how, in both conflicts, religious leaders on the run availed themselves of loyal accomplices, shady legal maneuvers, and the sacrifices of devoted followers. As John Taylor grew old and frail, George Q. Cannon, a recaptured fugitive, forfeited a donation jar labeled “Pennies for the Prophet.” When Warren Jeffs’s brother Seth was captured with $140,000 in cash and a luxurious Cadillac SUV, he had with him more than $67,000 in cash.

Or consider how, in both conflicts, women of polygamous marriages, stereotyped as passive, silent victims, showed themselves empowered to speak out both for and against the Principle. In the 19th century, women such as Emmeline B. Wells and Martha H. Cannon defended polygamy by writing in the Women’s Exponent, organizing rallies, even lobbying in Washington. Today, Anne Wilde, Mary P. Batchelor, Andrea Moore-Emmett, and Rachel Strong, and others suggest that cases built against polygamist men continue to rely heavily on the testimony of wives who, either willingly or under pressure, are more forthcoming and less forgetful than their husbands.

When members of the media mix up Mormons with polygamy, are we upset because we perceive them to be distorting our religion, or because they are throwing a spotlight on an aspect of our religion we desperately want to forget?

JUST like their pioneer forebears—who are also our pioneer forebears—members of the FLDS Church retreated to remote deserts so they could worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience. Like our great-grandparents, they created an imperium in imperio, a modern-day theocracy, and exalted loyalty and obedience to their prophet as supreme virtues. When they are left alone by the government, they survive and even prosper. When the government falls upon them, they resist fiercely because, unlike us, they still remember Rudger Clawson’s 1884 dictum: “I very much regret that the laws of my country should come into conflict with the laws of God, but whenever they do I shall invariably...
choose the latter.\footnote{Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy, 177–78.}

If we protest today when we see CNN’s Anderson Cooper hosting a show on polygamy with Temple Square in the background, is it because we fail to understand how Mormonism could possibly be associated with the crimes ascribed to the FLDS? Or is it, rather, because we know that Temple Square was once Polygamy Central—and that knowledge sits uncomfortably with us? If we resent it when the media call these polygamist groups “Mormon,” is it because we genuinely believe the practice of polygamy is inconsistent with that label—that they have abandoned the faith of our forebears?\footnote{Current LDS complaints about the media calling polygamists “Mormon” echo a complaint lodged by Mark E. Petersen of the Quorum of the Twelve shortly after the 1944 Boyden Raid. Petersen protested to the United Press that polygamists should not be called fundamentalists: “Use of this name has caused confusion in the public mind and has tended to give the impression (which is what the cultists sought) that they are old line Mormons, which they are not.” Quoted in Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy, 180.} Or is it because we don’t want to be reminded that polygamy was—is?—a defining characteristic of a brand of Mormonism we have long since forgotten?

\footnotesize{NOTES}

\footnotesize{NOTE: The author wishes to acknowledge the feedback and insights of Lavina Fielding Anderson and John-Charles Duffy in drafting this essay.}

\footnotesize{1. See B. H. Roberts, A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 6:122–32.}


\footnotesize{3. See www.nlgs.org/newroom (accessed 1 August 2006), see also “Media Gets a Big T” for Stories on FLDS,” Deseret Morning News, 12 May 2006. The news story about polygamy with Temple Square in the background was a special report by CNN’s Anderson Cooper that aired 10 May 2006. Elder Earl C. Tingey, from the Seventy, complained to Cooper on the 17 May show. See page 71–72 of this issue.}


\footnotesize{5. See the 1998 Church Handbook of Instructions, 1:73–74. Even though it is not mentioned in the Handbook, before remarrying in the temple, divorced men who have their first wives still sealed to them may request, and successfully obtain, a cancellation of their first sealing so not to enter into celestial polygamy, even if the first wife doesn’t have plans to get sealed to another man.}

\footnotesize{6. For recent stories about apostles Dallin H. Oaks and Russell M. Nelson entering celestial polygamy, see “Church Changes Policies for Temple-Only Marriages,” SUNSTONE, December 2003, 79; “Married,” SUNSTONE, April 2006, 78; see also the news story on page 74 of this issue.}

\footnotesize{7. Martha Sonntag Bradley, Kidnapped from That Land: The Government Raids on the Short Creek Polygamists (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), 194.}


\footnotesize{10. Ibid., 158; see also 161, 168, 203–04.}

\footnotesize{11. “FLDS Church Teachings Lead Members into Financial Mire,” Salt Lake Tribune, 5 May 2004.}


\footnotesize{13. Gordon, The Mormon Question, 29–54.}

\footnotesize{14. Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy, 159–160.}


\footnotesize{16. The anti-polygamy campaign of the 1880s, which Mormons called the “Raid,” non-Mormons called the “Crusade.” The Boyden Raid of 1944 was also called the “Boyden Crusade.” The infamous Short Creek raid of 1953 was called “Operation Short Creek” or “Operation Seagull” (after the name of a bill which the Arizona legislature had passed, ostensibly for “grasshopper control” but in fact as a secret source of funding for the raid). The simultaneous search of four homes in Hildale and Colorado City last May was called the “mini-raid.” See Gordon, The Mormon Question, 135; Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy, 287, 295; Bradley, Kidnapped from That Land, 121; “Police Probing Sex Abuse Raid Colorado City Homes,” Salt Lake Tribune, 26 May 2006.}

\footnotesize{17. Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy, 177–78.}

\footnotesize{18. Ibid., 192.}


\footnotesize{20. Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy, 142; Gordon, The Mormon Question, 97–101, 163–66.}

\footnotesize{21. See www.principalvalues.org.}


\footnotesize{23. Gordon, The Mormon Question, 115–16. During the second Reynolds trial, Amelia was nowhere to be found.}


\footnotesize{25. Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy, 180.}

\footnotesize{26. See www.principalvalues.org.}

\footnotesize{27. Ibid.}

\footnotesize{28. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{29. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{30. “Police Probing Sex Abuse Raid Colorado City Homes,” Salt Lake Tribune, 26 May 2006.}

\footnotesize{31. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{32. Ibid., 191.}

\footnotesize{33. Ibid., 191.}

\footnotesize{34. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{35. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{36. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{37. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{38. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{39. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{40. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{41. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{42. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{43. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{44. Ibid., 192.}

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\footnotesize{48. Ibid., 192.}

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\footnotesize{60. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{61. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{62. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{63. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{64. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{65. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{66. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{67. Ibid., 192.}

\footnotesize{68. Ibid., 192.}
FUGITIVE FLDS LEADER CAPTURED IN NEVADA; COURTS ISSUE SEVERAL POLYGAMY RULINGS

WARREN JEFFS, PRESIDENT OF the secretive Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, was arrested near Las Vegas, Nevada, almost four months after being placed on the FBI’s Most Wanted list. Jeffs was captured 28 August while riding in a red Cadillac Escalade with his brother Isaac Steed Jeffs and one of his wives, Naomi Jessop Jeffs.

“You know who I am. . . . I’m Warren Jeffs,” the polygamist leader admitted to FBI agents shortly after having given the alias, “John Findley.” In the luxury SUV, police found twenty-seven stacks of $100 bills, each stack worth $2,500; fourteen cellular phones; a radar detector; a laptop worth $2,500; seven stacks of $100 bills, each stack worth $700; two GPS units; two female wigs, one blonde and one brunette; a pair of glasses; and a Bible and Book of Mormon. Jeffs is estimated to have some one hundred and thirty-one wives, some of whom were formerly married to his father, and about fifty-six children. Despite the almost demonic stature Jeffs has acquired since he was placed on the FBI’s Most Wanted list, Driggs believes Jeffs is an ordinary man. “I never saw him as real charismatic,” says Driggs. “He’s a pretty bland speaker. I never observed anything extraordinary about him.”

THE MANHUNT FOR JEFFS and his eventual capture received national media attention, causing LDS officials to issue several statements distancing the LDS Church from Warren Jeffs and fundamentalist Mormons. When Warren Jeffs was placed on the FBI’s Most Wanted list, and again when he was captured, CNN’s Larry King and Anderson Cooper dedicated several hours in their primetime shows to feature Jeffs, the FLDS Church, and even the FLDS Church’s Effort Plan (UEP) trust, is also named in the lawsuit.

Jeffs will also have to answer to a lawsuit initiated by Brent Driggs, an attorney who accuses three of his uncles, including Warren, of sexually assaulting him when he was a child. Warren Jeffs’s $110 million financial empire, the United Effort Plan (UEP) trust, is also named in the lawsuit.

In September 2002, Jeffs took control of the 12,000-member FLDS Church and the UEP trust. Since then, Jeffs has excommunicated many respected FLDS men, assigned their wives and homes to other men, expelled teenage boys from the community, and further isolated the secretive church from the outside world. In 2005, after Jeffs repeatedly failed to respond to lawsuits, the UEP was placed under the control of a court-appointed special fiduciary, and its trustees were stripped of power.

Ken Driggs, an attorney who is currently writing two books about fundamentalist Mormons, believes that some of the conflicts in the FLDS Church arise from the increased isolation from the outside world that Jeffs has demanded from his followers. A case in point is former Colorado City Mayor Dan Barlow, who was excommunicated by Jeffs two years ago. “Dan was anxious to build relationships with people in the outside community that had economic value,” Driggs told the Desert Morning News, “and part of that was just getting along with people and being a little less weird.”

Jeffs is estimated to have some seventy-five wives, some of whom were formerly married to his father, and about fifty-six children. Despite the almost demonic stature Jeffs has acquired since he was placed on the FBI’s Most Wanted list, Driggs believes Jeffs is an ordinary man. “I never saw him as real charismatic,” says Driggs. “He’s a pretty bland speaker. I never observed anything extraordinary about him.”

MORMON LEADERS RESPOND TO THE ARREST

“Absolutely,” said Tingey. “And we’ve been certainly trying to make that point as clear as possible,” Cooper replied. “I know some of the Church have been critical of the media for using terms like ‘Mormon Fundamentalist’ or ‘Mormon sects’ to describe Jeffs’s group. Do you think it’s inappropriate to use those terms?”

“Absolutely,” said Tingey. “There’s no such a term as ‘Mormon Fundamentalist,’” he added, echoing a talking point often employed by Church spokespersons. “Those people
who are fundamentalists are not Mormon. And it's a great disservice, I think, when that term is used. It's very confusing to the people.”

“I can certainly see your point from a public relations standpoint, and it certainly could confuse people,” Cooper replied. “We've even tried to show the difference as much as possible. But I think part of the problem from the media's point of view is that you have these people out there who call themselves fundamentalist Mormon, and they will tell you that they are the true followers of Mormon [sic]. They believe Joseph Smith was a prophet; they follow the Book of Mormon. So it's a difficult thing for an outsider, I think, to figure out what terms are appropriate to use.”

Elder Tingey then focused on another complaint leveled by the public affairs department—namely, the use of Temple Square as background for the Jeffs-themed broadcast. “I think it's a great disservice,” said Tingey, “for example, to maybe show the icon of the Mormon temple when discussing fundamentalists, because guilt by association can be very confusing to the listeners.”

Told by Cooper that the FLDS expects to retake the Salt Lake Temple one day, Tingey said that the two groups should be judged “by their fruits” and emphasized the differences between LDS and FLDS. “Ours is a worldwide church. 175 countries, four hundred thousand converts a year, growing at 4 percent a year. We have over 130 operating temples. We are a distinct religion completely unassociated with those who call themselves fundamentalists.”

UTAH AND ARIZONA COURTS RULE IN SEVERAL CASES

IN A 4 TO 1 DECISION THIS past May, the Utah Supreme Court declared Utah's bigamy statute constitutional, upholding polygamist Rodney Holm's conviction on two felony counts of unlawful sexual conduct and one count of bigamy. Holm was ordered to serve one year in county jail with work release privileges and three years' supervised probation.

In 1998, Holm, who already had two wives, married 16-year-old Ruth Stubbs in a ceremony solemnized by FLDS president Warren Jeffs. Holm later had two children with Stubbs. Holm maintained that he never sought to legally marry Stubbs, but the justices concluded that Holm had “purposely to be married” to Stubbs by the nature of their wedding ceremony and relationship. According to Utah's bigamy statute, it is illegal to “purport to marry” or cohabit with another while married to another person.

“At the ceremony, Stubbs wore a white dress, which she considered a wedding dress,” wrote Justice Matthew Durrant with the majority. “In short, the ceremony in which Holm and Stubbs participated appeared, in every material respect, indistinguishable from a marriage ceremony to which this state grants legal recognition on a daily basis.”

Even though the decision led to a new trial, Kelly Fischer, 39, was found guilty on 7 July of sex with a minor and conspiracy to commit sex with a minor. On 2 August, the Colorado City, Arizona, man was sentenced to forty-five days in jail and three years' probation. Fischer is appealing his conviction.

On 8 September, Donald Barlow, 49, the second man on trial, was found not guilty on the charge of sexual conduct with a minor. According to a story in The Kingman Daily Miner, defense attorney Bruce Griffen spent most of his time arguing that the crime did not happen in the state of Arizona. The judge's instructions to the jury made it clear that the state has to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that Barlow committed the crime in Arizona.

Lawyers for the third man, Randolph J Barlow, 33, reached an agreement to go to a bench trial. The state dropped two counts of sexual assault charges against Barlow, who is charged with two counts of sexual conduct with a minor, both Class 6 felonies. If convicted, he could receive a sentence of anywhere between four months and two years in prison or receive probation.

The case against Barlow took an unexpected turn when Candis Shapley, 20, who is regarded by the state as the key witness to prove Barlow's guilt on two counts of sexual conduct with a minor, refused to testify. Shapley was held in contempt of court and sentenced to live in a local shelter for thirty days. It is not clear if Shapley will testify in court when Barlow's new trial date arrives.

The other five men set to stand trial are: Dale Evans Barlow, 48; Rodney Hans Holm, 39; Vergel Bryce Jessop, 46; Terry Darger Barlow, 24; and David Romaine Bateman, 49. The trials are being held in the same courthouse where many of the men's fathers and grandfathers were brought after the 1953 raid of the FLDS community in Short Creek, Arizona.

“Isn’t you curious to read the book the FBI found in Warren Jeffs’s possession when they arrested him?”
WILL ROMNEY’S FAITH HURT HIS PRESIDENTIAL BID?

WHILE MASSACHUSETTS GOVERNOR MITT ROMNEY continues to prepare for a likely run for the White House in 2008, polls suggest that American voters are not ready for a Mormon president. A recent national poll indicated that 37 percent of Americans would not vote for a Mormon presidential candidate; a South Carolina poll concluded that 44 percent of people in that state still believe that Mormons practice polygamy and that 27 percent believe LDS Church members worship Joseph Smith.

In an interview with The Salt Lake Tribune, Romney said he doesn’t believe religion is a factor “when people know the real individual.” Some observers are comparing Romney to John F. Kennedy, who had to fight anti-Catholic sentiment in order to win the presidency. In a September 1960 Roper poll, 35 percent of respondents said either that it might be better not to have a Catholic president or that they would be against it. Following the poll’s release, then-senator Kennedy gave a speech calculated to defuse the question of his religion, and he was elected president two months later.

“I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute,” Kennedy said during his 1960 campaign, “where no Catholic prelate would tell the President—should he be a Catholic—how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote, where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference, and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him, or the people who might elect him.”

Asked by The Salt Lake Tribune whether he might have to make a similar clarification, Romney said, “There may well be a time when something is said by me or something happens that crystallizes the issue for people, but I believe the people in this country subscribe to the Lincoln view that when people take the oath of office they abide by America’s political religion and that they place the Constitution and the rule of law first.”

The published Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll that indicated 37 percent of Americans would not vote for a Mormon presidential candidate also showed that 10 percent said they would not vote for a Catholic, 15 percent would not vote for a Jew, and 21 percent would not vote for an evangelical Christian. Muslims fared worse than Mormons, with 54 percent of voters saying they wouldn’t vote for a Muslim.

Following the polls release, some evangelical groups immediately came forward to say that they would vote for Romney—Mormonism and all. “The 2008 election is for president, not pastor,” explains the website www.EvangelicalsForMitt.org. “We would never advocate that the Governor become our pastor or lead our churches—we disagree with him profoundly on theological issues. But we reject the notion that the president of the United States has to be in perfect harmony with our religious doctrine.”

The Rev. Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, believes that evangelicals are ready to vote for competent candidates—not along religious lines. “We rejected an evangelical [Harriet Meyers] for the Supreme Court and accepted a Catholic [Samuel Alito],” observed Haggard.

At a time when Warren Jeffs and other Mormon fundamentalists give polygamy a bad name, Romney carries a family burden that could also hurt him: his great-grandfather, Miles Parker Romney, fled to Mexico so he could continue having five wives. Asked about Romney’s position on polygamy, his spokesperson, Eric Fehrnstrom, issued a two-line response: “Governor Romney has been married to the same woman for 37 years, and they’ve raised five children and ten grandchildren. As far as the history of the Mormon church goes, I would refer you to the historians.”

“The last thing Mitt Romney wants to be is the Mormon candidate,” LDS filmmaker Mitch Davis told The Salt Lake Tribune, “but inevitably the issue has to be addressed. . . If I believed what most Americans do about Mormons, I couldn’t vote for a Mormon either.” Davis, who directed The Other Side of Heaven, wants to make a $1 million documentary about the Massachusetts governor and has already launched RunMittRun.org, a visually lavish website specifically designed to boost Romney’s candidacy. “Could a Mormon be a Grammy winner?” asks the introductory slide over a picture of Gladys Knight. “Could a Mormon be a quarterback?” asks the second slide over a picture of Steve Young. “Could a Mormon be a movie star?” asks the third slide over an image of Napoleon Dynamite’s John Heder.

But Davis’s attempt to convince voters that Romney’s Mormon faith is a good thing could backfire, as Davis ends up openly criticizing other faiths—“evangelical Christians who have been taught that Mormonism is a cult.” “Mormons are enthusiastic about their faith and seek converts wherever they can,” the website explains. “In so doing, they make enemies, particularly among the ministers of competing religions who, whether for doctrinal or financial reasons, try to protect their flock from interlopers.”

Ultimately, Davis’s initiative may do more to help raise funds for Romney’s campaign among Mormons than to dispel misconceptions about Mormonism—not a bad thing, considering how much Romney will depend on Mormon donors to finance his campaign. According to a Deseret Morning News story published last June, Utah donations account for nearly 45 percent of the $1.6 million raised so far for a Romney campaign, and that money is being spent almost entirely out of state.
LDS PUBLIC AFFAIRS POSTS NEW STATEMENT ON HOMOSEXUALITY

LDS PUBLIC AFFAIRS HAS POSTED A LENGTHY INTERVIEW WITH ELDER DALLIN H. OAKS OF THE QUORUM OF THE TWELVE AND ELDER LANCE WICKMAN OF THE SEVENTY ON HOMOSEXUALITY.

The interview touches on a variety of issues, from the distinction between same-sex feelings and homosexual behavior to the Church's rationale for endorsing a constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage.

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The interview also includes advice on how parents might act in drawing the line as their gay children come out to them and, eventually, ask for permission to bring a partner home to visit. According to Oaks, while some parents may prefer not to receive their child’s partner and may say, “Please, don’t do that. Don’t put us into that position,” under some circumstances parents may choose to say, “Yes, come, but don’t expect to stay overnight. . . . Don’t expect us to take you out or introduce you to our friends, or deal with you in a public situation that would imply our approval of your ‘partnership.’”

“Elder Oaks chose to emphasize that [this subject] was important because Church policy was being criticized and [the Church] was receiving ‘unrelenting pressure from advocates of that lifestyle to accept as normal what is not normal,’” Watts told The Salt Lake Tribune. “I would have preferred to hear him say that it was important because so many of our good Church families with homosexual children were hurting and were having a difficult time reconciling the reality of their lives with a Church policy that, too often, seemed to divide, rather than unite their family members. I know so many gay people in committed relationships that I think are every bit as moral as any straight person’s. That’s the healthiest thing for gay people to do.”

To read the interview, visit www.newsroom.lds.org.

ELDER NELSON’S “CELESTIAL POLYGAMY” STIRS UP COALITION

ELDER RUSSELL M. NELSON OF THE QUORUM OF THE TWELVE WAS ACCUSED OF BEING A “CELESTIAL POLYGAMIST” IN A Petition requesting his removal from the Religious Coalition for Marriage, an organization which opposes same-sex marriage and defines marriage as “the exclusive union of one man and one woman.”

“Elder Nelson believes in polygamy,” reads the petition posted at www.removenelson.net. “As a matter of fact, only days before signing the petition, Elder Nelson married his second wife in a Mormon temple, thus becoming eternally bound to two women . . . . It is deceptive of Elder Nelson to sign a petition that defines marriage as the union between one man and one woman when he practices a theology that extends the name ‘marriage’ to a union between a man and multiple women.”

The anti-polygamy group Tapestry Against Polygamy similarly criticized Nelson, calling him a “serial polygamist.” “It is shamefully hypocritical for LDS leaders to publicly advocate against gay marriages and not polygamy,” reads the statement issued on 7 June.

Some observers were surprised last April when Elder Nelson, whose first wife died last year, used during general conference a definition of marriage that leaves no wiggle room for polygamy. “The Lord declared that marriage is the legal wedding of one man and one woman,” Nelson said (Ensign, May 2006, 36). LDS leaders and Utah lawmakers have preferred in the past to define marriage as the union between a man and a woman. Five days after delivering that conference address, Nelson, a widower, remarried in the Salt Lake Temple (see SUNSTONE, April 2006, 78).
CHILDREN OF POLYGAMISTS SPEAK UP AT RALLY

IN A HISTORIC PUBLIC RELATIONS MOVE, MORE THAN A dozen children and young adults spoke at a rally held in Salt Lake City in defense of their polygamist families. With signs reading “I (heart) all my moms” and “Our families, our choice,” some 300 polygamy supporters gathered 19 August outside the Salt Lake City/County Building for the event.

“We are not brainwashed, mistreated, neglected, malnourished, illiterate, defective, or dysfunctional,” said Jessica, 17. “We are useful, responsible, productive members of society."

“I have lived in a polygamist culture for most of my life,” said Tyler, 19. “I have made the choice to someday live this principle, and I don’t expect you to understand the reasons for this choice. But I do expect you to defend my right to make that choice.”

The rally drew local and national attention. CNN covered the event, MTV reporters talked with the teens about their views on popular music, and a crew filmed the crowd for costume design ideas for the HBO series Big Love, which is currently filming its second season.

The rally was organized by advocacy group Principle Voices, along with a coalition of fundamentalist Mormon groups including the Davis County Cooperative Society, members of Centennial Park, the Apostolic United Brethren, and independent polygamist families. The secretive Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which is receiving wide media attention in connection with alleged crimes and abuses, did not participate in the rally.

Anne Wilde, a frequent Sunstone symposium presenter and a polygamist widow who serves on the Principle Voices board and helped organize the event, told SUNSTONE: “We didn’t ask the teenagers to speak; they volunteered. It gave them a chance to express their thoughts and dispel some of the negative stereotypes about polygamy.”

Wilde believes that with so many negative media stories about Warren Jeffs and his followers, people tend to forget that the FLDS Church is only one of many fundamentalist groups and families that practice polygamy. “So far people have only heard the negative,” Wilde says. “I think now they’re ready to get the other side of the story.”

LDS CHURCH DENIES IT LURES MEMBERS FROM MEXICO

AS THE DEBATE OVER ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION HEATS UP in the U.S. Congress, the LDS Church issued a statement in response to the accusation that it encourages its members to leave Mexico for Utah.

“Mormons have converted a million Mexicans to their faith,” CNN correspondent Lou Dobbs stated last May, “and many welcome them to Utah with no regard for legal status.... I was just struck by the idea that the Church of Latter-day Saints, the Mormon Church, seems to be looking south just as avidly and aggressively as the Catholic Church to add a few folks to those pews.”

“Such statements are completely without foundation,” said an official statement posted at www.newsroom.lds.org. “The [LDS Church] has over a million members in Mexico. It does not encourage them to move to Utah or anywhere else.”

In an oft-quoted sermon delivered in Peru in 1977, apostle Bruce R. McConkie declared that “the gathering place for Peruvians is in the stakes of Zion in Peru. . . . The gathering place for Chileans is in Chile; for Bolivians, it is in Bolivia; for Koreans, it is in Korea” (Ensign, May 1977, 115–18). According to an 8 September story in The Salt Lake Tribune, the LDS Church has some sixty-two Spanish-speaking wards in Salt Lake County, around thirty in Davis County, and about forty in Utah County.

MAGAZINE SUGGESTS CHURCH MAY BE FINANCING TERRORISM

A STORY IN THE CONSERVATIVE FRONT PAGE MAGAZINE suggests the LDS Church may be financing terrorism. “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. . . is the single largest donor to the U.S. branch of Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW), also known as Islamic Relief,” wrote Debbie Schlussel in a story posted 1 September on FrontPageMag.com. “In the past year, it donated $1.6 million to the charity. . . . But Islamic Relief is not just any charity. The Israeli government says it is a Hamas front group. It is also under investigation by the American government.”

The story, titled “Mormons Financing Terrorism?”, claims that Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon aided by the IRW
are “known as breeding grounds for terrorists.” “Given all this,” Schlussel asks, “why are Mormons pouring millions into Islamic Relief?”

This not the first time the militantly pro-Israel magazine has criticized the Church. In an 6 October 2005 story about presidential hopeful Mitt Romney, Front Page referred to the LDS Church’s “tortured history on race” and suggested that LDS leaders still live with a racist mindset.

Though many Mormons have seen the rise of modern Israel as the fulfillment of prophecy and tend to worry about Islamic terrorism, these actions do not necessarily mean that the LDS Church will side with Israel on political issues. “Given the Jewish reluctance to accept the gospel of Jesus,” writes LDS sociologist Armand L. Mauss in his book All Abraham’s Children, “then perhaps there is still time to do some proselyting among others of Abraham’s literal lineage, such as the Arabs.” According to Mauss, when the LDS Church was facing intense criticism for the construction of the BYU Jerusalem Center, Israeli commentators suspected the Church of favoring the PLO (p. 183–85).

MORMONS COULD BE PART OF DA VINCI CODE SEQUEL

WILL THE EVIL JESUIT MONK OF THE DA VINCI CODE BE replaced by a Danite? That would be a worst-case scenario for The Solomon Key, the much-anticipated sequel to Dan Brown’s best-seller The Da Vinci Code.

Brown has already announced that The Solomon Key will take place in Washington D.C. and feature the Freemasons. Even though the book has not yet been published, author David A. Shugart has already released Secrets of the Widow’s Son: The Mysteries Surrounding the Sequel to The Da Vinci Code, in which he dedicates five pages to Mormonism and its connection to Masonry. “I had to push out in every direction possible,” Shugart told Salt Lake Tribune reporter Peggy Fletcher Stack. “I read five books about Mormon history and thousands of Internet websites. I tried to be thorough and fair.”

Speculation around the inclusion of Mormons is further fueled by the fact that in 2004, Dan Brown visited both the Masonic Temple and Temple Square in Salt Lake City. “[Brown] was, of course, very interested in the symbology of the Mormon temple,” Brown’s host Aaron Wilhelm told KSL reporter Carole Mikita. “He was interested in the pentacles and the suns and the moons and the stars and all that.”

In a Fall 1994 article in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Michael W. Homer proposed that “the rituals of Freemasonry had some impact on the origin and development of the LDS temple endowment” and that “early LDS leaders recognized this connection and did not consider it too sacred or controversial to discuss” (p. 3). In recent years, however, LDS leaders have become reticent to discuss such a connection. LDS Institute director Reed C. Durham, Jr. was censured in 1974 for delivering a speech in which he stated that “the temple endowment had an immediate inspiration from Masonry.”

Brown’s The Da Vinci Code has been popular among Mormons for suggesting that Jesus Christ was married and for exploring the feminine side of the divine—notions that nineteenth-century Mormon leaders embraced. In the mid-1850s, Orson Hyde stated repeatedly in general conference that Jesus Christ was married to Mary, Martha, and other wives, and that he had children with them. In 1899, George Q. Cannon, speaking to a group of Mormon leaders, said, “There are those in this audience who are descendants of the old twelve apostles, and shall I say it, yes, descendants of the Savior himself. His seed is represented in this body of men.”

The Church, BYU, and Deseret Book have responded to the book’s popularity with an official statement, lectures, articles, and a book dismissing the notion that the novel contains important gospel truths. “The belief that Christ was married has never been official Church doctrine,” an official LDS statement reads in part. “While it is true that a few Church leaders in the mid-1800s expressed their opinions on the matter, it was not then, and is not now, church doctrine.”

Early this year, Deseret Book published What Da Vinci Didn’t Know: An LDS Perspective, a 124-page book that distances the LDS Church from the assertion that Jesus was married and refutes the idea that early Gnostic writings are more authentic than the canonical gospels.

FOLLOWING LDS PROTESTS, SMITHSONIAN ALTERS EXHIBIT

AN EXHIBIT AT THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY WAS altered after LDS members, officials, and lawmakers complained to the Smithsonian Museum that the text accompanying the portraits of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young contained inaccuracies and offensive remarks.

“This was not only inaccurate but it was also slightly mean-spirited and not the sort of neutral position that labels normally go for, especially in a public institution,” LDS historian Richard Bushman told Salt Lake Tribune. One passage described Utah’s Mormon settlements as a “communal, undemocratic and separatist venture...antithetical to the ideals and structure of the national government.”

According to an email circulated last July, the original ex-
People

**Deceased.** LARaine WILkINS, 41, on 2 September from injuries sustained in a car accident in southern Idaho. Wilkins was a teacher, pianist, writer, and published poet who, at the time of her death, was serving as editor of *Irreantum*, the literary publication of the Association for Mormon Letters. In announcing her passing to its members, the AML board wrote, “Laraine’s contribution to Mormon Letters and her involvement in AML was a great gift to all of us, and everyone who knew her feels her absence deeply.” Wilkins’s daughter, Lena Schoemaker, was tragically paralyzed in the same accident. A fund, the Schoemaker Family Trust, has been set up at Washington Mutual for those who would like to assist with Lena’s recovery and care.

**Celebrated.** His 96th birthday, LDS President GORDON B. HINCKLEY, on 23 June, in a low-key event held at Brigham Young University President Hinckley, who recently underwent colon cancer surgery and chemotherapy treatments, was in Provo for the groundbreaking of a BYU building that will bear his name. Despite his age and recent ailments, President Hinckley took up a shovel and helped break ground.

**Winner.** BENJI SCHWIMMER, of the Fox television show *So You Think You Can Dance*. Schwimmer, from Redlands, California, is a returned missionary from the Oaxaca Mexico Mission. Schwimmer’s Mormonism came up good-naturedly several times on the show, especially when routines from Hip Hop and other dance styles called for sexy moves. Schwimmer is a former national champion in West Coast Swing. Besides Schwimmer, three other Latter-day Saints were among the show’s ten finalists.

**Planned.** A new Mormon musical by *South Park* creators MATT STONE (left) and TREY PARKER. Stone and Parker have teamed up with Avenue Q composers Jeff Marx and Robert Lopez to write a Broadway musical about the Mormons. “The show is going to be something totally different,” Marx recently said, according to a story widely circulated on the web. “It’s going to be about Mormons, and it’s going to be really funny. We hope.” Mormons and Joseph Smith have appeared several times on *South Park*, and a 2003 episode focused almost exclusively on the origins of Mormonism and the Book of Mormon (see *Sunstone*, December 2003, 9).

**Baptized.** Posthumously, POPE JOHN PAUL II, in four LDS temples, one year after his passing. According to Holocaust baptisms researcher Helen Radkey, the pontiff was baptized in the Ogden Temple on 11 April, in the Madrid Temple on 19 April, in the Jordan River Temple on 20 April, and in the Salt Lake Temple on 26 April. He was also endowed and sealed to his parents multiple times. John Paul II joins a list of renowned Catholic leaders who have been baptized vicariously, including Padre Pio, Mother Teresa, and Pope Pius XII. Born Eugenio Pacelli, Pius XII was also sealed to a mysterious “Mrs. Eugenio Pacelli.”

**Named.** MICHAEL HICKS, as editor of *American Music*, a prestigious quarterly journal devoted to studies of American composers, performers, publishers, institutions, events, and the music industry. Hicks, a professor of music at BYU and regular contributor to Sunstone forums, has published three books with the University of Illinois Press, which publishes the journal.

**Acquired.** By the University of Oklahoma Press, THE ARTHUR H. CLARK COMPANY. Founded in 1902 and presently based in Spokane, Washington, but soon moving to Norman, Oklahoma, the Arthur H. Clark Company is a publisher of fine-quality nonfiction books on the history of the American West, including several important titles related to Mormonism, many in its Kingdom in the West series, edited by Will Bagley. Former owner Robert A. Clark is now a manager at OU Press, which is one of several university presses that publishes substantive works on Mormon history topics.

**Deceased.** PORTER ROCKWELL JONES, 16, the official greeter and playmate of visitors to the Signature Books office, 20 September, of complications resulting from a ruptured spinal disk. The half-pit bull, named, appropriately, for Joseph Smith’s infamous bodyguard, Porter has been a fixture at Signature since his rescue from an animal shelter by Signature staffer Greg Jones. Porter is also famous for having his portrait painted by renowned artist Trevor Southey. Southey’s portrait of Porter can be viewed at www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/trevor.htm#porter.
BYU News

SCHOOL ACTIONS AGAINST FACULTY MEMBERS CREATE MEDIA STORM

BYU FIRED ONE OF ITS INSTRUCTORS AND PLACED another on paid leave following their making public statements deemed inappropriate for employees of the Church-owned school.

Jeffrey Nielsen, a part-time instructor at BYU, was let go less than two weeks after the Salt Lake Tribune published his op-ed piece that questioned the Church's public opposition to same-sex marriage and its decision to read a statement over the pulpit encouraging members to take an active role in support of a constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman only.

"When the church hierarchy speaks on a public issue and requests that members follow, it is difficult indeed if an individual feels the content of their message would make bad law and is unethical as well," Nielsen wrote in his 4 June op-ed. "I believe opposing gay marriage and seeking a constitutional amendment against it is immoral."

In Nielsen's dismissal letter, BYU philosophy department chair Dan Graham wrote: "In accordance with the order of the Church, we do not consider it our responsibility to correct, contradict or dismiss official pronouncements of the Church. Since you have chosen to correct, contradict or dismiss official pronouncements of the Church in an area of great concern to Church leaders, and to do so in a public forum, we will not rehire you after the current term is over."

During the Sunstone Symposium last August, Nielsen said that by writing this op-ed, he did not intend to question the religious claims of the Church, nor the leaders' right to establish Church doctrine or policy. "But I did think that as a member of the Church I had every right—in fact, every obligation—to address what was a moral concern, a moral issue."

Nielsen said that he believed he was not violating his BYU contract because he was speaking as a citizen in a public forum. "I have no hard feelings [towards BYU]," he added. "I have only the utmost respect and gratitude to BYU, and I admire the faculty and the students there immensely."

Steven Jones, a physics professor who argues the U.S. government conspired in the 9/11 terrorist attacks has been placed on paid leave while the LDS-owned university investigates his actions.

Jones became a hero among 9/11 conspiracy theorists after publishing a paper in which he argued that the World Trade Center fell not because of the planes that hit the towers but because of explosives placed inside the buildings. Jones says he found evidence of thermite—an explosive used by the military—in materials recovered from ground zero.

"BYU has repeatedly said that it does not endorse assertions made by individual faculty," a statement announcing the action reads in part. "We are, however, concerned about the increasingly speculative and accusatory nature of these statements by Dr. Jones." In recent weeks, Jones has also become the co-chair of Scholars for 9/11 Truth—a group that accuses unnamed government agencies of being part of a conspiracy.

Shortly after BYU placed Jones on leave, leaders of the American Association of University Professors criticized the decision. BYU has been on AAUP’s list of censured schools since 1998, when it refused to grant tenure to professor Gail Houston.

To learn more about Jones’s theories, visit www.911truth.org.

BYU’S ART EXHIBIT EXCLUDES NUDES

A EXHIBITION WHICH OPENED LATE JULY AT THE BYU Museum of Art included works by Burton Silverman, but displayed none of the illustrator’s famous nudes.

"The purpose of the show was not to show a retrospective of all his work," museum spokesperson Christopher Wilson told the Deseret News. "We picked works that reflect what we wanted to show about Burt’s work."

Silverman, who began doing nudes by visiting burlesque houses, chuckled about the censoring of his work. "Nudity in public life is relevant," he said.

Entitled "Intimate Eye: Drawings by Burton Silverman," the exhibit will be open until 25 November.

In 1997, BYU gained national attention when it refused to show "The Kiss" and three other sculptures by renowned nineteenth-century sculptor Rodin (SUNSTONE, November 1997, 76–77).
hibits described Brigham Young as a “tyrant” and claimed that Joseph Smith had been “lynched.” Although the term lynched can mean murdered by a mob, it is widely used to mean that the person was hanged. Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were shot by an armed mob.

Warned of the offensive display, area authority Ralph W. Hardy of the Quorum of the Seventy contacted Bushman, who rewrote the text with input from BYU scholar Ronald Esplin and a curator for the Smithsonian. The Smithsonian also received complaints from U.S. Senator Bob Bennett and U.S. Representative Rob Bishop.

According to National Portrait Gallery spokesperson Noelle Myers, the gallery had to write more than a thousand captions before the opening. “This was a mistake, and it was corrected before the gallery opened,” she said.

**ACLU, LDS CHURCH RESOLVE MARTIN’S COVE DISPUTE**

THE AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION HAS FINALLY resolved its dispute with the Bureau of Land Management and the LDS Church over public access to Martin’s Cove, a federally owned site that the LDS Church has on lease in Central Wyoming. Martin’s Cove is believed to be the site where some 150 Mormon pioneers died in an 1856 blizzard.

The ACLU argued that visitors have to pass through the LDS visitors’ center to access the trails and were subjected to religious messages on federal property through signs and from LDS volunteers. The newly formed agreement will ensure people have access to the public land without passing through the visitors’ center.

**Sunbursts**

AFTER THIRTY YEARS in print, Exponent II, a “forum for Mormon women to share their life experiences in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance” will soon be available only as an online e-zine. Subscriptions will be $10 per year. For details, visit www.exponentii.org.

A NEW JOURNAL to “encourage literary talent, provoke thought and promote greater understanding and faith among Latter-day Saint women” is now publishing. Beginning in 2007, Segullah will publish three times a year. Subscriptions are $15 per year. You may learn more at www.segullah.org.

THE 2007 LDS Film Festival will be held 17–22 January in Orem, Utah. More information, including calls for entries for the festival’s different competitions, are available at www.ldsfilmfestival.org.

**Solar Flares**

**The Greatest Gift: Quality Control.** A production error in a CD given to teens attending this past summer’s Especially for Youth (EFY) events meant that some of those teens ended up listening to explicit lyrics by rappers such as Eminem and Snoop Dog instead of the catchy inspirational songs that the CD, entitled “The Greatest Gift,” promised to deliver.

“The content on the erroneous CD does not reflect the standards of the Church nor what we support at EFY,” CES Youth Programs director Gregory M. Tanner wrote in a letter sent to 23,000 Mormon households. “It is the furthest from the type of music we would support or condone.”

The company hired to produce the CD estimates that only one in every 100 CDs is affected. About 40,000 youths attended the EFY summer camps and received the CD.

In a similar mix-up, a company commissioned to produce copies of the DVD for the Mormon-themed movie, *Sons of Provo*, ended up including a few copies of *Adored: Diary of a Porn Star* in the order (see SUNSTONE, December 2003, 79).

**Third West, Ho!** What happens to Mormons when they get kicked out of their homes? They load up their handcarts and move west, of course. And that’s exactly what more than 100 LDS Business College students did twelve days before Pioneer Day as they helped move the college’s library from the historic Enos Wall Mansion on 400 East in Salt Lake City to the college’s new location at the Triad Center on Third West.

Donning pioneer hats, bonnets, and other clothing, students packed books and other learning materials into pioneer-style handcarts and walked seven blocks—downhill. As they reached the Main Street Plaza, they circled the reflecting pond, drank water, and heard an inspirational speech from a former CES instructor.

Many felt that the sight of the procession slowly making its way west was faith-promoting. Others, in a more cynical vein, congratulated college administrators for finding the perfect gimmick to move their library into the new building at no cost.
The following is excerpted from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s April 1996 General Conference address, “A Handful of Meal and a Little Oil” (Ensign, May 1996, 29–31).

W E MAY NOT yet be the Zion of which our prophets foretold and toward which the poets and priests of Israel have pointed us, but we long for it and we keep working toward it. I do not know whether a full implementation of such a society can be realized until Christ comes, but I know that when He did come to the Nephites, His majestic teachings and ennobling spirit led to the happiest of all times, a time in which “there were no contentions and disquietings among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift” (4 Nephi 1:2–3). That blessed circumstance was, I suppose, achieved on only one other occasion of which we know—the city of Enoch, where “they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18).

The Prophet Joseph Smith had such a grand view of our possibilities, a view given him by the revelations of God. He knew that the real task was in being more Christlike—caring the way the Savior cared, loving the way he loved, “every man seeking the interest of his neighbor,” the scripture says, “and doing all things with an eye single to the glory of God” (D&C 82:19).

That was what Jacob in the Book of Mormon had taught—that “after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted” (Jacob 2:19).

I pay tribute to all of you, to all who do so much and care so deeply and labor with “the intent to do good.” So many are so generous. I know that some of you are struggling to make ends meet in your own lives and still you find something to share. As King Benjamin cautioned his people, it is not intended that we run faster than we have strength and all things should be done in order (Mosiah 4:27). I love you and your Heavenly Father loves you for all you are trying to do.

FURTHERMORE, I know that a talk in general conference is not going to cut through the centuries of temporal inequity that have plagued humankind, but I also know that the gospel of Jesus Christ holds the answer to every social and political and economic problem this world has ever faced. And I know we can each do something, however small that act may seem to be. We can pay an honest tithe and give our fast and free-will offerings, according to our circumstances. And we can watch for other ways to help. To worthy causes and needy people, we can give time if we don’t have money, and we can give love when our time runs out. We can share the loaves we have and trust God that the cruse of oil will not fail.

And thus, in their prosperous circumstances, they did not send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, or that were athirst, or that were sick, or that had not been nourished; and they did not set their hearts upon riches; therefore they were liberal to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, whether out of the church or in the church, having no respect to persons as to those who stood in need. (Alma 1:30)

How much that passage from the first chapter of Alma sounds like the wonder that was Nauvoo. Said the Prophet Joseph in that blessed time: “Respecting how much a man . . . shall give . . . we have no special instructions. . . . ; he is to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to provide for the widow, to dry up the tear of the orphan, to comfort the afflicted, whether in this church, or in any other, or in no church at all, wherever he finds them” (Times and Seasons, 15 March 1842, 732).

Remember what the Book of Mormon taught us. It is difficult enough to be poor in material goods, but the greater pain is in the heavy heart, the dwindling hope, the damaged dreams, the parental anguish, the childhood disappointment that almost always attend such circumstances. . . .

MY God, who has blessed all of us so mercifully and many of us so abundantly, bless us with one thing more. May he bless us to hear the often silent cries of the sorrowing and the afflicted, the downtrodden, the disadvantaged, the poor. Indeed may he bless us to hear the whispering of the Holy Spirit when any neighbor anywhere “is suffering,” and to “drop everything and come running.”
TIRED of the wait between SUNSTONE issues? Want to connect with friends between symposiums?

VISIT THE SUNSTONE BLOG!


FROM RECENT DISCUSSIONS:

The Pampered Spouse
STEPHEN CARTER, 19 June
. . . . They talked at length about their husbands and their unwillingness to do the temple thing when one woman piped up with comforting words . . . : “Don’t worry about it. When you get to heaven and your husband isn’t there, you’ll be free to date again and find someone else to be sealed to. . . .” Everyone seemed genuinely pleased at the prospect.

For Men Only?
JANA REMY, 25 August
My question is why women don’t gravitate towards Sunstone as often as men do? Does Sunstone need to work harder to reach out to women? And if so, what are those particularly female needs that aren’t being addressed in current Sunstone efforts?

For Better For Worse
LISA TENSMEYER HANSEN, 29 August
. . . Some couples find themselves closer after addressing a religious-spiritual divide, and others find themselves alienated from one another—even if they stay together. . . .
Have you experienced being out-of-balance in a relationship because of religious concerns, doubts, or spiritual questions? What casualties have you suffered and was the price worth it, or was it too great—in retrospect? If you’ve reached a truce or resolution with a partner, what are the guideposts to avoiding all-out chaos?

Heretic Today, Prophet Tomorrow?
MATT THURSTON, 31 August
. . . How does a faithful Latter-day Saint dissent and not be branded a heretic, or worse, an apostate? . . . What does one do when personal beliefs contradict Church doctrine, policy, or revelation? Ignore personal revelation and put your faith in the leaders of the Church? Quietly abstain with regards to the issue in question, keep your opinion to yourself, and openly support the Church in all other endeavors? Groan to friends and family members and occasionally pop off in Elders Quorum? Write an editorial for the Salt Lake Tribune?

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WHICH NOW OF THESE THREE, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves? — LUKE 10:36