An alternative interpretation of THE SIN NEXT TO MURDER by Michael R. Ash (p.34)

SCARLET THREADS IN THE LINEAGE OF JESUS by H. Parker Blount (p.44)

Capener contest winner John Dewey Remy compares Japanese and Mormon rites for SAVING THE DEAD (p.14)

AN OUTLAW’S MANIFESTO England essay contest winner by E. George Goold (p.52)

Karen Rosenbaum’s Brown fiction contest winner PARADISE PAVED (p.56)

Interview with filmmaker Richard Dutcher (p.67)

UPDATE Mormonism and Politics; and more!
Tired of the wait between SUNSTONE issues? Want to connect with friends between symposiums?

VISIT THE SUNSTONE BLOG!


FROM RECENT DISCUSSIONS:

Not of this Fold?
JOHN REMY, 5 September
I wonder, however, what defines the Sunstone community in belief terms? Where do its cognitive and discursive boundaries lie? . . . I know that some of my good friends in Sunstone are driven by a desire to keep people in the Church. I’m curious how many Sunstone supporters share this motivation. Are there those who focus more on the individual’s journey (which may lead out of or back into the Church fold) and less on the institution and community?

Miserable, Broke, and Ugly
RORY SWENSEN, 13 September
Does God want you to be rich? That’s the question posed in this week’s TIME magazine cover story as it details the rise of yet another form of Prosperity Theology. . . . Now I’m certainly not desiring to be miserable, poor, broke, and ugly—but Mormon teachings inspire me to celebrate the nature of this world and muddle through, . . . inspire me to a belief in a loving God that trusts us and allows us to grow.

Perfect Attention
SCOT DENHALTER, 24 October
I was stunned to recently read that the human mind wanders every six to ten seconds. . . . The spiritual ramifications of this are a bit troubling. During a simple two-minute prayer, my intent to commune with God is temporarily derailed as many as 20 times (Geez, I hate cilantro!) But what if God’s mind also wanders? How could it not?

Because Life Seems Too Rich for an Abbreviated Stay
JANA REMY, 3 November
I think about dying a lot. In fact, I am downright terrified that I will die soon. . . . While I find some solace in the notion that I will be reunited with loved ones after death, this doesn’t comfort my anxiety about having so many things still yet to experience in mortality. For me, life is so impossibly beautiful that I’m holding tight to this earth and not looking forward to anything beyond. So I have to wonder . . . Are you afraid of death? Do you think the Buddhist idea of reincarnation can be incorporated into a Mormon worldview? What is it that you most hope to do before you die?

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NOVEMBER 2006

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Cover photo by Emily Hatch
PRIVILEGE

P D. MALLAMO’S ARTICLE, "ANYTHANG Will Help" (SUNSTONE, September 2006), has lingered with me. I smelled it while visiting family in California and sat down to read and digest it fully once my issue arrived in the mail.

Mallamo captures the tension between Christian belief and practice. To give or not to give? That is the question. Despite clear scriptural instructions, more often than not, I've clutched my purse closer and kept walking. I can't count the number of times I’ve gone blind, deaf, or defensive when faced with a street person's extended hand.

Instead, I've counted on someone else to do good—maybe someone who’s less judgmental or less of a bean counter than I. My dad's generosity on the street and his volunteer work at the homeless shelter offsets my tight-fistedness, doesn’t it? I'm chagrined to know the answer to that question and to persist in thinking I'm off the hook.

Every notice that when you really need to learn something, the way is made clear for it to be knocked into your thick skull, regardless? When I got home from California, my husband said we would be picking up a man from the local veteran's home and bringing him to church. Indefinitely.

Last Sunday was my first time meeting Richard. He was quick to tell his story: divorced, lost everything, ended up homeless. He's never been baptized—said the missionar to church. Indefinitely.

To echo Mallamo's question, what good things could we bring to each other's lives? I'll get to find out on the way to and from church every week. That feels not like a duty, but a privilege.

As a Mormon missionary, I spent two years in Peru. The teeming number of street beggars was a shock with which I was emotionally ill-prepared to cope. I tried at first to give a little something and was mobbed. It seemed an impossible situation, so I shut down. I told myself I was there to feed the spirit and not the body.

Here at home, as a graduate student at the University of Utah, I lived in a small, downtown apartment and daily negotiated the same streets Mallamo frequents. But seduced by idealized notions of self-reliance and free will, and armed with a self-serving adoption of the philosophy of "tough-love," I avoided seeing what Mallamo regards with existential discipline.

I don't know what I can do to help solve the problem of homelessness. I am not much of a joiner; besides, I am uncomfortable with do-gooders. (They so often do more harm that good.) I only know that I can no longer look away.

SCOT DENHALTER
Syracuse, Utah

RECOUNTING BLESSINGS

I MMEDIATELY UPON READING IN your September 2006 issue Ken Driggs’s article about his years, experience, and feelings as a public defender, I gave it to my husband, Glen, a retired attorney. When we lived in Connecticut many years ago, because of our Church membership, he inherited similar cases. Although he practiced real estate and property law, he was the only Connecticut-licensed attorney in our stake. Other LDS attorneys were licensed across the border in New York. So Len got the calls to represent “members” who’d been caught shoplifting, abusing or abandoning spouse and/or children, assaulting someone—any non-Christian, non-humane behavior.

Glen often said, preferentially when our six children were present, “As I walk into prisons, I know I can go right back out. My business card is a ‘Get Out of Jail Free’ ticket.” Officials always treat me with great respect. I’m given translators. At least one guard and officials always treat me with great respect. I’m given translators. At least one guard and

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RECOUNTING BLESSINGS

Mallamo's journalistic realism does justice to a subject all too often addressed with glib sentimentality or righteous self-justification.

As a Mormon missionary, I spent two years in Peru. The teeming number of street beggars was a shock with which I was emotionally ill-prepared to cope. I tried at first to give a little something and was mobbed. It seemed an impossible situation, so I shut down. I told myself I was there to feed the spirit and not the body.

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Scot Denhalter
Syracuse, Utah

THE SUNSTONE EDUCATION FOUNDATION

The mission of The Sunstone Education Foundation is to sponsor open forums of Mormon thought and experience. Under the motto, “Faith Seeking Understanding,” we encourage humanitarian service, honest interchange of ideas that is respectful of all people and what they hold sacred. We encourage humanitarian service, honest interchange of ideas that is respectful of all people and what they hold sacred. We encourage humanitarian service, honest interchange of ideas that is respectful of all people and what they hold sacred.

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“And when I hear the people’s awful stories—well, I just pray none of you will ever experience it!”

Of course, while reading about Driggs’s clients and their needs, their lacks, I’d cried about my too often forgetting God’s blessings of physical and mental health, family, education, Church and other good teachers and guides and material comforts.

After Glen read, tears started down his cheek. He nodded and gulped as if having like feelings. When at last able to speak, he said, “That man is truly a Christian. A Saint”

JOAN CARROLL
Salt Lake City, Utah

RESTORED PERSPECTIVE

I FEEL LIKE I AM WRITING A LETTER TO the Ensign or LDS Living in saying the September 2006 issue of SUNSTONE “touched my heart.” From the first page to the last, it spoke to me about my small role in this sometimes cold, cruel world in which we live.

One of my favorite quotations comes from the epigraph to Kurt Vonnegut’s novel Bluebeard. The quotation is from a letter to Vonnegut from his son Mark, who had suffered from schizophrenia. The younger Vonnegut said, “We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is.”

I’ve often thought that a difference between the Vonneguts and me as a Latter-day Saint is that I know what this “thing” is; we call it the Plan of Salvation.

I’ve spent the last twenty years working in the welfare/child support system in New York. Because of the bureaucratic mazes and rules and regulations, it’s hard to come home feeling as if I helped, that I lightened a fellow sojourner’s burdens. Clients tend to become a case number rather than a person. It becomes easy to lose perspective.

The September 2006 issue was an impetus for self-evaluation to see if I am really “willing to mourn with those that mourn” and “comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9). Sadly, I must say that I fall short.

My thanks to the good people who put this issue of SUNSTONE together. The articles pointed out to me personal deficiencies and provided insights that restored lost perspective. I thank all who contributed articles to this issue. I appreciated this issue enough to order extra copies to share with others.

JIM HARRIS
Saugerties, New York

OPPOSITE OF EMPTY

IN HIS LETTER IN THE SEPTEMBER 2006 SUNSTONE, Max Rammell indicates that he sees little value in what he called my “take on President McKay’s thoughts on meditation” in my article, “Mormon Mantras: A Journey of Spiritual Transformation” (SUNSTONE, April 2006). As a clarification, my use of President McKay’s comments on meditation wasn’t really a “take on” as much as it was a “take off on” his thoughts, particularly where he attributes two key elements to spirituality: consciousness of victory over self and communion with the Infinite. In the article, I deal with both of these in detail and share techniques that have the potential to lead one to greater awareness and increased ability to live a godly life.

How Rammell can claim to have “carefully” read the article several times and then conclude that I was advocating “emptying our minds and thus becoming an inert and useless person” is a mystery to me. In the article, I advocate for transformation, awakening, expanded free agency, direct-conscious communion with God, and the nourishment and unfolding of Christlike qualities in our day-to-day living. One of the section headings is, “True meditation is not a blank mind but an awakened spirit!”

I can understand a Latter-day Saint not being comfortable with a classic meditation technique, as it is foreign to typical Mormon spiritual practice, but I don’t understand the compulsion to distort the clear focus and purpose of the article. I encourage Rammell to re-read the article, looking past his preconceived notions about the nature and practice of meditation.

PHILIP G. McLEMORE
West Point, Utah

Letters for publication are edited for clarity, tone, and space. Send them to <editor@sunstoneonline.com>.

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

HONEST JON
by Jonathan David Clark

A message from a semi-convert
MY MISSION PRESIDENT, Sanfred W. Elieson, told us to write home every week. For the most part, I did. English-speaking Texas was a single mission when I served there, and after three months training in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas, I was sent to Odessa, in west Texas, the oil-workers’ counterpart to the Midlands of George H. W. Bush. I not only wrote home every week and wrote a weekly report to President Elieson, I also wrote to several girls—nowadays we’d call them young women, but since I was still a boy all through my mission, I thought of them as girls and wrote to them as girls.

Because I was still awkward in my dealings with girls, I acted like an adolescent around them, even in letters. On one hot, dry, flat August Monday morning in Odessa, for reasons best left to the imagination, I wrote one of those letters to one of those girls, a Valerie, in yellow marker. I wrote the letter on white, lined paper, so I could see the letters as I wrote, and I could still read them even after I’d finished. On both sides of the leaf. Valerie was a friend I’d met at BYU, a California girl I was writing to; at the time, I considered the letter not so much an attempt to communicate as the communication of that attempt.

I’ll never be able to confirm that, or anything else about the letter, because Valerie burned it along with all the others I’d sent her, thinking I was trying to drive her away. After we were married, nearly four years later, I picked up a box of letters bearing 1960s postmarks from several Florida cities. I can no longer recall what I was looking for in the boxes of papers, memorabilia, and photographs. My mother had lovingly collected for each family member. I serendipitously discovered a stack of letters written by Valerie to an unknown recipient.

WHEN OUR CHILDREN were all living at home, Valerie created a family log (instead of a diary, which would have centered on her). When, years later, our children started to leave home, first for school and missions, then for work and marriage, we both wrote to them, and they answered. By then we had a computer and could process the letters before printing and mailing them. Valerie always erased her letters from the computer once printed, not wanting to clutter the hard drive. If I got to the computer before she erased them, I’d save them.

By then I’d lived with Valerie long enough to know that her letters were sparkling, clever accounts of what was going on in our lives. I liked to read them for several reasons, but the primary one was her voice—the same voice that had sustained me as a missionary. It was bright, witty, interested in each child, concerned with what concerned them, and though I gave as my reason for reading the letters that I could know what I didn’t need to cover in my own letter, my real motive was to read what she had written.

When we started to use email, that all changed. With our family’s dispersal to New York, Washington, California, Korea, and Illinois, she conceived a new family log, one of all the emails we wrote to keep in touch. It became her project to keep and edit the emails into a narrative of our diaspora. She is still the energy for that keeping in touch, still the one writing freely and happily to let our children know what we’re doing, still the one finding clever ways to look at our lives. Thanks to her, we have a home for our letters, our letters home.

DENNIS CLARK
Orem, Utah

TOUCHSTONES is a SUNSTONE section that debuted in the December 2005 issue. It was inspired by “Readers Write” in The SUN magazine. TOUCHSTONES topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for personal expression. Writing style is not as important as the contributor’s thoughtfulness, humor, and sincerity. SUNSTONE reserves the right to edit pieces, but contributors will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication.

To submit a reflection, please send it typed and double-spaced to SUNSTONE, 343 North Third West, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84103. Electronic submissions can be sent via email to TOUCHSTONES editor Allen Hill at: allen@sunstoneonline.com. Due to space limitations, submissions should be kept somewhere around 400 words, but we are willing to make exceptions for exceptional pieces. Please submit right away for upcoming topics.

Upcoming Topics:

THE WARD
POSESSIONS
FAMILY DINNER
for anything old, anything me, anything McDonald, anything Idaho.

Reading through the mission letters that afternoon calmed my uneasiness. While I remember my father telling stories of his days in Florida, the letters provided unfiltered access to life in the mission field. Always addressed “Dear Mom and Dad,” the correspondence told of many rejections, struggles with companions, thoughts of home, the kindness of members, and a constant plea that more people would write. A letter dated April 1964 from Gainesville recounted the excitement of meeting and teaching that sought-after “golden contact,” one who immediately responded to the message. The man gave “the most wonderful prayers that I have ever heard a contact give; he asked the Lord to help him to be worthy of baptism (sic) and of the true church,” wrote the energized missionary. Throughout its five pages, the letter convinced readers, even if thirty years distant, of the joys in bringing souls to Christ. I tucked the letter into one of my suitcases.

A letter dated April 1964 from Gainesville recounted the excitement of meeting and teaching that sought-after “golden contact,” one who immediately responded to the message. The man gave “the most wonderful prayers that I have ever heard a contact give; he asked the Lord to help him to be worthy of baptism (sic) and of the true church,” wrote the energized missionary. Throughout its five pages, the letter convinced readers, even if thirty years distant, of the joys in bringing souls to Christ. I tucked the letter into one of my suitcases.

I carried that letter with me every day of my mission. A little worse for the wear, my father’s modern day epistle provided great comfort, encouragement, and a little bit of home whenever I needed it most. When my younger brother left for the plains of South Dakota a few years later, it went with him as well.

DYLAN J. MCDONALD
Sacramento, California

AFTER I FOUND my birth mother’s phone number, I decided to write her a letter rather than call, thinking I might stumble less over my words. Looking back, I don’t remember a word I wrote, only the feeling that I tried to approach the topic subtly, rather than accusing her of giving birth to me and then giving me up.

She called two days later, the instant she got the letter. My husband, who I hadn’t told about my secret search for my birth mother, answered the phone. He had no idea who she was. When he questioned her, she hung up quickly. I called later that night. From miles away, all I could tell was that this wasn’t the best moment for her to discuss things with me. During intermittent conversations over the next few months, I gradually understood that while my adoption was the ace in the hand I had been dealt, for her, feeling that she needed to give me up was worse than any bad card she could have received. It represented being thrown out of the game at the age of twenty. She said the time when she relinquished me was so painful that she had mentally blanked out most events so they seemed almost like dreams to her now. Yet moments later, she said she clearly remembered torn emotions as she had signed the paper allowing me to be adopted.

I sought warmth and bonding; she granted me crumbs. She didn’t have to tell me that I was her deep, dark secret. Our conversations felt furtive and stolen. I sensed she was oddly flattered by my attention, yet her mood could turn cold mid-sentence. Sounding wistful, she said that my birth father looked handsome in white and that her own father had once published articles in the Saturday Evening Post. Yet if I asked a “wrong” question—such as wanting to know my grandfather’s name—oops, I stepped on a land mine—she would clam up, turn icy, or say she had to get off the phone.

She said she would tell her three children about me someday, “when they are grown.” Still unwilling to accept her reluctance, I continued to call and write every few months or years. My gestures were met with pained endurance from which I pried rare bits of enlightening information. Her father had survived diphtheria. She had never missed a
My parents and grandmother drove to Rexburg to drop me off. It was very emotional for all of us as they deposited me and the pile of belongings I had so carefully collected during the previous months. I cried as they drove away. None of the other five girls had arrived yet, so after drying my eyes, I waited hopefully—how could there not be one or two girls I would have a lot in common with?

Within a few hours, our apartment had six total tenants—all but me from California—and a couple of them who knew each other already. As the days went by, I felt more and more isolated and bewildered by my roommates’ behavior. While one other girl and I got up each morning to attend class (I had missionary prep at 8:00), the others slept in and rarely, if ever, went to class. I had trouble understanding how the girls could steal bottles of ketchup from the local restaurant, or buy a pair of pants, wear them on a date, and then return them for cash. Each day while I was in class, my roommates puttered around the apartment, rearranging furniture and trying on clothes from all the closets. I never knew what new position my bed or other belongings would be in when I returned, and I worried about my things being looked through and possibly taken while I was out for so many hours. Their behavior went against my values, which had been formed through eighteen years of Primary and Young Women’s teachings. While one of the girls spoke several times about her wonderful experience serving two weeks with the missionary sisters in her local ward shortly before coming to school, she and my other roommates attended church only once during our months together.

It was the week that my roommates attended that my student ward Relief Society president noticed me. After the meetings (I had been crying homesick tears through much of sacrament meeting), that dear president asked about my well-being and remarked how different I was from my roommates. Knowing that she cared and had taken the time to talk to me, I felt better. In those few words, she voiced the feelings of loneliness I had been experiencing.

I don’t know if the two girls who visited me shortly after that Sunday had been assigned by our Relief Society president or if they had likewise been moved by the Spirit to reach out to me. But I won’t forget the day Donna Davis and Robin Troumbley knocked on my door and handed me a card. They introduced themselves and said they lived a few doors down. They left after letting me know I was welcome to visit their place any time. In the privacy of my room I opened the card, which said, “Whenever you’re in a jam, just give me a call, and I’ll come running with the bread and peanut butter.”

It was a silly card with silly lines, but my entire Ricks experience changed from then on. I moved in with Donna and Robin the next semester. At last I was “home.”

LORRI WOTHERSPOON
Tooele, Utah
FROM THE EDITOR

PIVOTING THE SACRED

By Dan Wotherspoon

"Give me a place to stand and a lever, and I will move the whole earth."

—ARCHIMEDES

HISTORIAN OF RELIGION Jonathan Z. Smith tells the story of a moment of insight into the dynamics of religious life that he gained while working on a dairy farm. One of the requirements of his job was to rise at 3:45 a.m. in order to build a fire in the stove and heat the pan of water the farmer used to wash himself each morning when he arose a half hour later. After meticulous scrubbing, the farmer would then proceed outside and immediately pick up a handful of soil and rub it all over his hands. After Smith witnessed this ritual for a few weeks—and perhaps sensing a possible way for him to enjoy an extra thirty minutes of sleep if he didn’t have to rise to ready the stove and water—Smith asked the farmer about the incongruity between his careful washing and just-as-deliberate dirtying.

To Smith’s query, the farmer annoyingly replied: “Don’t you city boys understand anything? Inside the house it’s dirt; outside, it’s earth. You must take it off inside to eat and be with your family. You must put it on outside to work and be with the animals.”

Dirt. Earth. Same stuff, entirely different meanings. Later that summer, the farmer continued Smith’s schooling on the relationship between something’s substance and its esteem: “There’s really no such plant as a weed. A rose bush, growing in my cornfield, is a weed. In my flower garden—thistles, mullen and goldenrod make right smart plants, if you keep them under control.”

Because Smith’s farmer was so deeply immersed in a life in which he had to carve out his existence in the borderlands between the human and natural realms, he was more aware than most of us of his role as a creator of his own world. He understood, as Smith writes, that meaning is assigned according to “situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed.”

The French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep coined the phrase “the pivoting of the sacred” to describe the fluidity in which the same substance, object, action, or even person, can be viewed as sacred in one context and profane in another. His work demonstrates that, just as in the case of the farmer’s meticulous washing, it is usually through ritual and accompanying myths that things are vested with meaning, declared pure or dangerous, imbued with power or culled as insignificant.

I WAS reminded of Smith’s farmer and van Gennep’s pivoting as I worked with the articles by Mike Ash and Parker Blount in this issue. Each deals, at least in part, with religious understandings of sex—and what pivots more than sex when it comes to the way it is viewed on the sacred/profane scale? Within marriage, sex is holy, the highest expression of love, the means of mystical union with one another and the divine; in the farmer’s scheme, it is soil. Outside marriage, sexual activity is unholy, a base expression of lust and selfish desires, spirit-stunting; it’s dirt. Sexual relations between a man and a woman are declared natural, godly; between members of the same sex, carnal, devilish.

But though both Ash and Blount’s articles start as inquiries about sex—especially sexual sin and the severity scales by which transgressions in this area are weighed—they quickly diverge and take us into two different but deeply significant areas, different matters around which so much that defines us pivots.

Following a scripture trail that leads deep into the core of Christ’s message, Ash makes sacred the intents of our heart. In re-examining Alma’s rebuke of his son Corianton who had committed that which is “most abominable above all other sins” (Alma 39:5), and which Church leaders have most often interpreted as Corianton’s sexual dalliance with the harlot Isabel, Ash’s study leads us to re-evaluate the way we teach and care for others. Could that “sin next to murder” in seriousness be related more to ego, selfish desires, judgmentalness, and lack of charity to others, especially children (literally and figuratively) in the gospel, than to with whom and in what situations we have sex? Ash’s arguments are compelling, and I appreciate his reminder of the sacred trust I’ve been given—or better, the trust I make sacred through my activities and the meaning I imbue them with—to build and nurture others instead of trying to wow or gleefully shock them with the breadth of my learning or peculiar philosophies.

Whereas Ash’s musings make sacred our heart’s intent, Blount’s makes holy its receptiveness to grace, its ability to forgive ourselves our trespasses just as God forgives them. Blount recounts the stories of four biblical women who (though honored by Matthew in his naming them in the lineage through which the Savior descended) would each be considered by today’s sex-obsessed morality standard as being tainted. Then through moving accounts drawn from his own experiences, he broadens our view of what it might mean to be virtuous. His reflections remind us how we so easily forget that we, like Smith’s farmer, pivot the sacred each moment, judging things as this in one context and that in another. But, more important, Blount reminds us that God often pivots the holy quite differently.

I’VE always felt reluctant to embrace the full implications of the plan of salvation, uncertain that I want the responsibilities of creation and judgment should I seek to truly realize my divine potential. Smith’s farmer reminds me of the futility of such fretting. I can’t escape those responsibilities. I create each day I am Archimedes with a lever, moving the whole earth. With my judgments, I pivot the sacred. May I be more graceful with others and myself in the way I imbue them with—to build and nurture others instead of trying to wow or gleefully shock them with the breadth of my learning or peculiar philosophies.

NOTES


SEATTLE SUNSHINE

ON A BRIGHT, crisp Seattle day, the 2006 Sunstone Northwest Symposium drew nearly eighty people to the home of Roy and Molly Bennion for fantastic discussions that ranged from Old Testament women to Alfred Hitchcock’s use of the Book of Mormon in his final film, and ran the gamut from personal journeys to politics and religion in the Middle East. Nearly fifty people also attended a screening of the film States of Grace the night before the main event.

SYMPOSIUM SNAPSHOTs

• The discussion following Parker Blount’s session: what everyone dreams Gospel Doctrine class would be
• Energetic singing and Steve Jones’s cymbal playing during “God of Our Fathers”
• Shirley Paxman on everything from architecture to the Stepford wives
• Twenty or so people engaging J. Bonner Ritchie a full fifteen minutes after his presentation on the Middle East
• “Colorful” memories from Levi Peterson
• Post-symposium jam session with Ardean and Merrill Watts on jazz piano and sax with Tom and Skye Pixton improvising on “Nearer My God to Thee” and “We Thank Thee, O God, For a Prophet”

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5. A MORMON LIFE, Shirley Paxman
6. THE MIDDLE EAST STRUGGLE: ROOTS, REALITY, PROSPECTS FOR A LASTING PEACE, J. Bonner Ritchie
7. LOOKING FOR SIGNIFICANCE IN EVERYDAY EVENTS, Levi Peterson

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THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Sunstone is celebrating TEN YEARS in its office home at 343 N. Third West in Salt Lake City!

If you have an opportunity, please drop by this holiday season.

Other than the editor’s office, it’s usually in presentable shape!
FOR MOST OF US, THE CHRISTMAS SEASON IS A busy time, and we like it that way. We love the earthy drama of it—the lights, the sights, the music, the good smells. We especially enjoy the satisfactions that flow from exchanging our “labors of Love” with each other. We are glad not to be addicted to pricey objects of desire, knowing how little true worth they convey. We Latter-day Saints stay grounded in our connection to Jesus Christ’s birth into the world.

Each year, Christmas is an opportunity to begin Christ’s mission with him all over again. In a sense, we can watch him grow into the work his Father called him to, and we can grow alongside him into our own given work. We can circle back, as it were, to give ourselves a fresh start.

But there is another, more hidden blessing in this holiday. The gift of stillness and silence. A moment of perfect contemplation.

It is Christmas night in the depth of winter. Everything is simple. There is nothing to be done. Christ is born and in his mother’s arms. Were his parents stopped in their tracks in a manger because that was the will of their Father in Heaven? Did he deliberately create this tableau for all time? Whether created by God or storytellers, whether occurring in winter as we celebrate it, or in spring, one can feel the energy of the scene’s slow configuration.

First there is the little family—Mary of Nazareth, Joseph, son of Heli and husband of Mary, and the babe, lying in a manger; then the animals stabled there are drawn to the child; then angelic voices pull the shepherds into the small, calm center. There is a deep sense of waiting and of potential appropriateness to this season of hibernation. There is wonder, and also a veiled “unknowing” in regard to this child. How does a Messiah’s life go? No one knows yet, but the fact of his birth is enough for now.

The stars are aligned. The Magi have paused in the east as a star came to rest over the Judean child. There is no need to force the moment to be anything other than it is. Yes it will change. According to its own innate rhythm, winter will move into spring, and likewise the life of this child will also change according to his own inner being and destiny.

But tonight is a holy night. It is the “once upon a time” of our most sacred story about a family. We feel its truth and know that it comes with a price; it will mean a lifetime of faith and work for us.

Tonight, however, we are here to be still. We are part of the tableau; we have come from far and near simply to worship.

The last line of the next to last paragraph, “Mean a lifetime of work for us” seems also to need the word “faith” with work. For me it would add the strength of the oft-quoted

MARYLEE MITCHAM
Golden, Colorado

Margin Notes

REMAKING THE WORLD

"Fear not to do good..."
—D&C 6:33

MY DICTIONARY DEFINES FEAR AS: 1) AN unpleasant feeling of apprehension or distress caused by the presence or anticipation of danger, and 2) an idea, thought, or other entity that causes feelings of fear. To me, the most interesting thing about fear is that it does not have its own independent existence. Rather, fear is our reaction to something else. The same objective reality that “causes” fear in us may not in someone else. Fear is the reaction, not the action.

Fearfulness stands in stark contrast to the spirit of God’s call to us in the scriptures. In 2 Nephi 2:25, just after we are told, “men are, that they might have joy,” Lehi notes that as a consequence of the Messiah’s redemption, humans are “free forever, knowing good from evil, to act for themselves and not be acted upon.” To the degree to which we allow outside circumstances and stimuli to dictate our own feelings, moods, and even actions, we are surrendering our ability to act independently. We are agreeing to be acted upon. Too many of us spend too much time waiting for the world to happen around us, and then out of fear or anger or despair (certainly not by conscious choice) find ourselves propelled into action. Eternal progression is not about reacting but about purposely doing good things.

I have a dear friend who says, “I just want to pray, pay, and obey.” Maybe these words resonate somewhere, but I don’t see much sense in them. Surrendering to God and offering up a contrite heart and broken spirit is not at all the same thing as surrendering our God-given agency and innate intelligence in order to pursue an utterly reactive course. I do not believe
there is anything Orwellian about eternal progression: we do not progress by becoming mindless automatons, by reflexively responding. We are required to surrender our willfulness to God, not our will.

In 1 John 4:18, we read that “perfect love casteth out fear.” We all recall that Christ said that in the end, there are only two commandments—the first is to love, and the second is to love. So maybe there is only one commandment in the end: love.

The injunction to love is pretty non-specific, pointing more in a general direction than defining specific modes of action for every one of the infinite number of opportunities we have to act. The specific means through which we express love are up to us to understand and demonstrate, each in our own way. I think Christ is pointing the way for a journey of discovery he wants each of us to take that will challenge us to shape our world and circumstances. If we are filled with love, not only do we abandon fear, but we also become less concerned about and less apt to react to things others try to foist upon us.

The Lord’s command, “fear not to do good,” can be understood to mean that we should let nothing stop us from taking that leap of faith into making our own circumstances, to making or remaking the world around us consistent with the noble ends that God desires for all humankind.

TOM JOACHIM
Oakton, Virginia

NOTE: The purpose of Margin Notes is to invite brief commentaries on passages from scripture or some other religious text. As the title indicates, authors could use their literal margin notes as a springboard toward a discussion of their experience or views on the passage. Margin Notes submissions should begin with a reiteration of the excerpt and should be no more than 500 words long. Please submit reflections to editor Alison Takenaka at: ALISONTAKENAKA @HOTMAIL.COM.
Ward Stories

VEGETATIVE VALIANCY

DISCLAIMER: I haven’t been able to read the official version of this incident in my file at the Strengthening Church Members Office, so this personal account will have to suffice.

SOME YEARS AGO, I WAS A NURSERY WORKER IN A West Jordan, Utah, ward. Traditionally, toward the end of the second hour, we would pass out a picture for the children to color (scribble all over). Those children with more artistic flair than others would even use more than one crayon! Parents would come to pick up their offspring and be presented with the scribbles. Most members know that such a moment borders on a religious experience. The child proudly presents the evidence of said intensely creative output (two- and three-year-olds live at only two speeds: full intensity and unconsciousness) and anxiously waits for parental acknowledgment of the priceless offering. And most parents would respond as if a long-lost Rembrandt had been unearthed in the nursery toy box.

One week, our ward librarian slacked off in copying pictures for us to use, so I undertook to produce something for the kiddies to color. My first effort resulted in line drawings of a tomato, a carrot, a bunch of grapes, and an ear of corn. In a move mostly to entertain myself, I appended to the bottom of the paper a paraphrase from an official Church publication: “In the celestial kingdom, we shall partake of fruits and vegetables that are more valiant than other fruits and vegetables” (Orson Pratt, The Seer, p. 37). The children colored with abandon. In due time, the parents came, received the pictures, effervescently praised the children, and took them home.

The next week I added little smiley faces to drawings of more fruits and vegetables. The apple had two eyes, a nose, and a toothy grin. The grapes also sported jolly expressions. I was trying to show that they were happy being fruits and vegetables. Again I gave into my playful side and added another quotation from one of the Lord’s servants: “That vegetables . . . have spirits is clearly shown from the fact that they have capacities for joy and rejoicing” (Orson Pratt, The Seer, p. 34). At picture time, the nursery leader took one look at my handouts and wouldn’t let me distribute them. The children went home empty-handed that day, and I was released the following Sunday. I’ve wondered ever since if I’m the only Church member ever released from the nursery over a doctrinal issue.

GREG KOFFORD
Sandy, Utah

A Place for Every Truth

THREATS FROM A TROUBLED “PROPHET”

EDITOR’S NOTE: With this issue, SUNSTONE is launching a semi-regular Cornucopia column featuring incidents from the life and ministry of Elder James E. Talmage as compiled by James P. Harris, editor of The Essential James E. Talmage, and who is currently working on a full-length biography of this fascinating Mormon apostle. The column title is taken from a line in Talmage’s famous discourse on evolution, “Earth and Man,” and is inscribed on the apostle’s tombstone: “Within the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is room and place for every truth thus far learned by man or yet to be made known.”

ELDER JAMES E. TALMAGE’S JOURNAL ENTRY FOR Saturday, 9 June 1923, contains a clipping from the Salt Lake Telegram titled, “Death Threat Brings Arrest for Blackmail.” The article states that Orlando J. Langford of Tucson, Arizona, was arrested for threats against LDS Church leaders and other prominent persons, including Henry Ford. Inspector N. J. Salyards investigate Langford at the “instinct of Apostle James E. Talmage and former [Utah] Governor Simon Bamberger.” Salyards followed Langford across four states and arrested him at a ranch near Tucson. “Langford was immediately taken before United States Commissioner Edwin Jones and bound over to the federal court on a charge of misuse of the mails in a scheme to defraud.” The article states that President Heber J. Grant, Charles W. Nibley, presiding bishop, and Apostle John A. Widtsoe of the Mormon

IMPROVING “THE SUNSTONE EXPERIENCE”

A READER WHO RECENTLY GOOGLED THE WORD “SUNSTONE” WAS PLEASED to find that SUNSTONE magazine is the first “hit” in Google’s ranked list of search results. But the reader did a small double take at what appeared in second place: Sunstone Winery, a 78-acre organic vineyard in the Santa Ynez Valley in California.

The logo and font chosen by this winery bear a striking resemblance to ours, and just like us, the winery is always trying to improve “the Sunstone experience,” as they call it. But we believe the similarities end there. While six issues of SUNSTONE cost only $24, six bottles of 2005 rose, their current promotion, cost a steep $99. While attending our four-day summer symposium costs only $75, a single dinner at Sunstone’s Cuvee Cave costs a whooping $125. The clincher: unlike our namesake, at our symposiums, we allow students to taste our products for free.
church, Henry Ford and other men of prominence are known to have been among the recipients of Langford’s letters demanding payment of sums ranging from $500 to $50,000 under threat of harassment by “foul and pernicious spirits and the powers of death and hell until you send it.” Langford’s only known threat of direct personal violence was contained in his latest missive to Dr. Talmage, which was made the basis for Inspector Salyards’ investigation and which contained the following: “And if it be necessary I will slay you.”

The article goes on to say that Langford’s sanity is questioned. In his letters to LDS Church officials, he refers to himself as “The Lord and Thy God.” Langford had a disagreement with Talmage regarding the characterization of “The Son of Man” in Talmage’s book Jesus the Christ. Langford said the title “Son of Man” rightly belonged to him. Langford was also upset because in the only letter Talmage wrote to him, he spelled Langford’s first name as “Orlando.” Langford insisted his name was spelled “Orlando,” although in letters sent to Talmage and other officials he signed his name “Orlando.”

The letters had begun two years prior. When Langford felt his claims were being ignored, he resorted to blackmail and made violent threats. The Telegram article continues:

His letters, mailed from points in several western states, began to demand money to financially aid him in the establishment of his claims [that he was deity]. He built up his mailing list to include other “likely” victims outside the Mormon [C]hurch. From President Grant he demanded at first $500 and when this was ignored he increased the amount to $2500. From Governor Bamberger he asked $50,000. Various amounts were demanded from other victims. In each case he instructed that the funds be deposited with the Utah State National Bank under the name of Strong.

Neither in the article nor in the Talmage Journal is any mention made that the name Strong was a reference to the “One Mighty and Strong” described in Doctrine and Covenants Section 85:7.

In his journal that day, Talmage writes simply:

In common with some others of my brethren, and yet others who are not of the Church, I find myself the subject of some undesirable publicity through the arrest yesterday of Orlando J. Langford at Tucson, Arizona. This poor man is obsessed by the idea that he is a great prophet sent to direct the affairs of the Church in this dispensation; and for several years he has been writing letters to myself and others demanding recognition, in very offensive and abusive terms. President Heber J. Grant, Presiding Bishop Charles W. Nibley, and others have been thus assailed; and during the present year he has coupled with his former demands the payment of sums of money on penalty of dire results for refusal. Of the many accounts appearing in the newspapers one is clipped and incorporated herewith, taken from the Salt Lake Telegram of Saturday, June 9th. I pity the poor fellow, and am entirely devoid of any feeling of resentment respecting him. It was thought best by the First Presidency and the brethren generally to turn over the threatening letters received by President Grant and myself to the federal officials. . . .

Twenty Years Ago in Sunstone

FOR HEAVEN’S SAKE

Elbert Eugene Peck began his nearly fifteen-year tenure as SUNSTONE editor with “My Burden Is Light,” a reflection published in the November 1986 issue, from which the following is excerpted.

I CAUTIOUSLY BEGIN THIS EDITORSHIP. . . . BY borrowing a Robert Frost quote that integrates fun with purpose to describe my reasons:

Only where love and need are one
And the work is play for mortal sakes
Is the deed ever really done
For heaven and the future’s sakes.

Because of the impact SUNSTONE may have on its readers’ mortal work for heaven’s sake, they deserve to know how the editor views the Church and what his agenda is for the magazine. . . .

Like most SUNSTONE readers, I am acquainted with the disillusionment that comes from discovering that things are not as I was taught and believed; with the despair from realizing that nothing in heaven functions as it ought; and with the cynicism from concluding that things may never change. I have responded with outrage and indifference, apologetics and avoidance, love and hate. I have screamed “a plague on both your houses” upon finding that the “liberal” reformers are polluted by the very vices they decry—malicious gossip, presumptuous judging, blind pride, arrogant intolerance, and unforgiving memories. I’ve agonized when the schisms between groups and individuals demanded me to take sides, dividing loves and thoughts when my heart and mind yearned to be one. Lastly, of course, I have frightened in introspective moments upon seeing a spiritual darkness growing in my own soul and wept, remembering my lighthearted days when scriptures were revelations; prayers answered; truths simple and sure; prophets omniscient; and sins forgiven.

In one such moment, I returned home. Home to what I still knew was true: To a mortal yet divine church; to a believing community essential for spiritual growth; and to communion with a loving God. Still, I was not the same person I was before I left the Garden.

I now believe fewer things than I did before, but in what I believe, I am more certain. . . . If I’m tentative about dogma, I’m passionate about establishing Zion: which cause combines all my diverse attributes into one; which cause draws me to Sunstone in search of intellectual and spiritual understanding and also for community.
NEW CATEGORIES ADDED TO TESTIMONY SAFARI GAME

By Sean McKissick

Fans of Young, Kimball, Pratt, and McConkie’s (a division of Hasbro) church meeting survival series are excited by the latest update to Testimony Safari. The new categories are:

- Juicy confession of past sins (15 points)
- Juicier confession of past sins of other members of the congregation (30 points)
- Bishop shares his testimony of marriage (10 points)
- Your girlfriend shares her testimony of marriage (20 points)
- "I recently had the opportunity to . . ." (5 points)
- "I felt inspired to . . ." (10 points)
- "I brought my gun in order to . . ." (30 points)
- Testimony runs too long; bishop tells you to stop (20 points)
- Testimony runs too long; angelic host with flaming swords descends and tells you to stop (75 points)
- "Booger" (50 points)

Humble to come forward and claim credit for their deeds. But let me say it anyway. Thank you!

ALYSSA MAY
Spanish Fork

FROM THE PLANET NEAREST UNTO KOKAUBEAM
WARD NEWSLETTER

Dear “Brother Ha Ha” (you know who you are),

You are not funny. I told a free agency joke last sacrament meeting that went, “I’m supposed to give my talk on free agency, but I decided to use my free agency and not give my talk.” Now that was funny. But you—you are not funny. Please study the humor section of The New Era and the movie, The Home Teachers. Those are very funny. Hopefully you can learn something from them.

BROTHER BUTLER
Ward Activities Committee

NOVEMBER 2006
SAVING THE DEAD

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POST-FUNERAL RITES IN JAPANESE AND MORMON CULTURE

By John Dewey Remy

Although funerary rites are nearly universal, ritual systems based on continuing relationships between the dead and the living are less common. Two such systems of veneration for the dead include rites practiced by the Japanese and those by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Intrigued by this shared trait between two otherwise very different cultures, I set out to learn more about each system by holding them next to each other in an in-depth comparative study. Although I recognized from the start the problems inherent in comparing the ritual practices of a particular religious tradition with the much broader, syncretistic system of Japanese ancestral worship, I was very pleased with what I found: my research revealed interesting similarities and differences. The most striking difference I noticed is the strong relationship between time and Japanese ritual and between place and Mormon temple ordinances. While Japanese rites venerating ancestors have to be performed at particular times, Mormon ordinances for the dead can be performed only in LDS temples—specific sacred locales. A fascinating similarity is the existence of the contractual relationships that exist between the living and the dead in both religious cultures.

Cognitive Context

What principles bind the various rituals for the dead into coherent systems within Japan and Mormonism?

Because Buddhism and death are so closely associated in Japan, and because ancestor worship is supported by Buddhist priests, many rites are conducted in the home at the family butsudan (literally, “Buddhist altar”), and the dead spirit is often called hotoke (Buddha). Given these meanings, we may be tempted to assume that Japanese death rites are primarily Buddhist in nature. However, Japanese attitudes towards death are highly syncretistic. Ancestor veneration in Japan is a complex mix of traditions, beliefs, and practices. In addition to Buddhist funerary rites, one can find Shinto concepts about the impurity of death, Taoist geomancy, and Confucian ideals of loyalty and filial piety. When these elements are mixed together, they form the core concept of ancestor worship in Japan: the idea that the spirits of individual ancestors depend on rites performed by their descendants in order to achieve their ultimate destiny of incorporation into the ancestral spirit.

Through a series of rites, the spirit moves from impure association with death to ultimate assimilation into the pure and...
godlike ancestral spirit. William LaFleur explains that with each successive rite, the family perceives “that the deceased is more and more rarefied—at least as someone with whom the living need to deal.” Following key ceremonies, a wooden ancestral tablet representing the spirit is sometimes moved to higher platforms, a symbolic gesture that recognizes the ancestor’s increasing status and refinement in the afterlife. The final state of the spirit represents an anonymous amalgamation of all of the spirits of family ancestors, whose purpose is to ensure the prosperity of their line. By taking care of their dead, the living Japanese are entitled, in return, to the protection and helpful intervention of their empowered predecessors.

Mormon veneration for the dead, on the other hand, springs from the doctrine first taught by Joseph Smith that all people—living and dead—are required to receive specified religious ordinances to qualify for eternal salvation in God’s kingdom. Because one cannot participate in these ordinances without a physical body, the disembodied spirits of the dead are at a disadvantage but can overcome this obstacle if the living stand in as proxies for them.

Joseph Smith also taught that family relationships can survive beyond bodily death. Through temple sealing, the family can theoretically have a chain of death-proof bonds extending all the way back to Adam. Indeed, this is one of the ultimate goals of Mormon temple work for the dead—to create patriarchal bonds in an unbroken chain back to the father and patriarch of all humanity.

Mormons are taught that their eternal livelihood depends in part on the diligence with which they perform these necessary rites for their dead. Joseph Smith taught the Saints that “if they neglected to search out their dead and provide by proxy the means for their salvation, they did so at the peril of their own salvation, for the living could not be made perfect without their dead.”

**SAVING RITES**

**Assisting one’s ancestors on the path to godhood**

**RITUALS PERFORMED BY** the living for the dead form the building blocks for social frameworks in which relationships between the living and the dead can exist. The contexts for these relationships differ greatly between the two cultures. In Japan, the passage of time defines the ritual relationship, while within Mormonism, it is location that constrains the ritual interaction between the living and the dead. In Japan, rites for the dead are closely associated with events that occur at ritually significant times; within Mormonism, saving ordinances for the dead must take place within the temple.

I do not mean that location is not important to the observance of Japanese rites for the dead. These take place in a variety of locales—some at the Buddhist temple, some at the butsudan within the home, and others within the village during the Bon festival. Time, however, is the primary factor when considering the progression of the shirei (lit. “dead spirit”), or new dead, along its path to joining the sorei (ancestral spirit).

The period of time that has elapsed since the death of a family member changes the nature of the decedent’s relationship with the living relatives. Each death in Japan begins a new series of memorial rites that mark the progression of the spirit over time from shirei to sorei—from association with the impure corpse to the more benign ancestral spirit to its ultimate assimilation into the collective ancestral spirit. Through this process, the spirit is completely pacified, loses all individuality, and joins the corporate ancestor at the thirty-third anniversary of its death—the survivors have done all that they were required to do and have nothing to fear from the spirit from this point forward.

These memorials (senzo huyō) consist primarily of sutra chanting by Buddhist priests on behalf of the deceased (in ceremonies sponsored by surviving relatives). They typically occur on important anniversaries, including the first, third, seventh, and every six years after that, up to the thirty-third. These less frequent services are augmented by regular ritual attention paid to the memory of the deceased at the home altar. Relatives may light incense and present small daily offerings to the deceased. Some anniversaries are more important than others.

The forty-ninth day (shijuhunichi) memorial, hatsubon celebration, and thirty-third death anniversary memorial mark significant changes in the status of the dead spirit and its relationship with the living. During the first seven weeks, the spirit is still strongly associated with the body, and the physical presence of the deceased is reinforced by the frequency of the rites during this period. The spirit is also dangerous and unpredictable at this time. The forty-ninth day rite marks the end of the mourning period. At this time, the spirit essentially picks up and moves out of the home and settles in the grave. When this happens, attitudes within the family toward the deceased change.

Certain seasons are also closely associated with the dead. Of these annual events, the Bon festival in August is the most important. The first Bon celebration after death (hatsubon) is a critical event both for the capricious and unrefined spirits of the new dead and for their surviving relatives. Hatsubon observances are intended to appease and send off the spirits of those who died since the previous Bon celebration. The hatsubon is considered a rite of passage for the new dead; they become “purified ancestral spirits” during this celebration. This first Bon celebration for a family who has lost a loved one since the previous summer is thick with death significance.

After the rites of the hatsubon, the families of the deceased (and the surrounding community) can rest a bit now that the their recent dead have passed from the more dangerous and unpredictable shirei state to the more sedate, benevolent, and private sorei state. The spirit settles into a long period of purification through family memorials as it slowly progresses to its final state of incorporation into the collective ancestral spirit.

The final rite is performed on the thirty-third anniversary of the death. The ceremonies performed at this time mark the spirit’s final incorporation into the collective ancestral spirit. In
some locales, the spirit is explicitly said to become a god at this point (hotoke wa kami ni nari).9

This survey of the Japanese ritual timeframe reveals that death is not an immediate event but a gradual one. Death is both a biological and cultural event.10 Japanese scholar Kuroda Hideo connects the process of aging and senility with decreasing concern for the things of this world (konoyo) and the beginning of the transition into that world (anoyo), or the world of the spirits.11 This transition continues after death through the long process of joining the ancestors.

Mormonism also has a sequence of rites, but when these occur is of far less importance than in the Japanese rites. Mormon rites for the dead can take place within minutes or decades of each other, with no essential difference to the living or the dead. The sole exceptions are administrative waiting periods, such as the requirement that one can perform rites only for someone who has been dead for at least a year. Location is of primary importance, however: the rites can be administered only in the consecrated space of the temple of the Lord.

The temple ordinances are performed in a sequence that symbolizes passage from death to eternal life. The living perform these rites both for themselves and as proxies for the deceased. The basic sequence includes baptism by full immersion, anointing with water and oil (the initiatory), the lengthy endowment, and the sealing. As the living or the dead progress through these rites, they symbolically move farther away from death and closer to eternal life.

The first ordinance the living receive within the temple is the initiatory (their baptism having occurred prior to their becoming temple eligible). In this ceremony, the body is symbolically washed with water and anointed with olive oil. This is done to prepare the faithful saint for heavenly rule, but there are parallels to the preparation of a body for burial as well. Although the longest rite, the endowment, has been simplified in most temples by keeping the ceremony in one room, in older temples such as the ones in Salt Lake City and Manti, Utah, initiates move or climb a staircase (or ride an escalator or elevator) to increasingly heavenly rooms as the ceremony progresses. The participants travel toward the celestial room, which represents the presence of God. The crowning rite for most faithful Saints is the eternal sealing of husband to wife or parents to children, which generally takes place in rooms immediately adjacent to a temple’s celestial room.

In Mormonism, it is impossible to separate death from the temple. The two are symbolically intertwined. For example, the only time Latter-day Saints are dressed in their sacred temple robes outside of the temple is when they are lying in their coffins. Many Mormons also experience communication with, or can sense the presence of, their departed relatives within the temple. It is not uncommon for a Church member to go to the temple expecting to feel close to a dead spouse or parent.

The temple, then, is a transitional space between the physical world and the world of the spirits. This does not mean that any living and any dead can be present in the temple, however. Only the faithful living who are there to receive their own rites or who have already received them are permitted to enter that sacred space. The same principle seems to apply to the dead, with the added category of the few dead who enter the temple to petition the living to perform their rites for them by proxy. From the eternal perspective of the Latter-day Saint, there is more in common between the living and the dead who have received, or who are in the process of receiving, their rites than between living adult Mormons who have received their temple rites and those who have not. The walls of the temple separate these classes of people more than the veil of death does.

The sacred separateness of the temple space is accentuated for the living by the uniqueness of the rites performed, by the esoteric nature of the knowledge gained (portions of the rites include secrecy oaths), and through the screening of members so that only those who proclaim belief and fealty to the Church, and who demonstrate a certain level of adherence to particular commandments, are given permission to enter. All of these factors combine to transform what would otherwise be just a beautiful religious building into what Douglas Davies calls the “sacred place where death was subjugated.”12

THE TIES THAT BIND

Why are the Japanese and Mormon systems so different?

Clearly, the Mormon ritual experience is framed by the sacred space of the temple and the Japanese experience by time—the days, weeks and years elapsed since death, as well as the annual cycle. I have briefly described two ritual systems I consider similar because of their reverential post-funerary rites for the dead. This leads to the question: Why, then, are these frameworks so different? Why do the Japanese perform their rites with regard to the calendar and Mormons only within the sacred ritual space created by the temple? Conversely, why are the Japanese less concerned with the locale in which their rites are performed, and why is there no significant difference when the Mormons perform proxy rites for someone one year dead as opposed to one thousand years dead? Perhaps the answers can be found by examining the ritual systems within their unique cultural contexts.

The Japanese experience with the dead can be explained in great part through the concept of on, which refers to debts owed to, or favors received from those of superior status.13 Indeed, death and obligation are as symbolically interconnected in Japan as death and the temple are in Mormonism. Hori Ichiro includes the following four items in a list of six common features of Japanese religion: “emphasis on filial piety (koi) and ancestor worship connected with the Japanese family system; emphasis on on (debts and favors given by superiors) and ho-on (the return of on); . . . belief in the continuity between man and deity; . . . [and] strong belief in the spirits of the dead in connection with ancestor worship as well as more animistic conceptions of malevolent or benevolent soul activities.”14 These common features are tightly interwoven and reinforce one another.

In a book on the folklore of ghosts in Japan, Michiko
Within the Japanese context, rites exist as mechanisms for fulfilling debts and obligations to the deceased. Mormon ancestral ritual is primarily about making the temporary bonds of birth and marriage permanent and death-proof.

Iwasaka and Barre Toelken explain why the concepts of on, hon, and the spirits of the dead are so interconnected:

But the most difficult and far-reaching debts inhere in family relationships... No one is exempt, and this familial on... can never be fully repaid... Each person has received so much in nurturance and help from others that one is always in a state of debt... Almost anyone who dies will expire, then, with many unfulfilled obligations to others, and the relatives of that person will also be aware that they still have many obligations to the deceased. The resultant paroxysm of guilt and apology can be articulated and directed to some extent by the survivors' commitment to the proper rituals.15

Ancestral rites, then, prevent death's abrupt cessation of the all-important debt payments to one's predecessors and provide a means of avoiding the burden of unfulfilled obligation. These rites give survivors a way to grieve for their dead and to overcome the guilt that might otherwise accompany the person's passing.

Another important factor in Japanese society is the correlation between the frequency of personal interaction among friends, family, and associates, and the ability to sustain emotional intimacy. While this may seem like common sense, social anthropologist Chie Nakane argues that frequency of contact is perhaps more important in Japanese society for a continuing sense of closeness than it is in other societies. If we accept her assertion, then the periodic rites, along with daily prayers, offerings, and lighting of incense, all serve to maintain a level of emotional contact with the deceased.16

Given this background, it is not surprising that rites for individual ancestors last long enough (thirty-three years) for most of those who knew the deceased personally to themselves die off. In other words, the stages that a spirit goes through after death can be correlated with the ability of survivors to remember the deceased. In this context, perhaps the best way to understand Japanese rites is that they fill a uniquely Japanese need to maintain intimate contacts with immediate ancestors and to give both the deceased and the bereaved the opportunity to continue fulfilling their duties and obligations to each other.

Ritual-based relationships with the dead are also important within Mormonism, but they have a different character than the Japanese version. In Japan, the family contractual relation-
ships exist by default. The fact that not even the biological death of one party can dissolve these contracts gives rise to a set of social and emotional problems unique to the Japanese. Within the Japanese context, rites exist as mechanisms for fulfilling debts and obligations to the deceased. Family contractual relationships within Mormonism, however, are much weaker (in their unsolemnized state). Temple rites create solid eternal contracts where weak, time-bound promises otherwise exist. Mormon ancestral ritual is primarily about making the temporary bonds of birth and marriage permanent and death-proof.

Sacred, contractual relationships are a vital part of Mormonism. When Joseph Smith introduced the concept of eternal marriage, he called it “the new and everlasting covenant of marriage” (D&c 131:2). Ties between parents and children sealed in the temple are considered stronger than blood ties: for example, an adopted child sealed to her parents in the temple will still be their child after any or all of them die; a child by birth to a family whose members have never been to the temple will not be connected across death unless the family bonds are sealed through formal temple rites.

It is telling that the only revelation in the LDS scriptural canon that was received during the twentieth century concerned the relationship between the living and the dead. Joseph F. Smith, the nephew of Mormonism’s founding prophet, saw a vision of the world of spirits just a few weeks before his own death in 1918. His vision is the only revelation received by a Mormon prophet that has been canonized during the past 150 years. According to Smith, as quoted in a recent Church manual, the purpose of the temple sealing rites is that there “has got to be a welding together and a joining together of parents and children and children and parents until the whole chain of God’s family shall be welded together into one chain, and they shall all become the family of God and His Christ.”

Mormon temple rites fulfill the social function of overcoming death but in a different manner than the Japanese rituals do. In the LDS case, since the tradition is very young and the rites implemented relatively recently, we can look at the

Mormons who receive their endowment in the temple have already experienced death symbolically. Death is merely a flimsy barrier to be pushed aside as one enters into a brilliant reunion with loved ones.
circumstances surrounding their creation. Historian Klaus Hansen suggests that one of the many reasons Joseph Smith may have created the temple rites was to plant firmly in the minds of his followers the doctrine of the immortality of the human soul and the eternal nature of human familial relationships sealed by the power of God:

"Something more, something tangible and concrete was needed to reassure the Saints of the reality of eternal life. Joseph’s answer . . . was the “new and everlasting covenant” . . . the novel idea that the marriage covenant was not only for time but for eternity if sealed by the proper priesthood authorities. . . . This idea more than any other placed the idea of eternity in concrete human terms. Death was thus placed in an entirely new perspective, as Parley P. Pratt pointed out shortly after the promulgation of the new doctrine: “[T]he celestial order is an order of eternal life; it knows no death, and consequently makes no provisions for any. . . . We must leave death entirely out of the consideration, and look at men and families just as we would look at them if there was no death.”

In short, Hansen believes Smith created rituals that drove the relative inconsequence of death deeper into the hearts of the Saints. They, in turn, internalized these teachings because ritual performance transformed death from something frightening and unknown into something familiar—something over which they had power, rather than vice versa.

We can see ritual’s power to reinforce the doctrine of the immortality of the human spirit by examining the final portion of the endowment ceremony. The culmination of the endowment is when the devout Mormon, clothed in the same priesthood robes in which they will be buried, passes through a veil and into the celestial room. This gauzy temple veil is heavy with meaning: the term “veil” is used in everyday Mormon speech into the celestial room. This gauzy temple veil is heavy with meaning: the term “veil” is used in everyday Mormon speech to refer to death and the thin divide between the world of the living and the spirit world.19 “Passing through the veil” is a common Mormon euphemism for dying. The deceased are merely “on the other side of the veil.” Latter-day Saints who attend the temple typically view their transition through the veil as the culmination of their temple experience; they part the shimmering curtains and step into the well-lit and beautifully decorated celestial room, symbolic of the presence of God.

There they meet friends and family members who have also completed the ceremony and hug and shake hands in joyful greeting.

The simple ritual act of stepping through the veil profoundly influences the way Saints view death. Mormons who receive their endowment in the temple have already experienced death symbolically. They realize that their essence does not change when they have pass through the veil. Death is merely a flimsy barrier to be pushed aside as one enters into a brilliant reunion with loved ones.

The influence of temple rites on belief is further supported by a study conducted by Glenn Vernon that is cited extensively by Douglas Davies in his book, The Mormon Culture of Salvation and that I’ve excerpted from here, putting Vernon’s data into a different format.20 Note that although some of these traditions surveyed have similar teachings on the immortality of the spirit, Mormon followers are much more likely to accept those teachings. (The numbers indicate the percentage of those who answered “yes” to the questions):

**Is it your personal belief that there will be a future existence after death?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mormons</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholics</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptists</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutherans</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodists</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episcopalians</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Do you anticipate reunion with your loved ones in an afterlife?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mormons</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholics</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptists</td>
<td>53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lutherans</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodists</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Episcopalians</td>
<td>29</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Could you face the death of a loved one adequately?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mormons</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roman Catholics</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Methodists</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episcopalians</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the original study does not tie participation in temple rites to the strength of Mormon beliefs, Davies does make the connection:

Early Mormons generated a symbolic, ritual, and social world that fully engaged with death in a way that led to a sense of its conquest. . . . The development of LDS ritual, both vicarious and personal, afforded a sense of transcendence over death that continues to be productive at a time when many Protestant, and even some Catholic, views of the afterlife are in decline.21

Klaus Hansen suggests a connection between the two, as well: "The Mormon leader [Joseph Smith] was able to counter the destructive and demoralizing impact of death by a brilliantly conceived ritualization of its meaning."22

**FEELING AT HOME**

Why is time not as important to Mormons and their dead as it is to the Japanese?

The preceding analysis answers some questions but raises many others. Why is time not as important to the Mormons and their dead as it is to the Japanese? I believe part of this question can be explained when we examine the history of demographic mobility for each of these
societies. When Mormonism was in its formative years, its adherents were nearly always on the frontier of a young nation. As Joseph Smith and his followers experienced persecution, they kept pushing westward. In addition, the young church had an aggressive missionary program. During the mid-1800s, there were more Saints overseas than in the United States. The majority of these responded to the call to “come to Zion,” immigrating to Illinois and then to Utah. This mountain center was thousands of miles away from the nearest established settlements and was populated primarily by immigrants to the United States. I picture a young family of immigrants from Liverpool wanting to build God’s kingdom and help the Utah desert “blossom as the rose” but at the same time desperately wanting to maintain some kind of connection with the past. Place dominated the lives of these early Saints. They sacrificed to travel to and build a place called Zion. The distance they felt from their mothers and fathers and ancestors was one not of time but of the wide expanse of wilderness and oceans. The temple was a concrete place they could travel to, just as they had traveled to Zion, and there overcome the obstacles that separated them from their beloved dead. Within temple walls, through sacred rites, they could bring their parents and grandparents to Zion.

In contrast with the frontier Mormons, Japanese mobility was limited during the period when many Japanese ancestral rites were solidifying into the forms known today. During this period (from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries), the Japanese lived under an austere political regime that limited their ability to relocate. This is not to say that people did not move around during the Edo period. There is simply a huge contrast between the Japanese social environment, where families typically spent many generations in one locale, and American frontier society in the 1800s, where most people were first- or second-generation settlers in a particular location.23

CONCLUSION

MY STUDY OF these two ancestor veneration systems has convinced me that ritual functions largely to overcome very human problems. Few trials within human experience are as universal and as terrible as death. Japanese and Mormon post-funerary rites for the dead help people remain grounded and ensure continuity in a world of tremendous flux. These rites have the power to overcome the fear and grief associated with death through a strength that surpasses that of cognitive teachings alone.

While this comparative research has resulted in interesting revelations about the Japanese and Mormon ritual cultures, much more remains to be done. In this study, I compared the ritual practices of one very coherent, international Christian tradition against the entire breadth and depth of syncretistic Japanese ancestral worship. Future research should focus on the practices and beliefs of members of a single Japanese Buddhist sect. Another important study would be to look at groups where the two systems meet—perhaps Japanese converts to the Mormon Church.

Clifford Geertz writes, “This backward order of things—first you write and then you figure out what you are writing about—may seem odd, or even perverse, but it is, I think at least most of the time, standard procedure in cultural anthropology.”24 There is still much to learn about continuing ritual relationships with the dead in Mormonism and in Japan.

NOTES

2. I don’t emphasize the Taoist elements in this study to the same degree as the Buddhist, Shinto, and Confucian influences. Geomancy is familiar to many Westerners as feng shui. These principles influence the treatment of the dead body in Japan. For example, many Japanese avoid sleeping with their heads pointing north because this is how the dead are supposed to be aligned during the wake and the funeral.
6. The memorial rites continue for fifty years in some locales.
7. The Japanese have an ambivalent relationship with the spirits of the dead. No matter how kind and gentle someone may have been while living, when they die they are more like forces of nature (which are also personified in Shinto)—powerful, capricious, and unpredictable. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine this perception in detail, memorial rites serve in large part to appease and pacify the dead.
13. It is this sense of social and filial obligation that most clearly reveals the Confucian influence in Japanese post-funerary rituals.
19. Ibid., 100.
20. Davies, The Mormon Culture of Salvation, 254. Some of the other questions in the study dealt with the strength of a respondent's wish to live after death, how often the respondent thought about his or her own death, whether the respondent had seriously discussed the subject of death, and attitudes toward burial versus cremation. For the purposes of this article, one of the most interesting questions asked was: “Do you feel that religious observances by the living can somehow benefit the state of those already dead?” Again Mormons led the survey in number of affirmative responses, 68 percent, which was a level very close to 66 percent in the affirmative for Roman Catholics (whose doctrine includes views on purgatory and intercessory prayer for those who have died). Thirty-eight percent of Jews answered affirmatively, as did 14 percent of Episcopalians, 13 percent of Baptists, and 9 percent of Lutherans.
21. Ibid., 103.
23. Some individuals did relocate to the cities, especially the younger sons.
Is it possible for a couple’s relationship to grow and deepen even while the faith of one or both partners change?

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE, FOR APOSTASY?

HOW FAITH ISSUES AFFECT COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

By Ronda and Mike Callister, Page and Tom Kimball, Ruth Ogden and John Halstead

EDITOR’S NOTE: The reflections here are excerpted from a panel discussion with the same name held 11 August at the 2006 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium. It has far and away been the most frequently ordered and downloaded recording from that symposium (tape/CD/download SL06273).
**Introduction**

by Ronda Callister

The genesis of these reflections occurred at the 2005 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium when I met Page Kimball. As we talked, introduced our husbands, and shared our stories, Page said there ought to be a Sunstone session on marriage and faith. When I responded, “OK, let’s do one with our husbands next year,” she gasped, turned a little white, and said, “But I have never even asked a question at Sunstone before!” But she has been a good sport and gone along with our idea.

At that 2005 symposium, during the audience questions and comments portion of the session “When Beliefs Lead to Estrangement” (CD, tape, download SL05373), a commenter stated he was a facilitator of a group of post- or ex-Mormons and that within his group, when a change in religious opinion occurs, it can cause a lot of fear within the faithful spouse—often to the point where people cannot listen to each other. The person whose spouse has changed will freeze and back out of the room or accuse that person of being under the influence of Satan. The commenter asked the panel members if they had any suggestions for reducing the fear and tension and enhancing communication.

Panelist Marybeth Raynes responded (paraphrased): “This is a big one, and not just because there might be fear that someone won’t be with you in the next life . . . . Your basic attachment to the person you love and plan to spend the rest of your life and forever with is now threatened . . . . This news can create a feeling of pulling out someone’s basic cord for breath. It hits people at that depth . . . . And when we are hit that strongly in our emotional system, we don’t have words; regular cognitive reasoning doesn’t function. As a result, most of us will regress, we will start using our most primitive, least effective, and therefore least loving interventions.”

We each are couples who have married in the temple. Mike, Tom, John, and Ruth each served LDS missions. In many ways, we have been typical LDS families. But in this panel, we will discuss the challenges of faith changes that have occurred in one or both partners—and the challenges these create for our marital relationships. We are not experts. We simply hope to let others who are experiencing something like this know that they are not alone. We share stories of some of our most difficult periods with the hope that something we share may be helpful.

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Ronda’s Story

My spiritual crisis occurred in 1980 after I had finished my master’s degree and was expecting my second child. Growing up in southern California, I had been obedient and had done all of the right things: Young Women’s awards, Seminary, BYU graduation, and temple marriage. As I finished my schooling, I found myself struggling with the question of how to be a mother of young children while also being able to feel some sense of personal growth and progress when my talents and abilities were not necessarily home-centered. I decided to seek guidance for me as a young mother by reading the scriptures. Instead I became overwhelmed by the maleness I found there. I began asking, “Why don’t we know more about Heavenly Mother?” I thought knowing more about her would give me a sense of where women fit in the eternities. My deeper unspoken question was really: How can I, as a woman, feel a sense of being valued both within the Church and by God?

It was difficult for me to find people to talk to who understood my questions. I did not find answers, and my search soon petered out in frustration and fear. My crisis came not long after Sonia Johnson’s excommunication, and LDS women seemed cautious about discussing these questions. I gradually put mine on the shelf, resigning myself to thinking about them at some future point when I might find additional information to help me.

In 1987, after Mike and I had been married for eleven years and had four daughters ages newborn to nine, Mike decided he wanted to follow his dream and go to medical school. This was the beginning of a ten-year odyssey—the beginning of which had a wrenching effect on our marriage. We both were working harder than ever before. We both felt our efforts at home were inadequately acknowledged and too little recognized. Mike interpreted my unhappiness as resentment and dissatisfaction with me. I interpreted his unhappiness as crítica and dissatisfaction with and by God.

As our marriage deteriorated, I felt guilty, depressed, and like a failure in the sense that I could not do enough. With the help of a counselor who recommended good books, I was able to learn a lot about myself and recover from my depression. As I felt better about myself, our marriage also improved.

At this same time, I attended a “Pillars of My Faith” session at a Sunstone symposium which became a pivotal moment in my spiritual journey.1 Listening to Kathleen Flake tell her story helped me realize others had similar questions and inspired me to reopen mine. Now that I was feeling good about myself and my marriage, I decided it was probably time to try to answer my spiritual questions so I would be better prepared to assist my daughters as they grew up and encountered their own questions. I began again to look for answers that had eluded me earlier.

I read all of the feminist theology I could find in Salt Lake City during the pre-Internet, pre-Amazon.com era, using the
I began to wonder if our marriage was in trouble and he just didn't want to tell me.

During the course of my search, I discovered that the original structure of my faith had crumbled into pieces. I no longer knew exactly what I believed. I was unsettled but kept plodding forward, re-examining each component of my faith, and slowly reassembling the pieces. After a year of reading, thinking, and writing in my journal, I was relieved to find most of my faith was still there. Even as I put my belief system back together in a new way, my outward behavior remained the same; I stayed active in the Church—I just thought a bit differently. Building on the work of James Fowler, in conversation with me, Tom Kimball named this transition as moving from “we believe” to “I believe.” When I did this, I found a new place of equilibrium.

About the time that I was achieving greater peace in my spiritual journey, Mike finished medical school and started a six-year surgery residency at the University of Missouri. I was on a high, excited about all that I had learned over the previous few years, and wanting to maintain the invigorating sense of growth and learning I had been experiencing in my studies. So I did a crazy thing: I started a Ph.D. program. In addition to raising our four daughters, I spent the next five-and-a-half years getting my doctorate, and then six more getting tenure at Utah State University.

These were intense years in which I essentially put my spiritual journey on hold while I focused on my family and my intellectual journey. I had reached a place of relative peace. Spiritually, I felt comfortable. Then Mike entered his period of doubt and questioning.

Mike’s Story

I am a life-long Mormon, and my ancestors were converts in the early days of the Church. I was born in southern California, and my family settled in Reno, Nevada, where I lived my entire young life. Although I remain active in the Mormon tradition, my personal doctrine is not traditional.

My life as a Mormon boy was reasonably normal. The trouble I managed to find was not particularly insidious. I attended Sunday church meetings and had dedicated youth leaders and teachers. I did not attend Seminary until my senior year in high school. I don’t recall doubting any LDS teaching; the Church was always there, but not personally venerated. My parents were consistently loving, accepting, and generous in giving me the elbow room I needed to sort out my faith. I cannot recall a single discussion about missionary service prior to high school graduation. Although I initially had no intention of going on a mission, I fell into the BYU freshman tide moving in that direction, and in 1972, bound for Brazil, I entered the LTM (Language Training Mission) knowing very little about our church and without an energetic testimony.

The LTM was the single most spiritual experience of my young life. The gods smiled upon me as our visas to Brazil were delayed a total of five months—all of which I spent at
Allen Hall in Provo, Utah. While many of my fellow mission-
aries, who had faithfully attended four years of Seminary,
cursed the delay, I felt blessed every minute I was there.
Because I was seriously deficient in basic gospel knowledge, I
read everything I could get my hands on.

A short example of my ignorance of even the basics: one af-
fternoon while studying, I turned to the elder beside me and
exclaimed, “Hey, did you know it was John the Baptist who ac-
tually came down as a resurrected being and conferred the
Aaronic Priesthood on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery?
Isn’t that cool?” He looked at me as if I’d just stepped off the
mother ship. Anyway, the Restoration story made sense to me,
Jesus communicated with me during one memorable night,
and I hit the Brazilian ground running, never looking back
until I got home.

In 1976, twenty months after returning from Brazil, I mar-
ried Ronda in the Los Angeles Temple. We finished our under-
graduate studies at BYU and moved to the Salt Lake Valley.
After several years in a small business, the births of four
daughters, a mortgage, and an M.B.A. for Ronda, I started
medical school at the University of Utah at age thirty-three.
Following graduation, it was off to Missouri for six years of res-
didency and a Ph.D. for Ronda. Yes, we were absolutely crazy,
and if I could, I would excise the years 1987 to 1997 from our
marriage. It was very tough. And although Ronda and I both
really enjoy our careers, love our children and each other more
than ever, and our children seem to have survived our training
virtually unscathed, I cannot recommend the path we took to
anyone. I am not embarrassed to say that we wore out four sets
of marriage counselors—and we needed them all. Currently,
Ronda is an organizational behavior professor at Utah State
University, and I am a urologist in private practice in Logan.

I decided to be
patient, stay the course,
and trust that there was
indeed something
healthier beyond the
bounds of where I was.

Those who know me now and have heard my
current religious ranting and raving wonder why it
took almost thirty years to painfully loosen my
moorings from conventional faith (Fowler’s Stage
Three). It probably started early with my contempla-
tion that at least part of our canon was very
likely mythological: The creation stories, Adam
and Eve, Noah and the flood, and so forth, never
fit the observable universe with which I was ac-
quainted. That the Old Testament could be read
and understood in a non-literal, non-factual way
was certainly never presented to me as an option
in any official LDS teaching, and hence I never really enter-
tained doing so. The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, was
rock solid—I had no doubts. Then in 1978, I read Donna
Hill’s book, Joseph Smith: The First Mormon, and for the first
time, the neat, tidy, and official story I’d taught in Brazil was
puzzlingly negotiable. We even attended a few Sunstone sym-
posiums in those days. (Ronda was beginning her religious
journey with the Mother in Heaven issues.) Still, with my rea-
sonably regular reading, the Book of Mormon was literally the
keystone of my religion, and as long as it was true, I felt well
within the safety net of the Restored gospel. We were active,
served in many ward callings, tithed, went to the temple, had
occasional Family Home Evenings, prayed, and read scriptures
daily.

SO WHAT HAPPENED? First: friends—some of whom I’d
known for decades—started leaving the Church. I was at a
loss. Why would anyone leave the Church? Initially saddened,
I ultimately became interested in why someone would leave
something within which I felt so safe. This became a time of
intensely personal reflection on many doctrinal issues I had
suppressed over the years. Because I was convinced that a reli-
gious tradition worth one’s devotion would stand the test of
scrutiny, I decided to step out of the paradigm myself and look
as an outsider might at the tradition I’d been practicing. By ne-
necessity, my view would be my own, and I did not want to in-
volve Ronda in this potential turmoil—at least not yet.

Second: the issue that troubled me the most was the destiny
of the innumerable souls who would never prove themselves
within a Christian or LDS milieu. The Doctrine and Covenants
sections regarding these issues did not begin to account for the
wide spectrum of belief systems and convictions among hu-
mankind. Was I conceited enough to believe that every devout non-Christian or non-Mormon who had spent his or her entire life developing virtue and faith would learn after death that their effort was false, or at least critically inadequate?

Third: I took President Hinckley’s challenge, and in 2005, the fifth year of my bishopric service, and along with ward members in Logan, I slowly and methodically reread the Book of Mormon. A few of the stories still moved me, but many did not. Could any man have written this book? For the first time in my life, my answer was “perhaps.” There were many other developments, books read, and not a few sleepless nights. I ultimately shared with Ronda my developing rejection of various doctrines within our Mormon tradition.

RONDA: Mike waited a number of months before disclosing his doubts. I knew something was wrong. He was withdrawn, down, and had a somewhat shorter fuse than normal. This went on for so long that I began to wonder if our marriage was in trouble and he just didn’t want to tell me. By the time he started talking, I was significantly more anxious and fearful than I might have been had he started talking months earlier.

Initially Mike’s disclosure was not too upsetting. I had been through my own period of questioning and felt I could understand. I had remained faithful, and I thought Mike might do the same. I also saw that Mike had very few people he could talk to about this. I knew how valuable it had been for me to eventually find a non-judgmental friend who listened to me as I bounced ideas around and explored sometimes unorthodox thoughts. I wanted to be that person for Mike. This became a far more painful and difficult process for me than I expected once I recognized the depth of his questions and doubts. His questions triggered deep fear in me.

Mike asked me on several occasions, “Are you afraid for my salvation?” I kept answering no. He was a wonderful man, and he wasn’t sinning. I was afraid on a much more self-centered level. I worried about what would happen to us—our marriage and our future together. My dreams of sharing both our lives and our beliefs together felt threatened. Our paths appeared to be diverging.

Mike: One night, I disclosed to Ronda my doubts about the exclusivity of LDS temple marriage. Even though my focus was on a very positive description of her sibling’s non-LDS marriage in which I asked how God could reject their commitment and marriage while accepting ours, Ronda heard my question as a tacit rejection of our marital vows. Although she’d heard me rant and rave about various gospel subjects in the past and had been a marvelous listener and sounding board, this one struck precariously close to heart and home.

RONDA: This was one of the most painful moments for me. When he asked how I could possibly believe in temple sealings, I felt as though he were questioning our marriage—especially the eternal part. It seemed at that moment as if he were talking about divorcing half of me—the eternal half. To his credit, the next day, he explained that he was trying to speak generically about his questions and not trying to challenge me, and that he was not referring to our marriage specifically.

This episode illustrates for me how sensitive these discussions can be, and how carefully we must choose our words. Our conversations continued to trigger fear. It was a very difficult time. But I kept trying to listen and encouraging him to talk. There were long periods of time when Mike was suffering through his own pain, and as he searched for answers, he had little energy left to provide me much reassurance about our relationship.

MIKE: Although I thought the LDS temple was the right place for Ronda and me to be married, I did not consider my feelings for her dependent upon LDS temple doctrine. I wanted to be married to Ronda simply because I love her and want to be with her—not because of the temple. I really like the idea of marital covenants, and I think the temple is a great place for the living to make covenants—but so are chapels, synagogues, cathedrals, mosques, and maybe even a forest or a backyard. Although this view has matured over the years, and at various times, I have been more or less temple active, I do not consider the temple ceremonies per se as pivotal to my marriage or my salvation.

RONDA: I spent months alternating between being hopeful and being afraid. Finally I began to realize that neither hope nor fear were useful in this case. As long as I hoped that Mike would either believe or behave a certain way, then I was crushed with disappointment each time he said or did something that even suggested he might be changing and becoming different than I wanted him to be. That fear crowded out my ability to love deeply.

As I thought about what might help Mike, I listened to a Sunstone symposium session on James A. Fowler’s Stages of Faith. Listening to this and other sessions reawakened my own spiritual journey in a very positive way. The session started me on my own odyssey of reading Fowler. Several books later, what I took away from Fowler’s work was invaluable to me in overcoming my fears about Mike’s doubts and questions.

Fowler’s work suggests that going through a stage of doubt and questioning—even a prolonged period—was a normal developmental stage, and that there was hope for a better future in subsequent stages where even greater spirituality was possible. I drew great comfort from this. I began letting go of my fear and started becoming more accepting of Mike’s doubts. When I began to see his journey as normal and one that could potentially lead to a more solid, more hopeful place, we both had a much better experience. I was gradually able to allow him to follow his own faith journey. I came to realize it was best just to offer my love and support.

MIKE: No question Fowler had a very positive effect on Ronda’s interpretation of what I was experiencing, and his work gave me some essential map coordinates as well. I agree that Fowler’s stages are most useful, and perhaps only useful, for those leaving Stage Three (“Synthetic-conventional” faith)
and entering State Four ("Individuative-reflexive" faith). That someone (and not a Mormon) had studied this process, and described a passageway out of the pit I was in, was comforting. Although the faith transition process was perhaps the most painful thing I'd ever done, instead of leaving the Church (which many understandably have) I decided to be patient, stay the course, and trust that there was indeed something healthier beyond the bounds of where I was.

Also, I better understand Ronda's fear and grief. Just as Marybeth Raynes said in the panel discussion Ronda quoted from in the introduction, these issues hit us at the core—like breathing! I wanted to communicate the deep love I have for Ronda, but after nearly thirty years of marriage, telling your wife that you have serious reservations about the eternal temple ritual is a big potential landmine!

Regardless, this journey has been very beneficial to me. Having a deeper understanding of other belief systems has given me the comfort to select what I believe is important and valid Mormon doctrine and to jettison the rest. When President Hinckley stated to the religious world that perhaps Mormonism could add a little something to their faith, I believe he was describing one lane of the thoroughfare. There is plenty out there in other religious traditions that I can comfortably and fearlessly add to my own personal cosmology that enhances my relationship with Ronda and the Infinite. Ultimately, Ronda became aware that even though my beliefs were undergoing some serious realignment, my commitment to her was not. In the beginning, I did an inadequate job of communicating that to her. I think she understands it better now. The key issue to me is that we are both traveling on this journey, and it is much more satisfying.

RONDA: I think we now both agree that Mike's journey so far has been a positive experience for our relationship. For a number of years, we hadn't talked a lot about our beliefs. As long as we thought we believed the same thing, discussion was limited. But after Mike shared his concerns with me, we've had many long talks about what and why we believe the things we do. I thrive on talking about important ideas. Once I was able to get past my fears, this deep disclosure has helped us experience times of great closeness and bonding.

These conversations have rejuvenated my own spiritual journey. Now instead of worrying about whether we are on divergent paths, I recognize we are both journeying and can share our experiences with each other. Ours are different journeys, but sharing rather than suppressing them has drawn us closer.

**Tom's Story**

In the Orthodox Mormon narrative, Adam and Eve are placed in the Garden of Eden and then presented with a Catch 22. God commanded them to multiply and replenish the earth yet not partake of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The problem was—they could not do both. Adam was a bulldog of faithfulness and obedience to God. But in the Garden, that was getting him nowhere. The real hero is Eve. She chose knowledge, and Adam was forced to make a choice. And here we are.

Page and I have been married for almost seventeen years. We met in Virginia while I was interviewing for a federal job. Page was a nanny for a Catholic family in Vienna, Virginia. I had been home from my mission to Alabama for less than a year and had recently moved to the Washington D.C. area. At church, I bumped into an acquaintance from my Utah hometown. She sensed that I didn't know very many people and insisted on sending someone to pick me up at my apartment so I could hang out with her and her friends for videos and popcorn. Page was that chauffeur.

I was a "dyed in the wool" zealot Mormon from a conservative Utah LDS family. Page was from Sanpete County, Utah, and was raised with conservative, small-town traditions. Her family has a wonderfully interesting mix of liberal and fundamentalist Mormon leanings.

Page's father, Jim, liked me when we first became acquainted. Even then, I was steeped in Mormon books and minutiae; Jim was more than capable of keeping up in our conversations. As our friendship grew, I found that I could speak to my father-in-law about many topics that I wasn't able to engage my own father on. I feel a sense of loss now that things have changed and my father-in-law and I don't seem capable of having a civil religious conversation. I understand that early in his marriage, he felt judged by some of his extended family for his beliefs. Now I feel judged by him. But it is really mostly my own fault. I'm moving toward agnosticism while Jim is moving in the opposite direction.

I've worked in the Mormon book trade for more than a decade. I feel that it's natural for someone in my trade to encounter moments of cognitive dissonance. And if these moments are allowed to work their course, I feel that they lead to glimpses of honest clarity. I do not mean to say that these glimpses are moments of "Capital T" Truth but rather are instances when one realizes that something isn't the same anymore and never will be again. The God of my Mormonism died during one of those moments. And if and when I ever find God again, it will simply be something else.

My poor wife. She bargained for a hard-working, clean-cut, Eagle Scout, returned missionary with a quality Mormon pedigree. Instead she got me. By the late 1990's, I was essentially embarrassed by my Mormonism. I wasn't happy attending church. In fact, I was really quite angry, feeling that I had been betrayed by my tradition. Page seemed very frustrated with my doubts, and I felt that my church service had become a duty I performed for her sake rather than for myself. While I worked at Benchmark Books, a co-worker, Dan Wotherspoon, introduced me to the work of Emory University Professor James Fowler and his theories about faith stages. I've spoken at past symposiums about my experiences with stage theory, but in brief, Fowler's work and my other reading in the field has allowed me, in time, to make peace with my Mormonism.

Though I find it difficult to quantify my experience in words, I have recently found my ward, and more specifically...
my elders quorum, to be a sanctuary for my re-emerging spirituality. Page offered me some advice once. She mentioned that church is where people go to get spiritually recharged, and it isn’t my place to detract from that. I’ve strived, though sometimes unsuccessfully, to contribute positively at church, and to my surprise, I’ve found my fellow quorum members have been kind and responsive. I’ve picked my moments to be sure, but I’ve been honest and respectful in expressing my serious doubts about the gospel. I’ve also tried not to vent at people who are passing folklore as history, or at those who most likely don’t have the tools yet to deal with the serious credibility problems facing Mormonism. But for me to walk away from my tradition at this moment would be spitting in the face of good men who have gone out of their way to make me feel comfortable and welcome at church despite my doubts.

The most difficult aspect of a couple’s dealing with doubt in marriage is that often spouses go through it at different times. In our case, I wanted to vent my frustrations about our tradition with my closest friend—Page. But that only contributed stress to a marriage already strained by normal issues of parenting, finances, and such. And that’s not to mention my own poor communication skills and, of course, the Kimball temper.

As I’ve watched my friends go through periods of doubt, it appears that it can often take ten or more years for someone to fully move through various maturing processes. I think I deal with my own doubt (as well as other people’s lack of doubt) much better than I did ten years ago. But getting from then to how left a fair amount of carnage behind me. I credit Page for allowing me to take this incredibly difficult and harebrained journey with our marriage intact.

Unfortunately, just as I’m finding my way off the rapids, Page appears to have launched her boat upstream. And, at the moment, all I seem able to do is advise her to “hang on,” as I’m not yet totally on shore myself. Earlier this year when Page decided to attend another church, I have to admit that inside I felt a sense of betrayal. When I wanted to move on, I didn’t. I stayed, I gritted my teeth, and I stayed active in our tradition. I didn’t mind so much that Page was finding spiritual rejuvenation in another tradition. I’m just not sure what lies ahead for our children. I’ve listened to Page’s complaints about Mormonism, but I see most of the same problems in those other traditions. I feel that in the long run, she will only be trading one set of problems for another. I see a lot of strength in the familiar youth programs of our own tradition, including the scouting program, which I’m actively involved in.

WHAT DOES A couple do when there doesn’t seem to be any answers, and when our local spiritual advisors—our parents and many of our friends—can’t really understand our individual dilemmas, nor those we face as a couple. There are no guidelines, no mentors, no easy answers. We’re on our own. Too often in unthinking gospel discourse, we are essentially told that if our children grow up without the gospel in their lives, our sons will become drug addicts and our daughters, trailer trash. Yet I see plenty of faithful, active Latter-day Saints with dysfunctional families.

I recently spent some time with my oldest daughter and realized that some of my kids are already smarter than I am. And I can’t imagine that these kids won’t come face to face with the same intellectual dilemmas regarding their Mormonism that Page and I face now. At some point in their emerging adulthood, they’re going to ask themselves, “Hmm, I wonder
Suddenly I loved him for who he was, not for who I wanted him to be. I decided to stop looking at all the things I thought he wasn’t and focus on the things that he was.

PAGE’S STORY

OUR STORY BEGAN way before I had met and married Thomas. When I was baptized at eight, my father was in the bishopric. Not long after that, however, my father stopped attending church as regularly and quit going to the temple altogether. The hardest part for me was not understanding what was going on in his head and why he had stopped believing. Unfortunately, he didn’t answer any of these questions for me. I guess he felt he was protecting my faith, or maybe it was out of respect for my mother, who was a staunch believer and desperately trying to keep us children active and faithful to the Church. I spent my youth hearing about eternal families, and I knew I didn’t belong to one. In my naive mind, I assumed it was because my father didn’t care enough about us to want to be with us for eternity. So I was bound and determined to marry someone whose faith was strong and whose testimony was unshakable. I wasn’t going to be the woman who dragged her children to church alone, feeling alone in her worship of God, and praying every day that her husband would see the light.

Enter Thomas Kimball. Spiritually, he was everything that I had wanted in an eternal companion. His enthusiasm for learning about the Church and the gospel was infectious. I couldn’t be around him without wanting to learn more myself. When he talked about the temple and the mysteries it held, his face lit up, and he would continually say to me, “Wait until you go for yourself, Page. It’s magical.” When we read the scriptures together, he had a way of bringing out information that I had never thought of, or he would help me understand a passage as I had never understood it before. Spiritually, he lifted me to a higher ground.

When Thomas first started talking about his doubts, I was annoyed. Annoyance quickly became anger, and then fear. The more he tried to talk to me about it, the more I distanced myself. I didn’t want to hear his doubts. I hadn’t read all the books he had read, and I didn’t know how to respond to his accusations of abuse and untruths within Mormonism. I kept thinking he was just listening to the wrong people, reading the wrong books. And I really didn’t like Sunstone. I remember one day blowing up and saying, “If you don’t believe in it, why are you still going to church?” Immediately, I wanted to take what Dad did for a living?” And when they choose to explore their father’s trade, will the cognitive dissonance they will naturally encounter cause them to become hoods and whores? I pray that Page and I are trail-blazing and not bridge-burning for our children. I hope that seeing Page and me struggle with such things while attempting to find ways to repair our marriage and spirituality might give them strength to heal their own souls—and the courage to persevere with their partners in a positive way.

The dilemma of doubting is that we can place at risk our relationship with our partners often at a time when other corrosive influences, such as employment and financial difficulties, in-laws, child rearing, educational advancement, and issues related to personal maturation, are already pulling at our relationships. I see Page dealing with her doubts the best way she knows how. Knowledge, for all its benefits, has its costs. I’m sure Mother Eve was unsure about what would result from her choice, but she understood one thing: there would be pain, death, heartache and sorrow—but “there is no other way.”
those words back, because I knew I was going to push him so hard that he’d stop coming. His response was that he was just trying to figure it all out and couldn’t I just understand that? Unfortunately, I didn’t have the ability to do that for him then.

About this same time, he started to work at Benchmark Books, and he and Dan Wotherspoon would have lengthy conversations. Needless to say, I wasn’t crazy about Dan. I felt he was leading Tom down a slippery slope. However, with time, I realized that Dan was acting as the sounding board that I couldn’t be for Tom. Tom needed someone to talk with, and being in the Benchmark environment gave that to him, whether it was interactions with his co-workers or with the customers. And although I wanted Tom to be able to talk with me, every time he did, I became agitated and angry. I felt like the little girl again, and I just couldn’t understand why he didn’t love me enough to just believe. For me, couldn’t he just put all his doubts aside and believe? Well, as many of you know, it doesn’t work that way. Thomas and I were both being torn up inside, both of us seeking for something that the other couldn’t provide.

After sitting through multiple lessons on how we should rid evil influences from our lives, and how we should not listen to those who would destroy our testimony, I remember thinking, “But what if that influence is your husband? What do you do when the person who is poisoning your testimony is your husband? Do I get rid of him? I can’t just throw him away like I can with a book, or stop spending time with him, like I can with an acquaintance.”

I don’t remember when exactly it happened, but one day I realized that I needed to stop looking at Thomas through the Church’s eyes. Because when I judged him according to the Church, he was failing miserably. He was not leading our family in prayer, Family Home Evening, or scripture study. He had stopped going to the temple. By all official Church accounts, he was a poor Mormon husband. When I decided to start looking at him differently, I realized he was an incredible man, that he loved me and the children with a deep, steadfast love, that he supported me in my dreams and goals. He was just like I was.

I think it is odd that throughout all of this, we have remained relatively active in our ward. We seem to teeter-totter about what we should do about our disbelief. When he was frustrated and wanted to quit attending church, I still felt there was a place for me—that I could help other people who were struggling just like me. Then when I decided that I wanted to throw in the towel, that I couldn’t stand another Sunday lesson on obedience, Thomas wanted to go and felt it was important for him to continue being involved.

At the beginning of this year, I felt like I wasn’t getting anything out of my Sunday worship in our ward, so I began attending other churches. I found a quaint little Bible church where I loved the preacher’s sermons. When I left services, I felt rejuvenated and inspired to do better and be a better person. The sermons focused on real-life issues, and there wasn’t the implied condemnation for imperfection that I often felt in Mormon settings. Also, in contrast to my experiences in the LDS Church, the people didn’t profess to have all the answers; they all were seeking for a connection with their God just like I was.

But wouldn’t you know it, Tom now feels completely comfortable in his elders quorum. He has found a way to balance his disbelief (which he openly admits to the other class members) and his feeling of belonging. I really don’t want to separate our family into two different religions, and because he was willing to attend the Mormon Church all those years for me, I feel like I can do the same for him now. I have decided it is not about the religion as much as it is about my relationship with God.

The upside of this whole process is that Tom and I no longer have to hide our true feelings, worrying that we will hurt the other. We can be angry, sad, or just laugh together at some of the quirksiness within our church. In a sense, we have bonded in our frustrations regarding our religion.

However, although we both sense spirituality in our own lives, we don’t share it within our relationship. I would like to change this—whether through meditation, reading, talking, or something else. Both of us are longing for this, but we are still searching separately. It is hard to make the shift, because we have become comfortable with our relationship right now, and reaching for something new might mean opening up ourselves and our beliefs for criticism from the other partner. It is easy to define what we mutually believe or don’t believe, but it is hard to express a heartfelt belief the other doesn’t share. Although I realize we do not have to have the same beliefs to respect each
other, Tom’s opinion means a lot to me, and I just don’t want to recreate the chasm that we once had between us. I would love to seek our spiritual purpose together.

**Ruth and John’s Story**

RUTH: We are here to introduce ourselves, tell our story, and say whether our relationship is better or worse since John left the Church five years ago. We have decided to do this by sharing a dialogue that John and I have actually had—with some editing, of course.

JOHN: I’ll start. I grew up in the Midwest. My parents converted when I was three. I always felt that the Church was an integral part of me. That is, until I met you, whose identity really was integrated with your Church membership. I didn’t appreciate how much this was so until after I left the Church. I realized then that my Church membership had always been a choice for me, a voluntary association, not so much a part of me. I don’t mean to say that my commitment to the Church was in any way shallow. It’s just that I didn’t identify it with my “being” to the degree that you do. I felt as if I had been adopted into the fold, but for you, it seems more like a birthright.

RUTH: Yeah. We have since realized the differences in the way we were a part of the Church. I was born into a family that had ancestral Mormon roots on both sides. I was raised in Utah, and I now understand how the Church was a big part of my identity. From my family of origin, to my religion, to the geographical culture I was raised in, I was Mormon to the core. I often say it is in my DNA. I, of course, didn’t really know this either before we moved to Indiana and I noticed how different Mormons could be.

JOHN: This discussion sometimes bothers me because it seems to imply that it was easier for me to leave than it would be for a Utah Mormon. But, if I’m honest with myself, that’s probably true. But it certainly wasn’t easy for me at the time, especially being married.

RUTH: What—married with ties to a Utah Mormon? Do you know what I mean by that?

JOHN: Yeah, partly because you are a Utah Mormon, and partly because of the way you viewed our spiritual development as a joint endeavor.

RUTH: I am still a little baffled by the fact that you did not think it was a joint endeavor. Can you explain how you escaped that paradigm in the Mormon Church with its doctrine about achieving salvation as a family?

JOHN: Yes. Of course Mormons believe in eternal families, but it’s not like they believe that one spouse is going to be damned if the other one is. They believe they will be given a worthy spouse in the afterlife if the one in this life doesn’t make it. I have always believed, and still believe, that we are alone with God in the most fundamental sense. I mean, even if you don’t believe in God, or you just believe in a void, you ultimately have to face that alone. People can help you, but no one can do it for you. I don’t believe in group salvation nor the notion that we are saved or damned together. Does that answer your question?

RUTH: No, because I am very offended by the idea that I would be “given to another.” Not being able to be with the spouse of my choice—that doesn’t sound like any type of heaven I would choose.

JOHN: Oh, but once you get to heaven, you will choose it, because you wouldn’t want to be separated from the presence of God.

RUTH: I don’t want to be married to God, though. I choose you. I want to be a god with you.

JOHN: So I screwed that up!

RUTH: Yes . . . and no. Yes, you screwed that up because I feel you have left me to be alone in a journey of spiritual growth that was to be ours to create together. And no, you did not screw that up, because I do not believe that I will be given to another or choose another. I think that heaven is about being with our families. We choose our families of creation here, and we will choose them there. Mormons believe in eternal progression, and we will need eternity to become gods anyway.

JOHN: And here we are back to one of our theological debates about whether there is upward movement between the degrees of glory in the post-life or whether there is a glass ceiling.

RUTH: Yeah, I understand that I make the doctrine fit my preferences and my issues. But, so does everyone else.

JOHN: Here we get down to another critical difference in the way you see being Mormon and the way I do. I grant that you have always had the history, and perhaps you have even embraced the standards and the lifestyle more fully than I did. But I don’t think you have ever taken the doctrine as seriously as I did. And even now as you play fast and loose with it, I can see why you could not understand why I left, because for me, in and out of the Church, it has always been about the doctrine.

RUTH: No it wasn’t. You were making the doctrine fit your life, and when it didn’t fit anymore, you rejected it.

JOHN: I agree that I was creating my own version of doctrine as everyone else does. You can’t avoid interpretation, but you can do it more or less consciously. And I think I have always placed more value than you have on at least trying to preserve the integrity of the doctrine—meaning I was trying to get it right as opposed to picking and choosing. For me it was all or nothing, so I had to consciously manipulate some doctrines as I got closer to that crisis point when I left.

RUTH: It’s the all-or-nothing attitude that precedes apostasy.

JOHN: I agree with that, but I think we are off topic.

RUTH: What is the topic?

JOHN: Our relationship.

RUTH: Well, what we have discussed already are symbolic of the emotions and insecurities in our relationship. As the story goes, I remember we went to get our temple recommendations renewed. You were the Young Men’s president at the time. I was a counselor in the Relief Society. We had recently read some controversial readings together. I knew you were coming to terms with some of the Church’s
I was not playing a Mormon wife role by loving you. I was Ruth in love with John, no roles necessary.

tainted history, but I had no idea you would come out of that temple recommend interview without a recommend and having asked the branch president to release you from your calling.

I thought, “Okay, this is okay—John needs to work some things out.” Looking back, I don’t know why I was surprised when finally you told me you had given the branch president a letter listing the reasons why you did not believe in Mormonism anymore and then asked to have your name removed from the records. But, the moment you told me, it was as if you had just punched me terribly hard in the stomach. I doubled over and could not breathe. I was disoriented, I didn’t know if I should hit you, collapse, or just get the hell out of the apartment. I was betrayed by the fact that you told the branch president (a kind of stranger) before you told me. I remember thinking, “What does this mean as far as what I am supposed to do now?” I had dated non-members and had decided long ago that I wanted a priesthood holder. I wanted the possibility of going on a mission as an elderly couple. I wanted a Mormon family. I did not want this! I was thinking, “Doubt, fine. Struggle, fine. But, give up? Leave? Who are you now? This is not what I chose!”

I have later come to appreciate the fictitious person I had imagined and called husband. In a very real sense, I needed to get to know you—maybe for the first time. We had to start over again, didn’t we?

JOHN: Yeah, we did. We had assumed that we knew certain things about each other because of our joint commitment to the Church, not realizing that we were committed for different reasons and in different ways. I remember feeling as if I had made one of the most authentic choices of my life and I was truly being myself. Therefore, I saw your reaction to my leaving as a rejection of who I really am. I mean, I wasn’t blindsided by your reaction. I saw it coming—and that is why I put off telling you, and largely because I was afraid you would talk me out of it. I was afraid of what my reaction would be when faced with the choice of being true to myself and being true to our LDS marriage.

RUTH: So even though you were not surprised by my reaction, you still felt betrayed as well?

JOHN: Yeah, it is ironic. I mean, I didn’t even know who I was at that point or even what I was going to do next. But I felt that you had absolutely no respect for the little piece of myself that I had finally carved out separate from the Church’s mold. So you became for a time almost an enemy to me. My love for you compelled me to compromise the little integrity I felt I had achieved, and when I did that, I hated myself, and I hated you. I guess that is how love is turned into hate. Fortunately we didn’t stay there.

RUTH: Yeah, I hated you, too. I could think only of myself and what you were doing to me. I did not see your struggle. I only saw how my marriage was being sabotaged. I had to make a decision about whether I wanted to stay married to you or not. I began seeing ways that you are an amazing man separate from having to be amazing as a priesthood holder. You were a great lover, a great father—you had goals and ambition. You really cared about me. I knew you cared because you listened to me and allowed me to hurt. I made the decision that I wanted you with or without your Church membership. I think my love for you deepened because it seemed more real. I mean, I was not playing a Mormon wife role by loving you. I was Ruth in love with John, no roles necessary. I was still angry and hurt, though. I still had a lot of questions about how we were going to raise our family now. What would our family look like with regard to spiritual rituals that had always been important to me?

JOHN: Yeah, once you realized that I was not going back to the Church, you had to ask, “Okay, what kind of family religious life are we going to create together?” I was still working out what kind of religious life I wanted to live by myself, which I felt needed to be worked out first. We fought about that for a while—the priority of those two questions.

RUTH: I remember continuing to be baffled by the lack of “family” integration into your spiritual development. I was annoyed by your lack of consideration of how this family of
our creation was to move in any direction without you.

JOHN: We are still working that one out.

RUTH: Yeah. However, I remember a significant turning point for me in our relationship. I remember asking myself: "Why am I waiting for John to come up with a spiritual map for our family? I have my own life, my own spirituality, and my own talents I can share with our children without him." I never wanted to be alone in this, but I was. I was not going to whine any longer and pine for your attention to take some initiative in spiritual matters. I was making a hard and hurtful decision to let go of my expectation that you lead our family in spiritual rituals, but this decision was ultimately healthy for our relationship. This decision was not made out of anger and resentment in response to you, but for once, I was deciding for me. I felt suddenly powerful and amazingly capable. I did not tell you about this decision until later. At the time, it felt good not to include you. I was on my way to being free from you.

JOHN: I remember when you did tell me. I felt on the one hand relieved and excited for you because I didn’t think the level of dependence in that area was healthy for either of us. However, it did feel like another rejection of me (which I suppose it was), and that hurt.

RUTH: I was not rejecting you as much as rejecting the expectation that you be the one to take the initiative in religious and spiritual matters for our family. I did not feel dependent on you as much as I just depended on you to be my partner in this.

JOHN: Now we are negotiating better and compromising the details of how we are going to raise our kids. You are in school, and you are going to have a career of your own, and you have interests and goals and a whole life independent of me. And I feel both proud of you and relieved that I am not responsible for your spiritual life. There is no doubt that you and I are stronger individuals for having been through this struggle, that we are more whole, more integrated as individuals. And I believe—I have to believe—that being stronger individuals, we will be stronger as a couple.

RUTH: I think we are stronger as a couple because we are stronger as individuals. We are not as threatened by our differences now. We can disagree or agree with each other without having to take it so personally. You have always been my biggest supporter in going for my goals in spite of what some may consider the selfish nature of them. You have been a good example of living an authentic life (leaving the Church being one of those authentic decisions). I will always be grateful to you for showing me that I must be who I want to be and everyone else will have to catch up eventually. You stayed with me. I am so glad that you did not “outgrow” me and leave.

JOHN: But sometimes I feel very distant from you, and I miss you. It’s ironic, because for years, I have been wanting to disentangle our relationship. But I sometimes fear that we don’t have enough bonds anymore to make it through. I wonder how we can maintain our hard-won autonomy while also preserving our relationship. When I was in the Church, I think we were lazy because we assumed that we had the Church and the Church lifestyle in common. Now I mourn for the loss of that feeling of closeness that came from our shared commitment, even if it was an illusion. The saying goes that all knowledge leads away from some Garden of Eden. I suppose that is as true in marriage as in the rest of life.

RUTH: I miss you, too. I miss sharing the stupid religious symbols that still have meaning to me. And I wish you would share more of what symbolizes spirituality to you. I guess we are at a point where we want to share more but we do not want to go back to relying on each other for anything. I think that is a loss for us.

JOHN: Lately, that sense of loss has been getting the best of me. And I have this feeling, like Mike said, that I want to excise whole years of our history. At those times, I have to remind myself of a favorite quotation:

"It's no good trying to fool yourself about love. You can't fall into it like a soft job without dirtying up your hands. It takes muscle and guts. And if you can't bear the thought of messing up your nice, clean soul, you better give up the whole idea of life, and become a saint, because you'll never make it as a human being. It's either this life or the next."
JOHN: When I left the Church, I also gave up on the idea of becoming a saint (in both senses of the word). I chose this life, messy and dirty as it is. You are a huge part of that life, and you are an example to me of the “muscle and guts” it takes to really live life. I’m glad I have you with me to share it all.

RUTH: I am thankful every day that you still choose to be with me.

Panelists

RONDA AND MIKE CALLISTER. RONDA is a professor of organizational behavior at Utah State University. MIKE is a urologist in private practice in Logan, Utah. Ronda and Mike have been married for thirty years and have four daughters and four grandchildren.

PAGE AND TOM KIMBALL. PAGE is a nursing student at Utah Valley State College. TOM is marketing director for Signature Books and book review editor for the Journal of Mormon History. Page and Tom have been married for seventeen years and have five children.

RUTH OGDEN AND JOHN HALSTEAD. RUTH is a marriage and family therapy graduate student at Purdue University, Calumet, and is active in her Highland, Indiana, ward. JOHN is an attorney. Ruth and John have been married for nine years and have two children.

NOTES


2. In saying this, I realize that at least from a long-term perspective, especially if one believes affiliating with the Church is ultimately a good thing, this phenomenon of one spouse going through a doubt stage without the other fully on board is probably a good thing. If both members of the couple were to begin doubting at the same time, they might very well help feed each other’s angst in such a way that they will both resign their memberships. Whereas if they enter into their periods of doubt at different times, the pull of the more orthodox spouse will most likely act as a check to the other making a hasty decision regarding continuing LDS affiliation.

3. John Osborne, from his play Look Back in Anger. In 1958, it was made into a film by the same name.
If Alma’s primary concern with Corianton was sexual transgressions, one would think that most of the remainder of his discourse would focus on promiscuity.

THE SIN “NEXT TO MURDER”: AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION

By Michael R. Ash

Traditionally, Latter-day Saints have ranked sexual transgressions as “next to murder” in order of serious sins. In 1942, the First Presidency of Heber J. Grant, J. Reuben Clark, and David O. McKay declared that “sexual sin—the illicit sexual relations of men and women—stands, in its enormity, next to murder.” Breaking the law of chastity, wrote President Kimball, “is one of the most serious sins next to murder.” In the category of sins, explained President Ezra Taft Benson, “unchastity stands next to murder.” Adultery, Harold B. Lee said in a priesthood address, is “one of the greatest of all the sins next to murder.”

Invariably, the scriptural support for such a claim is based on Alma 39:5, wherein Alma (the Younger) reprimands his son Corianton who, while on a mission to the Zoramites, ran off to chase a harlot:

Know ye not, my son, that these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost?

This verse seems to be the impetus for the LDS belief that sexual transgressions are second only to “murder” in the eyes of the Lord. While this may be one valid interpretation of Alma’s comments, or at least a way of “likening” the scriptures to a serious problem among God’s children, I believe there is a more logical interpretation of the “sin next to murder”—a sin that doesn’t involve sexual transgression.

In noting a possible reinterpretation of Alma’s words, I don’t want to diminish the seriousness of sexual sins. Infidelity in marriage is one of the leading causes of divorce and the breakup of families. Adultery destroys trust, damages self-esteem, and is linked to domestic violence and suicide, as well as suicide attempts by children of divorced parents. Pre-marital sex often results in teen pregnancies, abortions, early marriages that frequently end in divorce, disease, single parenthood, and a host of other problems. Sexual sins are serious because they damage not only a person’s spiritual well-being but also because they generally damage others as well. I also don’t want to moderate the very serious nature of heinous sins—many of which are sexually related—such as rape, child molestation, torture, and so on.

However, when we examine Alma’s reprimand in light of the entire thirty-ninth chapter as well as in light of other scriptures, we discover that Alma’s admonition may be linked to another serious sin: causing the spiritual death of others.

Chapter thirty-nine of Alma begins with Alma comparing Corianton’s actions with those of his more righteous brother Shiblon (both of whom were missionaries to the Zoramites).

And now, my son, I have somewhat more to say unto thee than what I said unto thy brother; for behold, have ye not observed the steadiness of thy brother, his faithfulness, and his diligence in keeping the commandments of God? Behold, has he not set a good example for thee?

For thou didst not give so much heed unto my words as did thy brother, among the people of the Zoramites. Now this is what I have against thee; thou didst go on unto boasting in thy strength and thy wisdom. (Alma 39:1–2)

Shiblon was faithful and diligent and showed “patience” and “long-suffering” to the Zoramites (Alma 38:3). Alma had counseled Shiblon against boasting or relying too much on his own strength (Alma 38:11)—the very things wherein...
Corianton failed. "This is what I have against thee," complained Alma. But there was more:

And this is not all, my son. Thou didst do that which was grievous unto me; for thou didst forsake the ministry, and did go over into the land of Siron among the borders of the Lamanites, after the harlot Isabel. (Alma 39:3)

In the Bible, we find that harlots were not only prostitutes, but also that the word "harlot," and imagery associated with harlots, is sometimes used metaphorically for those who practice idolatry (Jeremiah 3:1). Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah lamented the wickedness of Jerusalem, calling her a "harlot" who had worshiped false gods (Ezekiel 16, Jeremiah 3, Isaiah 1:21). In 1 Nephi, we read that the great and abominable church would be responsible for the apostasy in the meridian of time. Both Nephi and John the Revelator refer to this group of people as the "mother of harlots" (1 Nephi 13:24; 14:16–17, Revelation 17:5). Whereas sexual transgressors would literally leave their wives or moral values to chase after harlots, fallen members of the Lord's people would metaphorically leave God to chase after the harlot of other gods.

Alma continues:

Yea, she [the harlot Isabel] did steal away the hearts of many; but this was no excuse for thee, my son. Thou shouldst have tended to the ministry wherewith thou wast entrusted. (Alma 39:4)

While it's certainly possible (perhaps even likely) that it was the "hearts" of sexual desire which Isabel stole away from "many" others, it's also possible that metaphorically she caused "many" to turn their hearts away from the Lord. In the Old Testament, the Lord strongly admonished the Israelites not to intermarry with non-Israelite women. Marriage to non-covenant women, warned the Lord, could cause their hearts to be "turned away" after idolatrous gods (1 Kings 11:2). King Solomon failed to heed this counsel, and eventually "his wives turned away his heart after other gods" (1 Kings 11:3).

In the Book of Mormon, "heart" is often associated with testimony. We read of hearts "pondering" the things of the spirit (2 Nephi 4:16) and groaning because of sins (2 Nephi 4:19). Hearts that are "hardened" will not enter the "rest of the Lord" (Alma 12:36). Hearts are swallowed up in pride (Alma 31:27) and set upon riches (Helaman 13:20). The righteous have changed hearts (Alma 5:17, 12–26). Alma frequently speaks of the heart. Zoram, he explains, who was the leader of the Zoramites—the very people to whom Corianton and Shiblon were sent to preach—was leading the hearts of the people to bow down to dumb idols (Alma 31:1). Likewise, Korihor preached that there could be no atonement and led "away the hearts of many" (Alma 30:18, 45).

Just after noting how Isabel stole "away the hearts of many," Alma made his famous comment that "these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord"—nearly as bad as murder, yet less severe than denying the Holy Ghost. "These things" suggests that there was more than one thing wrong with Corianton's affair with Isabel. I believe that, perhaps, the more serious infraction was the resulting spiritual damage inflicted upon others who had witnessed Corianton's sinful actions.

One evidence for this claim is that if Alma's primary concern with Corianton was sexual transgressions, one would think that most of the remainder of his discourse would focus on promiscuity. Yet immediately after noting the abominable nature of Corianton's actions and the fact that his actions were second only to murder, which was second only to denying the Holy Ghost, Alma launches into a description of the unpardonable sin—to knowingly deny the Holy Ghost. Following this explicatio, Alma continues by explaining that "whosoever murdered against the light and knowledge of God, it is not easy for him to obtain forgiveness" (Alma 39:6). Denying the Holy Ghost is unforgivable, but those who murder "against the light and knowledge of God" can receive forgiveness, albeit with great difficulty.

WHAT DOES IT mean to murder "against the light and knowledge of God," and why does Alma feel the need to convey this information to Corianton at this time? Some have supposed that to "murder against the light and knowledge of God" refers to the shedding of innocent blood. And this certainly is a possible interpretation. I believe, however, that in context of Corianton's sin, there is a better interpretation.

In Alma 26:3, we read that some of the Lamanites, who once were "in darkness," were "brought to behold the marvelous light of God"—in other words, they gained their own testimonies of the Gospel. When Alma relates his own conversion story, he recalls being "redeemed from the gall of bitterness and bonds of iniquity." Where he had previously been in "the darkest abyss," he finally beheld "the marvelous light of God" and his soul "pained no more" (Mosiah 27:29). Alma tells us that his ancestors, the Nephites, fell into transgression after having "so much light and so much knowledge given unto them of the Lord their God" (Alma 9:19). He also prophesies that four centuries after Christ would appear, the Nephites would again become iniquitous—sinning against "so great light and knowledge" (Alma 45:12). So while it's possible that murdering against "the light and knowledge of God" could refer to shedding blood even while knowing it's wrong, a better interpretation could be that Alma was referring to the sin—very closely related to the unpardonable sin—of killing (murdering) someone else's testimony.

Why does Alma feel the need to share this with Corianton? In the very next verse, he says, "And now, my son, I would to God that ye had not been guilty of so great a crime. I would not dwell upon your crimes, to harrow up your soul, if it were not for your good" (verse 7). Corianton hadn't shed innocent blood, yet Alma charges Corianton with the crime of murdering "against the light and knowledge of God." While some may argue that this could still refer to Corianton's moral discrepancies by nature of his rebelling against the things he had been taught (his "light and knowledge of God"), this verse doesn't make such an implication. Instead, it accuses Corianton of murder—which generally refers to killing someone else—in this case, murdering someone else's testi-
mony. Alma, as a young man (and before his conversion), had led others away from the Gospel. He was "a great hinderment to the prosperity of the church of God; stealing away the hearts of the people" (Mosiah 27:9). He confesses to Helaman that as a wayward young man, he "had murdered many of his [God's] children, or rather led them away unto destruction" (Alma 36:14). He now used the same terminology to note Corianton's sin next to murder.

While Alma also counsels Corianton to "go no more after the lusts" of his "eyes" and to not let his heart be "led away" by "wicked harlots," he explains to his son that such actions had brought a "great iniquity . . . upon the Zoramites; for when they saw your conduct they would not believe in my words" (Alma 39:9, 11; italics added). Corianton had indeed murdered the testimonies of numerous Zoramites. Alma continues his exhortation by noting:

And now the Spirit of the Lord doth say unto me: Command thy children to do good, lest they lead away the hearts of many people to destruction; therefore I command you, my son, in the fear of God, that ye refrain from your iniquities; that ye turn to the Lord with all your mind, might, and strength; that ye lead away the hearts of no more to do wickedly; but rather return unto them, and acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done. (Alma 39:12–13)

Alma is very concerned that Corianton has damaged the testimony of others; because of his iniquities, he has led them away from God and to destruction. Corianton needs to repent and fix what he has done. Alma reiterates the future coming of Christ and tells Corianton that "this was the ministry unto which ye were called, to declare these glad tidings unto this people, to prepare their minds; or rather that salvation might come unto them, that they may prepare the minds of their children to hear the word at the time of his coming" (verse 16).

It appears that Alma framed his argument thusly: Corianton is guilty of leaving his mission to chase a harlot (either literally and/or figuratively). This harlot has damaged many testimonies already, and Corianton's actions have also led some of the people to destruction instead of to God. Among Corianton's sins is one that ranks next to the shedding of innocent blood, which ranks second only to the unpardonable sin of willfully denying the Holy Ghost. Corianton's grievous sin, for which forgiveness is still possible albeit difficult, is murdering "against light and knowledge." To murder or shed innocent blood (the most serious of the pardonable sins) is to extinguish someone's life. To murder against light and knowledge is, I believe, in Alma's logic, to extinguish someone's testimony.

That murder of testimony ranks among the most serious of sins finds support in other scriptures as well. In Matthew 18, for instance, Jesus gathered several children to him and told his disciples that unless they were converted, humbled, and became like little children, they could not enter the kingdom of heaven (verses 1–4). "And,"
W
E WHO COMMUNICATE POTENTIALLY
FAITH-CHALLENGING INFORMATION
WOULD BE WISE TO EXAMINE OUR
INNER MOTIVES.

Jesus continued, “whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me” (verse 5).

As noted in John Gill’s Exposition of the Bible, “one such little child in my name” is meant to be understood metaphorically—“that is as this child.” In other words, the “child” refers to a disciple who has humbly converted and become as a little child in Christ. Therefore whoever receives the follower of Christ, likewise receives Christ himself. As Christ, in a different instance, said of his disciples: “He that receiveth you receiveth me” (Matthew 10:40). Of course the corollary is also true. “He that despiseth me despiseth me” (Luke 10:16). With this in mind, we turn to the next verse in Matthew 18 wherein Christ is counseling his disciples to become as little children: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (verse 6).

While Latter-day Saints and other Christians have often interpreted (or at least “likened”) this verse as a warning against harming a child, in context, “these little ones which believe in me” refers to those who have become as children in Christ—he humbler followers of Christ. The word the King James scholars translated as “offend” comes from the Greek skandalizo which means metaphorically “to put a stumbling block or impediment in the way, upon which another may trip and fall” or to cause someone to “fall away.” The New Living Translation of the New Testament renders this verse as follows: “But if anyone causes one of these little ones whom you have brought into the kingdom of God to stumble, it would be better for that person to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around the neck.”

Thus, Christ seems to be warning those who might destroy the testimony of others. They would be better off dead than being the cause of someone else’s loss of testimony. Christ must have viewed such a sin as extremely serious.

Interestingly, in the Doctrine and Covenants we read a similar warning about offending little ones, but in a context that doesn’t relate to actual children. As the prophet Joseph Smith lay confined in the jail at Liberty, Missouri, depressed about the trials that he and his followers had endured, he prayed for relief from suffering, both for himself and his fellow Saints, and asked the Lord to take vengeance on their enemies. The Lord responded with a message of peace and comfort, assuring the prophet that the trials would be “but a small moment” (D&C 121:7). Speaking of those who had brought pain and suffering to the Saints, the Lord said:

And they who do charge thee with transgression, their hope shall be blasted, and their prospects shall melt away as the hoar frost melteth before the burning rays of the rising sun. Also because their hearts are corrupted, and the things which they are willing to bring upon others, and love to have others suffer, may come upon themselves to the very uttermost. . . .

Cursed are all those that shall lift up the heel against mine anointed, saith the Lord, and cry they have sinned when they have not sinned before me, saith the Lord, but have done that which was meet in mine eyes, and which I commanded them. But those who cry transgression do it because they are the servants of sin, and are the children of disobedience themselves. And those who swear falsely against my servants, that they might bring them into bondage and death—Wo unto them; because they have offended my little ones they shall be severed from the ordinances of mine house. Their basket shall not be full, their houses and their barns shall perish, and they themselves shall be despised by those that flattered them. . . . It had been better for them that a millstone had been hanged about their necks, and they drowned in the depth of the sea. (D&C 121:11–22)

Here we see that those who “offend” Christ’s people—“my servants” (whom the Lord calls “my little ones”)—will be “severed” from the everlasting ordinances performed in the temple. Such punishment speaks to the severity of the sin.

Others have also recognized that Jesus’ admonition about “offending” his “little ones” refers to destroying testimonies. Harold B. Lee declared:

The Lord issued a warning to those who would seek to destroy the faith of an individual or lead him away from the word of God or cause him to lose his grasp on the “iron rod.” Then quoting Matthew 18:6, President Lee continues, “The Master was impressing the fact that rather than ruin the soul of a true believer, it would be better for a person to suffer an earthly death than to incur the penalty of jeopardizing his own eternal destiny.”

The grievous view that Christ takes of those who cause believers to stumble lends support to the reinterpretation of Alma 39 I’ve undertaken here. Corianton’s sin-next-to-
INFORMATION INOCULATION: HELPFUL OR HARMFUL?

Many years ago, I concluded that fewer members would be shocked out of the Church if they were taught the stickier issues of LDS history in faithful settings or from faithful literature. When members are introduced to peculiar or unconventional aspects of LDS history from LDS-critical sources, the natural inclination for some is to assume that the Church has "covered up" or "lied" about its past.

From my more than two decades of dealing with "ex" (or struggling) Mormons, I've found that feelings of betrayal and being lied to are the most frequent emotions felt by those who leave the Church for "intellectual" reasons. When feelings of betrayal overpower belief, faith is often lost and the original challenging discovery is no longer the issue; the greater issue becomes the feelings of infidelity and deception—feelings that are not easily overcome, even if serious answers are forthcoming later on. A testimony lost at this stage can be hard to restore. What might have been sufficient answers earlier become insufficient once resentment—as a result of presumably being deceived—replaces faith. As LDS scholar Kevin Barney once remarked to me, "People can absorb hard facts when presented in a context of faith. But they can't absorb the feeling of being lied to."1

Other LDS scholars, including D. Michael Quinn, have also noted the potential power of "inoculation" against these stickier issues. While I don't completely agree with all points in Quinn's important essay, "On Being a Mormon Historian," I do agree that Latter-day Saints will encounter—even more so in today's Internet age—the problematic issues from "other sources." Mormon historians would be better off "seek[ing] to write candid Church history in a context of perspective in order to inoculate the Saints against the historical disease germs that apostates and anti-Mormons may thrust upon them."2

LDS historical inoculation is analogous to viral inoculation both in immunizing subjects against more serious harm by exposing them to smaller doses of the virus in a controlled setting, as well as the potential risk from the inoculation itself. For example, while those who contract smallpox typically have a 20 to 40 percent mortality rate, those who are inoculated against smallpox have a mortality rate of 2 percent or less.3 Likewise, it is unfortunate, but unavoidable, that some Latter-day Saints will lose their testimonies following LDS history inoculation or because of the actual inoculation. From my experience, however, those who survive inoculation with contra-conventional LDS information, generally preserve their testimonies when later faced with LDS-critical material.

Daniel Peterson, writing in a public forum, shared the following about a lecture he'd attended by the late Stanley Kimball regarding the complexity of LDS history:

He [Kimball] spoke of three levels of Mormon history. Level A, he said, is the Sunday School version. Everything on Level A is obviously good and true and harmonious. Level B, however, is the anti-Mormon version of the same story. . . On this level, everything that you thought was good and true and harmonious actually turns out to be evil and false and chaotic.

Kimball noted that the Church typically seeks to keep its members on Level A or, at least, feels no institutional obligation to bring them to a deeper level. Why? Because souls are lost on Level B. And, though Level C might be academically more desirable, it cannot be accessed without at least some exposure to Level B. Were he in a leadership position, [Kimball] said, he would probably make the same decision.

Once members of the Church have been exposed to Level B, though, he said, their only hope is to press on to the richer, more complicated version of history that is to be found on Level C—which, he contended and I agree, turns out to be essentially and profoundly, like Level A. The only cure for bad historiography is better historiography. The only remedy for bad anti-Mormon arguments is better counterarguments. . . .4

Although inoculated Saints may retain their testimonies when confronted with contra-conventional information, most who are exposed to challenging issues emerge with slightly differing views than unexposed members have. An inoculated member may still believe in all the basic Mormon tenets but will generally reject naïve assumptions such as infallible prophets, error-free scripture, or other absolutes that lack clear revelation (all of which, I believe, are superior understandings about prophets and scripture). Some inoculated members may fit more closely in less-orthodox categories of belief such as "Liahona Saints"5 or "Borderlanders."6

It is important to consider the source from which one is introduced to challenging issues. In his perceptive book, That Noble Dream, Peter Novick argues that an absolutely objective history is an impossible ideal.7 David Hackett Fischer, professor of history at Brandeis University, likewise argues, "The Baconian fallacy consists in the idea that a historian can operate without the aid of preconceived questions, hypotheses, ideas, assumptions, or general presuppositions of any kind."8 Both believing and non-believing historians who write Mormon history face not only their own biases but are also challenged at every turn with decisions about what information to present or withhold (or at least they must decide about what perspective to take on the information they present, or how they want to emphasize or de-emphasize it).

Non-believing historians are forced to deal with evidence that supports the traditional view of the supernatural beginnings of Mormonism. As Dan Vogel recently explained, for those (like himself) who do not believe in a historical Book of
Mormon nor the existence of Nephites, "then one is obliged to explain the plates and witnesses" with a theory "consistent with that conclusion."9

For believing LDS scholars and historians, the challenge is often how to introduce inoculatory information into works written for LDS readers. As a participant in two different LDS-apologetic websites—www.MormonFortress.com and www.FAIRLDS.org—which explore critical claims,10 I’ve seen occasional emails from members who are shocked that there are so many arguments criticizing LDS claims, or express discouragement when they stumble upon rebuttals to topics they didn’t know were controversial. Other LDS apologists and I recognize that, for some members, just discovering that there are answers to troubling questions may be akin to opening a can of worms. But we also realize that by not addressing sticky issues, the Church runs the greater risk of appearing deceitful (even if by omission) as well as allowing critics the first opportunity to expose and set the tone for the challenging issue.

Believing historians face similar challenges. Richard L. Bushman, a believing historian, explains that most historians who believe in Mormonism’s faith claims are “dialogic”—"they are engaged in constant internal dialogue. They know how their story looks to the faithful, and they also know how it looks to the skeptics. The debate over credibility is waged in their own minds, not just in scholarly debate."11 He notes the difficulty of writing history for both believers and skeptics and that histories written for both (including those he’s written) sometimes seem a “trifle emaciated.”12

Writing for one audience alone—either believers or skeptics—permits you to make claims that simply won’t hold water if you write for both. A story that seems plausible to a secular audience falls apart when you tell it to Latter-day Saints.13

While Bushman doesn’t offer a solution for this dilemma, he does offer insight and advice. Dialogic historians, he explains, often have the advantage of being more aware of “the plight of readers and feel compelled to empathize with their predicaments.” As an example, he notes how Fawn Brodie’s “brilliant study . . . had no sympathy for the Mormon reader” as her book “mowed down the faithful with her account of Joseph Smith.”

More important she felt no need to address the objections that Mormon scholars might raise. She was on her way out of the faith and wanted to address the larger world. She played to its prejudices while disregarding believing scholarship. Some believing writers do the opposite. They play to Mormon prejudices while rejecting the larger world.14

From my experience, more member testimonies are shaken when challenging information is introduced from critical sources, who as Bushman notes, rarely “feel compelled to empathize” with the believing reader, than those who are introduced to the same information from faithful sources. Bushman advises believing scholars: “We need historians who will mourn the failings of the Saints out of honor for God instead of relishing the warts because they show the Church was earthbound after all.”15

The ideal would be to see inoculation introduced in official Church venues—although arguments could be made that such a program is not pragmatic. Despite the fact (and contrary to the claims of some critics) that many unconventional LDS topics have been discussed in LDS literature—including Church magazines, BYU Studies, and even, in some cases, Sunday School School manuals16—the purpose of Church curriculum is to support the mission of the Church: to bring people to Christ, to help members draw closer to God, seek the Spirit, and understand gospel principles. Thousands of virtually untrained volunteer members (with varying degrees of gospel and historical knowledge) endeavor to bring the Spirit into the classroom so that class members can be spiritually edified. Certainly, some Gospel Doctrine teachers are knowledgeable enough to share detailed historical information, but manuals generally give basic historical outlines that specifically relate to a lesson that focuses on one or more gospel principles. Church is a place for worship, spiritual edification, and enlightenment, not for in-depth historical lessons. And while the Ensign can, and has, dealt with troubling issues, its primary goal is to enhance members’ understanding of gospel principles and provide articles on how to implement those principles into everyday lives.

Numerous LDS-related publishers, however, have blessed thousands with inoculatory writings, as have LDS websites and a growing number of Mormon blogs and message boards.17 The recent publication of Richard Bushman’s Rough Stone Rolling,18 and the forthcoming Church-initiated book on the Mountain Meadows Massacre,19 all indicate that believing scholars recognize the need to deal with challenging historical issues.

As an Internet-active LDS apologist, I’ve read emails from members whose testimonies have been shattered by challenging material. I’ve also read emails from members whose faith has been enriched by pro-LDS material that candidly discusses the same challenging issues. Like never before, the Internet affords the average member access to once-obscure sources and information on Mormonism and LDS origins. Those members who take seriously the Lord’s counsel to learn by “study” as well as by “faith” (D&C 88:118) have a growing number of articles, books, and websites—both faithful and hostile—that offer contra-conventional or ancillary data about the Church and its history.

With the growth and popularity of the Internet, the Church may soon be forced to take a more proactive role in inoculating its members “against the historical disease germs that apostasize and anti-Mormons may thrust upon them.”20 Personally, I would welcome greater candor in the history articles and books published by the Church.

Notes for this sidebar begin on page 42
murder was most likely that he led people away from Christ. If our joy will be great because we, after all our labors, bring a single soul to Christ (D&C 18:15), it stands to reason that our anguish will be just as great if we lead a single soul away from Christ.

HOW MIGHT SOMEONE destroy a testimony, create a stumbling block, or lead others away from Christ? I see at least two possibilities of which we must be mindful. First, like Corianton, we members of the Church might lead others away through our unrighteous or careless actions. For example: some of the early Christians were eating meat from the non-Christian temples. This wasn’t against Christian doctrine, but some of those members who had converted from Judaism were bothered by it. Paul advised those members to “be careful . . . that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.”

For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall. (1 Corinthians 8:9–13, NIV)

Likewise, most of us have heard stories of non-members who have been offended by a holier-than-thou Latter-day Saint. As M. Russell Ballard notes, “I have heard about narrow-minded parents who tell children that they cannot play with a particular child in the neighborhood simply because his or her family does not belong to our Church. This kind of behavior is not in keeping with the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ.” If our careless actions result in driving others away from the gospel, how severely do we suppose the Lord would look upon such actions?

We members of the Church often live in “fishbowls” and are frequently the subjects of close monitoring and inspection. If we set bad examples and commit serious offenses—such as Corianton’s moral transgression—we may cause others to turn away from the gospel and the missionaries.

Second, some people intentionally lead others away from the gospel by the things they do, say, or write. Some critics, ex-members, and even borderland members seem to take great joy in shocking less-informed members with some of the stickier parts of early LDS history or scriptural difficulties. One critical member, for instance, recently wrote to other disaffected members:

I would like to see . . . [the Church] come crashing down, but sooner rather than later. . . . I propose, and this is what I do, that those of you who know you are being lied to and who are fed up with it actively work to undermine it from within. Start doing something about it. Fight back. Many of you cannot leave the church because of family or other very real reasons.

If you’re in the church, start taking active steps to bring it down from within. . . . If you teach or are being taught, start asking a few difficult questions. . . . There are many other ways of bringing this church down; use your own imagination and creativity.

Informed Latter-day Saints know the issues which can and have contributed to deconversion. And because we all have biases and approach topics with preconceived assumptions, these same challenging issues are often presented with drastically different spins. While faithful or apologetic LDS scholars may see a challenging historical event as evidence of the human nature of prophets, those who are critical of LDS claims often see the same event as evidence of fraud or pious fraud.

In 1981, Elder Boyd K. Packer gave a talk to Church educators entitled, “The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect.” His presentation was directed primarily to Seminary and Institute instructors— instructors who, on the Church payroll, are entrusted with increasing the faith of young students of the gospel. He counseled these instructors to give milk before meat:

Teaching some things that are true, prematurely or at the wrong time, can invite sorrow or heartbreak instead of the joy intended to accompany learning. . . . It matters very much not only what we are told but when we are told it. Be careful that you build faith rather than destroy it. . . . A destroyer of faith—particularly one within the Church, and more particularly one who is employed to specifically build the faith—places himself in great spiritual jeopardy.

Elder Packer’s talk has received criticism from a variety of members, non-members, critics, and even believing scholars. Some of his comments have been construed as encouraging censorship or hiding unsavory aspects of Church history. While I share Elder Packer’s concern that tithing-funded instructors build faith rather than destroy it, I also sympathize with D. Michael Quinn’s observation that some LDS histories have avoided “difficulties of the Mormon past” and have, instead, “offered to the Saints . . . a mixture of platitudes, half-truths, omissions, and plausible denials.”

Such a public-relations defense of the Church is actually a Maginot Line of sandy fortifications which “the enemy” can easily breach and which has been built up by digging lethal pits into which the Saints will stumble. A so-called “faith-promoting” Church history which conceals controversies and difficulties of the Mormon past actually undermines the faith of Latter-day Saints who eventually learn about the problems from other sources.

I’m a firm believer that sunshine is the best disinfectant. Exposing difficult issues often has inoculatory power. (See sidebar, pages 38–39.) Having said this, however, I also recognize that some members or investigators can stumble when confronted with untraditional information, wherein no blame can be laid upon the messenger. Some have claimed, for example, that Richard L. Bushman’s Rough Stone Rolling—which
HOW CAN WE KNOW WHO IS EXPOSING TROUBLING ISSUES WITH AN OBLIGATION TO BUILD TRUTH INSTEAD OF A DESIRE TO DESTROY TESTIMONY?

candidly discusses many untraditional and often challenging issues—has supposedly caused at least a few members to leave the Church.\textsuperscript{23}

Joseph Smith also had members desert the Church when they stumbled over untraditional teachings.

Many men will say, “I will never forsake you, but will stand by you at all times.” But the moment you teach them some of the mysteries of the kingdom of God that are retained in the heavens and are to be revealed to the children of men when they are prepared for them they will be the first to stone you and put you to death.\textsuperscript{24}

I have tried for a number of years to get the minds of the Saints prepared to receive the things of God; but we frequently see some of them, after suffering all they have for the work of God, will fly to pieces like glass as soon as anything comes that is contrary to their traditions: they cannot stand the fire at all.\textsuperscript{25}

Some believers even left Christ himself when he taught things that were too difficult for them to accept.

Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father. From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. (John 6:65–66)

If believers can be offended, stumble, or lose their testimonies simply because of the information they encounter, how can the person who disseminates this information be guilty of “offending such little ones” or committing a sin next to “the shedding of innocent blood”? Like most other righteous and unrighteous acts, I believe it’s relative to the intent of one’s heart. As Paul wrote to Timothy:

I thank Jesus Christ our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly because of unbelief. (Timothy 1:12–13)

Elder Packer, I believe, correctly pointed out that the “historian who delights in pointing out the weakness and frailties of past or present leaders destroys faith.”\textsuperscript{26} and that for some historians, “the motive” to publish a warts-and-all history “is to destroy faith, if they can, and the Church, if they are able.”\textsuperscript{27}

In a 1984 general conference address, Elder Dallin H. Oaks observed that there are at least six reasons why people perform righteous acts such as service. Some of the motives, however, are less than stellar. The least desirable motive for serving is the “hope of earthly reward.” Those driven by such a motive seek prominence, honor, wealth, or power.

The scriptures have a word for gospel service “for the sake of riches and honor”: it is “priestcraft” (Alma 1:16). Nephi said, “Priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion” (2 Nephi 26:29).\textsuperscript{28}

Other non-ideal motives for service include “fear of punishment,” “a sense of duty or out of loyalty to friends or family or traditions,” and “hope of an eternal reward.” While all of these motives are valid reasons why people serve in the Church, they all, notes Oaks, are still motivated with ourselves in mind. The greatest reason to serve, explains Elder Oaks, is out of “charity” or “the pure love of Christ” (Moroni 7:47). “Our service should be for the love of God and the love of fellowmen rather than for personal advantage or any other lesser motive.”\textsuperscript{29}

Logically there must be similarly good and bad motives for those who communicate potentially testimony-damaging information. So how can we know who is exposing troubling issues with an obligation to build truth instead of a desire to destroy testimony? We can’t know with any certainty. Occasionally we may be able to infer hypothetical motives from an author’s actions or past efforts, but since we are unable to see into another’s heart, we leave judgment to him who knows the thoughts and the intents of our hearts (D&C 6:16).

Personally, I choose to believe that the majority of Mormon scholarship (from both “orthodox” scholars and “revisionist” scholars)\textsuperscript{30} is probably produced with integrity and an honest desire to convey issues and events according to each scholar’s interpretation of the evidence.\textsuperscript{31} I suspect, however, that there are genuine instances of “wolves in sheep’s clothing”—critics who engage in subterfuge, enticing believers by deliberately masking their expositions as faithful formulations. Instead of faithful interpretations, however, such critics would, instead, paint their accounts with a patina of iconoclasm in order to crack the foundations of faith and to incite deconversion.

We who communicate potentially faith-challenging information would be wise to examine our inner motives. If our intentions are pure, I believe we will stand guiltless in regard to those who stumble over their own false or naïve assumptions. About those who have intentionally malicious motives, however—those who intend to “offend” and kill testimony—it seems that Alma and other prophets, and even the Lord him-
self, regard such an offense as nigh unto murder, and such perpetrators would metaphorically be better off with a millstone around their necks and drowned in the sea.32

NOTES

6. After I had written and submitted this article for publication, I discovered that I was not alone in this interpretation of Corianton’s sin. See, for example, G. St. John Scott, “The Economics of Sin: Sexual Morality in an Ethos of Civic Republicanism,” The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal, 24 (2004): 57–73.
10. Both of these scriptural supports are included in Jorgensen, “Spiritual Chastity,” 27.
18. This term, which describes members of the Church whose views seem to be at the “borders” of traditional LDS beliefs, was coined by D. Jeff Burton who writes a SUNSTONE column entitled, “Braving the Borderlands” (which first appeared in the April 2002 issue).
27. Ibid, 269.
29. Ibid., 14.
30. For an interesting discussion of orthodox scholars, revisionist scholars, and apologists, see John Charles Duffy, “Defending the Kingdom, Rethinking the Faith: How Apologetics Is Reshaping Mormon Orthodoxy,” SUNSTONE (May 2004), 22–35; also available online at http://www.sunstoneonline.com/magazine/issues/132/Defending_the_Kingdom.pdf (accessed 11 July 2006). Duffy seems to take a humor-impaired approach to apologetic discourse. While “funny” is in the eye of the beholder, Duffy often sees “verbal aggression,” “hostility” and “contempt” in writings which are generally meant to be tongue-in-cheek. Compare, for instance, some of Duffy’s examples (p. 27) with those posted at http://www.mormonfortress.com/gloss2.html (accessed 11 July 2006). Despite this shortcoming, however, Duffy offers a valuable overview of the clash between the orthodox and revisionist scholars.
31. I’m also on record for acknowledging that

32. See, for instance, Matthew 18:6 and D&C 121:22.

NOTES TO ‘INFORMATION INOCULATION’ SIDEBAR

5. This term was coined by Richard D. Poll, "What the Church Means to People Like Me," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 2, no. 4 (Winter 1967): 107–118. Poll suggests that many Saints are either "Iron Rod Saints" or "Liahona Saints." "Iron Rod Saints," Poll explains, "do not look for questions, but for answers, and in the Gospel—as he understands it—he finds, or is confident that he can find the answer to every important question. The Liahona Saint, on the other hand, is preoccupied with questions and is skeptical of answers, he finds in the Gospel—as he understands it—anwers to enough important questions so that he can function purposefully without answers to the rest" (108).
6. This term was coined by Jeff Burton who writes a regular SUNSTONE column entitled, "Braving the Borderlands." Burton’s column addresses those members who seem to be at the "borders" of LDS belief—those members who consider themselves faithful to and part of the Church ‘but don’t fit comfortably with the unwavering core members or “true believers.”’ See SUNSTONE, December 2003, 67.
12. Ibid., 281.
13. Ibid., 280.
15. Ibid., 11.
16. A list of challenging topics and the LDS publications in which they are addressed is included in my manuscript, “Shaken-Faith Syndrome: Resolving Ant-Mormon Difficulties,” currently seeking publication.
If we believe the scriptures are a keyhole through which we can peek into God’s inner sanctum, we had best be prepared for periodic eye-rubbing to clear our vision as we contemplate the narratives of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba.

SCARLET THREADS IN THE LINEAGE OF JESUS
FOUR WOMEN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

By H. Parker Blount

A young man, I wanted to be a worthy priesthood holder entitled to a pure, sweet, clean virgin who would accompany me to the temple. I don’t know that I acquired that view on my own, but having heard Church leaders repeatedly picture it as the narrow gate to marital bliss and exaltation, I adopted it as my own. I had read The Scarlet Letter, and I shrank from the oppressive and fetid consequences of sexual transgression. Poor Hester Prynne vividly demonstrated what we were frequently told. In contrast to the permeating peace of virtue retained, lost virtue is crimson pain incarnate. If we lost our virtue, we were told, we would be overcome with guilt, self-recrimination, and despair. We would lose self-respect and the respect of others. We would suffer endless unhappiness, and repentance would be a long and painful process. Even though we could repent and be forgiven, our virtue could never be restored.

We were told that a girl who lost her virtue was like a dust-covered and bruised flower along the wayside, ignored by the travelers who had their eyes on the pristine beauty growing high above and out of reach of the grime stirred up by the travelers’ careless feet. Although these notions were primarily aimed at girls, boys were made to understand what sorry specimens they were if they took the virtue of one of these innocent daughters of God, or even besmeared her through necking or petting. Said one member of the Twelve of that era: The leaders of our Church have said that they would rather see their children dead and in their graves clean, than to have them lead unclean lives. Virtue is more important than life. Protect it above your life. If the time ever comes when you must choose between the two, then sacrifice your life, but under no circumstances sacrifice your virtue.1

She waited by the wayside. Her outfit and posture shouted, “For a price, you can have me.” A man came along, saw her, was aroused, bargained a price, and a trick was turned. The woman was Tamar; the man, Judah. Their story is found in Genesis 38.

My interest in Tamar came about when, sometime back, I decided to reread the New Testament, beginning with “The Gospel According to St. Matthew.” Ordinarily I skip the lineage of Jesus, otherwise known as “the begats,” in Matthew chapter 1. The begats are a quintessential patriarchal statement testifying to the male power to procreate. The begats are also terribly boring. For some reason, I decided to read them this time. I began: Abraham begat Isaac; Isaac begat Jacob, Jacob begat Judah. I was already tired after just two verses. I was ready to quit and move on to where Matthew mentions Joseph and Mary and Jesus, but my eye caught something that sur-

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prised me. There in verse three, in which Matthew tells us that Judah begat Pharez, Matthew adds, “of Tamar.” Why include Tamar, I wondered. He hadn’t included Sarah, Rachel, or Leah. As I read the following verses that march us steadily, begat by begat, toward King David, Matthew mentions three more women by whom a male child in Jesus’ lineage had been sired. They were Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. (Matthew doesn’t identify Bathsheba by name but as “her that had been the wife of Uriah.”) Then silence—no more women for twenty-seven generations, until Matthew introduces Mary, “of whom was born Jesus” (Matthew 1:16).

Forty-two generations. According to Matthew, forty-two men and a mere five women make up the lineage of Jesus. It is obvious why he included Mary, even if he did it in the passive voice—Mary didn’t bear Jesus; Jesus was born of her. Was there something special about these four women? I began searching the scriptures to see what I might learn about them and what their stories might reveal. What follows are some of my discoveries and thoughts regarding these women. To help put things in perspective, I will continue with Tamar’s story and then summarize the Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba stories.

AS FAR AS we know, Tamar was not a practicing prostitute. But on this occasion, she resorted to using sex, as do many women, to acquire something that she seemed, as a female, unable to achieve through her own merits. What Tamar wanted was a child. To use Rachel’s words, “Give me children, or else I die” (Genesis 30:1) A childless woman had no stature in Tamar’s culture. Tamar had married Judah’s oldest son, Er, whom the scriptures say God slew for some unnamed wickedness. Childless, she was given to the second son, Onan, to raise up children to his brother. At the critical moment, however, Onan withdrew, spilling his seed on the ground (Genesis 38:9). God was unhappy with Onan’s "coitus interruptus" and slew him, too. God likes a man who sees things through to the end.

Judah promised Tamar his youngest son, Shelah, when he came of age. But Judah forgot his promise. Desperate for a child, Tamar apparently concluded that using her sex to get her father-in-law’s attention could also give her the child she wanted. So she dressed herself as a harlot and thinking her a harlot, asked what it would take for him to sleep with her. They settled on a kid from his flock, to be delivered at a later date. Tamar, however, insisted on collateral against the delivery of the kid. Judah left with her his signet, bracelets, and staff.

As a result of that encounter, Tamar became pregnant and gave birth to twin boys. During delivery, one of the babies “put out his hand” as though he were testing the waters of life. The midwife tied a scarlet thread around the exposed hand, a symbol that will show up in yet another story. “And it came to pass, as he drew back his hand, that, behold, his brother came out: and she said, How hast thou broken forth? this breach be upon thee: therefore his name was called Pharez” (Genesis 38:28–29).

When Judah discovers that Tamar is pregnant, he wants her burned. She produces the signet, bracelets, and staff and asks Judah what had to be for him a startling question, “Whose are these?” Judah recognizes these tokens and acknowledges his mistake: “She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son” (Genesis 38:26). Tamar is not burned, and, in fact, there is no evidence of Judah nor Tamar experiencing any recriminations. What the Bible does tell us is that Judah fathered what became the most prominent of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the one to which the promised Messiah would be born. And it was Pharez, the child of Tamar and Judah’s illegitimate union, who became a forefather of King David, and, according to Matthew, Jesus.

AS THE CHILDREN of Israel approached the promised land, Joshua sent two spies secretly into Jericho to survey the situation (Joshua 2). They lodged at the house of Rahab the harlot. We don’t know why they chose to lodge at such a house, but one conspicuous possibility is to avail themselves of what the house had to offer. In Rahab’s words, “There came men unto me” (Joshua 2:4). The king of Jericho became aware of their presence and sought to apprehend them. Rahab hid the spies on her roof, and misled the king’s agents by telling them the spies had only moments before left the city. “Hurry, you can catch them,” she essentially said. She told the two spies that people were afraid of the power of the god of the Israelites, and she knew that their god would give them the land of Jericho. She begged the spies to spare her and her father’s family. Because of her kindness in saving their lives by hiding them, they promised her that her house and everyone in it would be spared when they came into the land. They gave her a scarlet thread to hang in her
E 

Limelech and his wife Naomi, with their two sons, left famine-starved Bethlehem-Judea and moved to Moab. There the two sons married Moabite women, one of whom was named Ruth. In time, both Elimelech and his two sons died. Naomi decided to return to her homeland, and Ruth chose to leave Moab, her home, and go with her mother-in-law.

The narrator of Ruth's story has her say to her mother-in-law, "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:16). This beautiful and poetic statement has made the story of Ruth extremely appealing. Using that lyrical verse, LDS speakers teach principles of conversion, fidelity, and loyalty. According to one LDS apostle, Ruth is a "model of ideal womanhood."3

Ruth's beautiful statement is just the beginning of her story. Ruth returns with Naomi to Naomi's homeland. Soon Naomi masterminds a plot whereby Ruth captures the attention and favors of Naomi's wealthy kinsman Boaz, the same Boaz born of Rahab. Naomi tells Ruth that late in the evening, Boaz will be at the threshing floor eating and, along with his meal, drinking wine. Ruth is directed to wash, dress—apparently in a special outfit—and perfume herself. Ruth is to slip unseen to the threshing floor. After Boaz is well under the influence of wine and lies down, she is to lie down next to him.

"And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn: and she came softly, and uncovered his feet, and laid her down" (Ruth 3:7). When Boaz discovers her, she tells him, "I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine hand-

maid; for thou art a near kinsman" (Ruth 3:9). Ruth spends the remainder of the night with him only to slip away before dawn under cover of darkness in hopes that no one would discover she had spent the night on the threshing room floor.

Now, you tell me: what do you think is about to transpire when a sexually experienced woman lies down beside a tipsy man in the dark of night? Do you think they were discussing grain futures? What might "uncover his feet" be a euphemism for? What about "spread thy skirt over thine handmaid"?4

Later, we read that Boaz marries Ruth, and "the Lord gave her conception, and she bare a son" named Obed, the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David the king (Ruth 4:13–17).

D 

David sees Bathsheba bathing, summons her, and has sex with her. She becomes pregnant. Here the narrator of the story allows Bathsheba to utter her only words: "I am with child." David brings home Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband, from his military campaign expecting him to sleep with Bathsheba and thereby make her pregnancy seem legitimate. "And David said to Uriah, Go down to thy house, and wash thy feet" (2 Samuel 11:8). Alas, David is foiled. Uriah will not allow himself to have fun while his military colleagues are in the field of battle having none. David's solution is to put Uriah in a vulnerable position on the battlefield where he is sure to be killed. Following Uriah's death, David and Bathsheba are married.

Unlike the three other cases, where there is no evidence the Lord is displeased with either the man or the woman, the Lord is displeased with David. He sends Nathan the prophet to David. "Thou hast despised me," the Lord says through Nathan. You have killed Uriah with the sword of Ammon, and you have taken his wife to be your wife. David had many wives, and the Lord would have given him more if he had asked. But David took a poor man's one little ewe lamb without asking. For his failure to ask, and for setting Uriah up to be killed by the Ammonites, thus giving Israel's enemies a chance to blaspheme Yahweh, the Lord tells David the sword will never depart from David's house, beginning with the death of Bathsheba's child (2 Samuel 12:8–10, 14). But first the child must suffer a severe illness, the Lord keeping him barely alive for seven days before he is to die. That is Yahweh's justice—killing the child to punish David. Why not kill David? Apparently Yahweh had further plans—important plans for both David and Bathsheba.
At the death of the child, David goes to Bathsheba to comfort her. The compassionate comforting leads to sexual intercourse. We might even say that she uncovered his feet and he spread his skirt over her. She conceives and bears a son, whom they name Solomon. And the scriptures tell us the Lord loved Solomon. Go figure.

Of all of David’s wives and concubines, it is to Bathsheba that the Lord gives the child Solomon, who is to play such a crucial part in shaping Judeo-Christian religion. Prior to Solomon, Yahweh is Israel’s tribal god. During Solomon’s rule, we see a shift in the text and begin encountering references to Yahweh as more than just Israel’s God and protector, but also as God the Father. Solomon builds Yahweh a temple in which Yahweh resides. And Solomon, the Lord said, “shall build an house for my name; and he shall be my son, and I will be his father” (I Chronicles 22:10).

Nevertheless, I can’t quite believe that the stories of these four women are important to the biblical writers exclusively because they gave birth to male children. There are hundreds of women with sons who aren’t mentioned. The reason that ancient Israel valued these stories, or that Matthew included them in the begats, is not explicitly revealed in the stories nor in the commentaries. We are left to find their value as we interact with the narratives themselves.

A YOUNG man at BYU, I often heard better dead and clean, than alive and unclean, or some similar refrain. Being clean, of course, meant sexual purity. The frightening thing was that I had sexual desires. I hated to admit it, and I didn’t, even to myself if I could help it. But it was nevertheless true, and those desires were a great threat to my peace of mind as well as, I assumed, to my eternal salvation. For young men my age, our sexuality was like a virus that could strike and kill us spiritually. It was to be controlled with prescriptions such as singing a hymn to ourselves, reading the scriptures more regularly, and praying more intently. The underlying message seemed to be that if we were living worthily, we would be immune to those desires (that is, they wouldn’t exist). Looking back, it seems to me that most of my associates were boys who hid behind a mask of blue blazers and striped ties, trying hard to be a younger version of general authorities who came nearly weekly to speak to us, and who obviously had never had to wrestle with a single impure thought.

So why did Matthew include these four women out of forty-two generations of male begats? He doesn’t tell us,5 so I decided to back up a step and ask why these stories might have been important to ancient Israel. What was it about these women and what they did that made them worthy of the New Testament’s spotlight?

An important key to understanding the Old Testament is to recognize that one of its primary purposes is to show that Yahweh is more powerful than any of the gods of the other tribes in the land. Time after time, we are shown how he outwits and out-muscles the Israelites’ enemies (and their gods). As we read in Exodus, “The Lord is a man of war . . . . Thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy” (Exodus 15: 3, 6). In addition, the Old Testament tells how the Hebrews interpreted their relationship with Yahweh as his chosen people and what it meant to be faithful. In these writings, they reveal their perception of Yahweh’s personality—what sets him off, and what he winks at.

How do the stories of these four women show the power of Yahweh? He gives these women children—boy babies. Male children are a gift from God. It was an affirmation to the mother that God took notice of them, that they were righteous and acceptable to God in perhaps the same way that being called to certain LDS leadership positions is taken by some as an affirmation of righteousness. As the Psalmist sings, “Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward” (Psalm 127:3).

Instead of discovering in these women’s stories the ethics and morality we Latter-day Saints are predisposed to find in the scriptures, we are confronted with astonishingly different characters. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, are, as Jonathan Kirsch tersely observes, “non-Israelites who married Israelite men, and all four engaged in sexually questionable conduct, including acts of prostitution and seduction.” To that we can add that each story contains some rather under-handed scheming. Rather than confirming the image of irreplaceable virtue, these stories contradict it. In these stories, what we have been taught to consider as immoral behavior is not followed by misery and unhappiness, but by the ultimate blessing—a child is born, “God hath taken away my reproach” (Genesis 30:23). These women are a far cry from the image we construct of the ideal woman. And the men? Well, the less said the better.

Because the events that followed the scheming in each story are not what we expect to hear, it is all the more important to explore, rather than ignore, them.

I am struck by the openness of these stories. Nothing is hidden. The women’s sexuality is neither disguised nor ignored; neither is their scheming. If anything, these women are celebrated because of the way they challenged the patriarchal society through negotiating, contriving, and even deceiving. They are who they are, and that is what the stories tell. The Hebrew chronicler says in effect, if not in fact: this is what these women did and how they lived, and they are a vital part of the story that tells us who we are.

When I think of Tamar, I see a woman shaped by a cultural milieu that tells her that her mission in life is to bear a child. She, a non-Israelite woman, willingly abides by the Hebrew levirate marriage custom in which a brother marries his dead brother’s widow and “go[es] in unto her . . . . and perform[s] the duty of an husband’s brother unto her” (Deuteronomy 25:5). The scene depicted in Tamar’s story prior to her seduction of her father-in-law, then, is of a grown woman waiting for a boy.
I am struck by the openness of these stories. Nothing is hidden. The women's sexuality is neither disguised nor ignored; neither is their scheming. The Hebrew chronicler says in effect, if not in fact: this is what these women did and how they lived, and they are a vital part of the story that tells us who we are.

NAOMI

To mature physically so that he can impregnate her. I struggle to find a morality paradigm in which I can be comfortable with this situation.

When I encounter Bible stories, I have to remind myself how important it is to really listen. As Marcus Borg says, "Reading [the Bible] well involves listening well—seeking to hear what the text is saying to us and not simply absorbing the text into what we already think." What I hear is Tamar saying: "Enough already. I tried their program, and it hasn't worked. Now it is time to take things into my own hands." And she, the seductress, Judah confesses, was more righteous than he (Genesis 38:26).

While Tamar played the role of a prostitute, Rahab, in fact, was a prostitute. However, the narrative does not judge her prostitution. She is deeply concerned about her father's family, and she may even have been driven to prostitution to provide for them. I don't know how many women choose the profession because they find it personally fulfilling. But Rahab reads the signs of the time, and she is an opportunist. Instead of remaining loyal to her own government, she casts her lot with the signs of the time, and she is an opportunist. Rather than letting the contradictions and the paradoxes stand, as though they were important in understanding God and how God relates to his chosen people. The compilers could live with ambiguity—and they needed to, since their experience showed Yahweh to be an unpredictable God. His paths are seldom straight but contain sweeping curves and sharp angles like a twisting mountain path.

Of the four tales, the story of Bathsheba may be the most interesting, certainly the most complex. For most of the narrative, we see Bathsheba only in the background of David's story. And in this story, unlike the others, God is a character. Readers often assume that Bathsheba was fetchingly beautiful, but all we know is that David was a randy fellow. Against the roiling mountain path.

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among God’s chosen people). In time, David takes back Michal, but when Michal criticizes David for an unseemly dance witnessed by young girls, David expels her from his life. “Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no child unto the day of her death” (2 Samuel 6:23).

According to the Bible, Michal loved David. There are frequent references to a man loving another man, but to my knowledge, this is the only account in the Old Testament mentioning a woman’s love for a man. The romantic in me says that Michal deserved to bear Solomon. We don’t know if Bathsheba loved David, but unlike her sister wife Michal, Bathsheba prevailed.

The story of these four women, and the Hebrew men who interacted with them, are surprisingly reminiscent of stories from Mormon history. If we look closely, we will find that all the particulars are there. Women used sex to survive and find self-worth, just as Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba did. They schemed to survive when men were away on missions or in the face of polygamy. And in those early days of the Church, there were counterparts to Judah, the spies, Boaz, and David. Just as Bathsheba responded to a powerful David, the Lord’s anointed, so did women respond similarly to powerful leaders of the new kingdom.8 If we were as open as the Hebrew storytellers, I have every reason to believe that we would see aspects of these stories unfolding in the Church’s recent history.

The only difference between the Hebrew and Mormon narratives is not in the particulars, but in the telling. The Hebrews told them without judgment and without tidying or polishing them. They weren’t concerned about flaws and warts, because everyone had them. Being God’s chosen people did not hang on the merits of any given individual.

A GIRL I was dating when I was at BYU told me that she and her roommates had been watching the Sunday morning session of general conference when one of her roommates left the room in tears. It turned out that she had given birth out of wedlock and had put up the child for adoption. A speaker’s comments regarding chastity, moral cleanliness, and the preciousness of virtue, which could so easily be lost, had engendered deep feelings of guilt and unworthiness in this young woman. Even though she had gone through the process of repentance and done all her bishop had asked, she still carried a heavy burden.

She was a really lovely girl who attracted the attention of the guys. But my girlfriend and I felt sorry for her. We knew that she could repent, but she could never reestablish her virtue. It was gone forever. And, of course, she would have to confess her indiscretion to any boy who became serious about her. And what would that lead to? Who would want as their eternal companion this used and bruised flower?

It never occurred to us to question any of that. We didn’t, perhaps couldn’t, go deep enough to realize that virtue wasn’t exclusively associated with an unbroken hymen. I don’t know why we didn’t realize that virtue wasn’t so tenuous that one could be filled with it one minute and then be absolutely and forever devoid of it the next.

I believe the Hebrew perception of God and morality is less exacting and less rigid than the view I acquired from my immersion in the Mormon way of thinking. I don’t think the Hebrews were as preoccupied with the ideal—the ideal home, family, man, woman—as we seem to be. Perhaps they didn’t have the leisure to get much beyond the everyday effort of living. Or maybe they didn’t believe they could forge themselves into flawless vessels. It is possible they didn’t even believe that was necessary.

Compared to the Hebrew narrative, I wonder if we aren’t a little too supercilious about our purity, or even about our definitions of worthiness and purity. Thinking about these four women makes me wonder if we haven’t perhaps overgrazed the “body is a temple of God” pasture. One LDS women’s leader recently said:

“You can recognize women who are grateful to be a daughter of God by their outward appearance. These women understand their stewardship over their bodies and treat them with dignity. They care for their bodies as they would a holy temple, for they understand the Lord’s teaching, ‘Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?’ (1 Corinthians 3:16)”

A temple, just like a body, can be a whitened sepulcher full of dead men’s bones. A little less body talk and a little more talk about the interior would suit me better. But, then again, the body is worth thinking about. According to the male voice in the Song of Solomon, his lover’s lips “are like a thread of scarlet” (Song of Solomon 4:3). His lover’s breasts are like . . . well, you probably aren’t interested in what her breasts are like. But according to Cathy Smith Bowers, in her poem “Elegy for Enkidu,” “Gods are cruel, / though, knowing few men can resist a woman’s breasts.”

“Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18). It is so easy for us, standing apart, to equate the inviting scarlet mouth of a desirable woman with a path to crimson sin. And what is there but sex and seduction woven through the tales of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba? Tales of scarlet threads attached to scarlet women, like Hester Prynne’s scarlet letter.

Hester was required to wear her scarlet letter by the community, a community that presumed such righteousness that they could humiliate anyone who deviated from their strict code of sexual conduct—or at least those whose conduct was exposed. This community wanted to be able to tell by outward appearances at a glance who loved God and who didn’t.

Hester Prynne’s community branded her with a scarlet letter, whereas Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba seemed not to experience any disapproval from their communities. We now seem to find the stories of these four women hard to bear. Their sexuality, determination, and machinations exceed the boundaries of our template for the ideal woman. Consequently, we don’t include their stories in our litany of faith-promoting accounts of women the Lord will love—or women who love the Lord, for that matter.
Who would want as their eternal companion this used and bruised flower? We didn’t go deep enough to realize that virtue wasn’t exclusively associated with an unbroken hymen.

SOME YEARS BACK, I held a Church position that required me to hear confessions and make judgments about worthiness. A young woman from one of the outlying wards of the stake sought out a priest to confess sexual transgressions. We sat facing one another in one of the classrooms of the ward building with its opaque windows and ivory-colored concrete block walls. “I was,” she told me, “taken with rodeo cowboys.” It had led to sex. Later, before she married her non-member husband, they had sex together. Her voice hung with tears as she began, and they ran down her cheeks as she continued. She clearly was uncomfortable, not wanting to tell me these things that became despicable to her as she worked her way through the past in that cold cell of a room.

Her husband had joined the Church, and they had two little tow-headed boys. The couple attended meetings, had callings, and were deeply involved in the ward community, which included her large and active extended family. And she suffered. The flow of her life was dammed tightly, the waters backed up into black, impenetrable pools. Her husband had been baptized and came out of the waters clean and innocent while she was fully immersed in her sins. She had heard the sermons, directives, and lessons, and she knew she was flawed, that she hadcheapened herself, that she wasn’t worthy. Her only hope was to confess this ugliness to the proper priesthood authority.

What did I say to her? I told her it was in the past. I told her to forget it (hoping she could). I tried to assure her that from the perspective of the Church (and I was the Church at the moment), her repentance was complete. I wanted to erase it for her and to not see her scoured raw.

I don’t remember her name. I can’t reproduce a clear image of her face. I do remember the sound of her pain. I remember that because I remember my own pain as I sat with her. After she left, I cried. I didn’t know why I was crying. Something was trying to speak, but it was too deep for me to find words to express it. Crying was the only voice I had.

I don’t know that I am any clearer today about why I cried than I was then. But I have some thoughts now that I didn’t have then. I cried because of what we do to one another and the things we heap upon each other. I cried because Church repentance requires such a big dose of pain. I cried because she had to prostrate herself before me. Too many had. I cried because I am frail and human, and I don’t know how to be anything else. I hadn’t had her experiences, but I could have.

I think I cried because she couldn’t choose to whom she would like to tell her story—or even whether she needed to tell the story. I think I cried because I sensed her story had been hijacked. As far as I know, she may have felt about her cowboy the way the poet Thomas Lynch said he, as a young man not yet twenty, felt about Johanna Berti.

About the only thing I knew for sure about my future was that I wanted to spend a good portion of it in the embrace of Johanna Berti, or someone like her. She had recently disabused me of years of blissless ignorance the nuns and Christian Brothers had labored to maintain.

Even if the young wife I mention felt that way, she could not have told that story, probably not even to herself. She was left to tell a story that required her to make shame and guilt the center of it, whether it naturally belonged there or not.

THE CHILDREN OF Israel thought the accounts of these four women were worth remembering and studying. I would love to know exactly why they thought them important. I would love to be able to see the reason etched clearly in black and white. I say this knowing that the Old and New Testaments are mostly a grab bag of meaning. If we aren’t careful, all we get from them is what we bring to them.

If we believe the scriptures are a keyhole through which we can peek into the inner sanctum of God, we had best be prepared for periodic eye-rubbing to clear our vision as we contemplate the narratives of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. We have been pretty much conditioned to favor an orderly, predictable God who is quick to reward righteousness and swift to punish evil. We favor stories such as Jonah’s, in which, when Jonah tries to run away from his mission call, he is gulped down by a big fish. But these four women’s stories tell of something quite different. They are certainly stories of salvation and redemption—not of the eternal kind, but of ordinary people achieving for survival in the face of the ordinary vicissitudes of life. They are narratives about our human predisposition to long for something not easily identifiable or easily satisfied. Judah said to Tamar, “Go to, I pray thee, let me come unto thee” (Genesis 38:16). In effect, this is what the men in each of these stories said to the women. But we, all of us, male and female, stand begging, do we not, for intimacy, willing to barter and trade? We yearn to be connected and to be whole. Maybe these narratives are telling us that God understands that better than we understand it.

I would like to think that Matthew thought we should know these four women were ancestresses of Jesus because whatever these stories may say to us, they are, at their heart, our stories. By knowing these women’s stories, we might better understand this child of Mary’s who said when he grew up, “Neither do I condemn thee” (John 8:11).
NOTES


4. There is strong scholarly consensus that there was a sexual element to Ruth’s visit to Boaz that evening, though opinions about the extent of that sexual element vary widely. (See The Oxford Bible Commentary, John Barton and John Maddox, eds. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 194–95; The Anchor Bible Dictionary, David Noel Freedman, ed. [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 5: 843–45.) It is possible that Ruth simply uncovered Boaz’s feet, perhaps to awaken him. Raphael Patai says, “The throwing of [a] … man’s cloak, over the head of the bride is part of the marriage ceremony among the Bedouins of the Sinai Peninsula.” Patai relates this to Ruth’s request that Boaz spread his skirt over her. (See Raphael Patai, Sex and Family in the Bible [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959], 97.) Much of the speculation about the sexual activity implied in this story comes from the biblical use of the word “feet” as a euphemism for “genitalia” (see, for example, Exodus 4:25; Isaiah 7:20; Deuteronomy 28:57). The David and Bathsheba story, discussed later in this essay, has David calling Uriah home from battle and telling him to “Go down to thy house, and wash thy feet,” which is followed a few verses later by Uriah’s explanation that he is unwilling to “lie with my wife” when his fellow soldiers are still fighting Israel’s cause in the field (2 Samuel 11:8, 11). Two discussions of this euphemism, one from an LDS-themed blog, can be found at: http://www.bycommonconsent.com/2006/03/covering-the-feet/ and http://www.telecomtally.com/blog/2005/05/a_euphemism_for_feet_1.html.

Whether the story of Ruth is using euphemisms for something sexual, or is making reference to symbolic acts for which we now have no key, cannot be determined. Some commentators underscore the innocence of the events on the threshing room floor, citing Boaz’s testimony of Ruth’s virtue, “all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman” (Ruth 3:11). However, even though the narrative doesn’t explicitly say that Ruth and Boaz engaged in sexual relations, it can certainly be interpreted as saying that something sexual transpired, and most commentators do interpret it that way. Boaz’s declaration of Ruth’s virtue is not unlike Judah’s avowal that Tamar was more righteous than he: Boaz is not necessarily using the term “virtue” as it is used in the Church today, meaning sexual purity.

5. Following my Sunstone symposium presentations, I was directed by a friend, Boyd Petersen, to a source where New Testament scholar Raymond Brown asks what common characteristics these women share that would cause Matthew to include these four women in his list of begats. Brown explores three possibilities, each of which hinges on notions that the four women “foreshadowed” some aspect of Jesus the Messiah and Redeemer. The first is that the women were sinners, and their inclusion alludes to and underscores the role their descendant, Jesus, plays as the redeemer of sinners. The second possibility is that the women serve to show that Jesus was related to gentiles. And third, the four women shared a commonality with Mary: each of their stories contains a sexual irregularity that initiated a step (through the influence of the Holy Spirit) that furthered God’s plan. See Raymond E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 71–74.

My own journey with these four women, which has lasted for several years now, began with the question of why Matthew included them. That question has become less important to me as I gradually began to ask what the narratives themselves have to say to me and to the collective Mormon worldview. The commonalities that the four women share are easily derived from the Bible narratives, but I don’t find anything that convinces me that any or all of the commonalities Brown mentions were the impetus for Matthew to include these women in his genealogy. As far I know, he may have copied the genealogy from another source without giving any thought to the women’s inclusion.


8. I would compare the women who responded to Joseph Smith when he introduced them to plural marriage to Bathsheba. The hundreds of women who were sealed to the Prophet after his death, rather than to their own husbands, make me think about how women have always responded to the allure of a powerful leader, and I see similarities to levirate marriage in the way women sealed to Joseph for eternity were subsequently sealed for time to Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball. The promise of exaltation, God’s love, is powerful, and I believe that like the biblical women under discussion here, many LDS women of the past used their sexuality as leverage to achieve what they desired above all else. John A. Widtsoe wrote:

Zelous women, married or unmarried, loving the cause of the restored gospel, considered their condition in the hereafter. Some of them asked that they might be sealed to the Prophet for eternity. They were not to be his wives on earth, in mortality, but only after death in the eternities. This came often to be spoken of as celestial marriage. Such marriages led to misunderstandings by those not of the Church, and unfamiliar with its doctrines. To them marriage meant only association of earth. Therefore any ceremony uniting a married woman, for example, to Joseph Smith for eternity seemed adulterous to such people. Yet, in any day, in our day, there may be women who prefer to spend eternity with another than their husband on earth. (See John A. Widtsoe, Evidences and Reconciliations [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960], 343.)


I come from a culture of writers. From the beginning, we Mormons are repeatedly told that we will be judged by our works. I've always assumed that means written works. It all begins with Joseph Smith, of course—the most influential American writer of all time. He never made any money off the Book of Mormon, but he changed the world with it. My own writer's lineage begins with him, then goes to my granddad W. George Goold, after whom I am named. My father's father wrote his life story in a neatly typed, 200-page volume entitled, What Has Made My Life. It includes photocopies of the six personal commendations he received from J. Edgar Hoover, Granddad's boss at the FBI in the '60s. Also present are the letters of praise Ezra Taft Benson gave him while Granddad served in the Department of Agriculture. The book's table of contents lists chapter titles such as, "Earning a Livelihood," "Church Activity," and "Your Mother's Role." My favorite chapter is, "The Most Important Person in the World," which Granddad begins like this:

To each of you, the most important person in the world should be yourself. It is you who will have to account for the way in which you have used your life. Thank God for the free agency He has given you, and the pattern He has presented for you to follow in exercising it wisely.

After that, the roots of my writer's tree also dig into the soil of my grandfather Ray Loughton. My mother's father is a poet. His life story was compiled by my mom in a three-ring binder and was given the expansive title, "A Discerning Pen: The Life Story of Ray Loughton in Prose, Poetry and Pictures." My mom's family all presented it to Grampa on his 90th birthday last year. Grampa greatly admires Robert Frost, though their legacy as poets will certainly never be judged as similar. Several of Grampa's poems actually include the proviso, "With apologies to Robert Frost." For nearly all his life, Grampa shared his poetry only with my grandma. But she's gone now, and he is just kind of sitting in his easy chair and waiting to follow her. So I guess that makes it okay to share some of his poetry, which I admit is kind of growing on me. The poems have titles such as, "The Thought," and "Not Ours Alone." My favorite poem is the ironically titled, "Poem with a Point," Grampa included in a letter to a friend on 10 March 1966.

POEM WITH A POINT

T's said that poetry measures best
The mark of civilization's crest.
So . . . poetical evaluation is the theme—

To say in verse just what I mean
Is rather an ambitious quest . . .
Please grade me generously in the test!

In any event the issue raised
Is what in poetry is to be praised:
Pure form and beauty of the art?
The piercing of a lover's heart—
Description of a poignant pen—
Or the rambling of artistic yen—
Enlargement of historical fact—
Or persuasion by emotional impact?

How do we measure an artist's terms,
"applied to his own deepest concerns"?

My mind, like Frost's, gropes for reason,
And to avoid intellectual treason . . .
I judge a poem quite smug-gl-y . . .
Do I understand better than formerly?
If there's more confusion after the fact
I conclude t'was the Poet, not me, that lacked!

My parents passed the literary legacy of their fathers on to all six of us kids in the Goold clan. In Family Home Evening one night when I was eleven, my dad gave us all a new, spiral notebook and encouraged us to start journals. I'm still writing mine, and it is more than 2,000 pages long. But I didn't become a "real" writer—one who's paid to do it—until I went to Alaska in August 2001, to accept a job as a sportswriter for the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. That was also right around the

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time, after a twelve-year absence, I returned to the Church.

I didn't become an outlaw until I went back to the Mormons.

The day I entered into the fellowship of the Fairbanks 1st Ward, I walked up to the bishop, stuck out my hand, and said, “Hi, I’m Eric. I’m inactive.” He shook hands with me and responded, “Not today.”

What makes me an outlaw? There’s this: I’m a fourth-generation member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I’ve never read the Book of Mormon. I’ve read certain parts of the Blue Book (because it’s blue, I know it’s true), but never has it pulled me through cover-to-cover. Patchwork pieces of it were preached at me every Sunday for the first eighteen years of my life, so I couldn’t help but retain a small bit of its wisdom. For example, I know that the authors use the phrase, “And it came to pass,” quite an inordinate number of times. I know lots of personal tidbits that interest me—and probably no one else—like the Psalm of Nephi is pretty cool. But mostly, every time I try to buckle down and read those 531 pages all the way through, well, it puts me to sleep. It reminds me that Mark Twain’s famous declaration about the Book of Mormon being “chloroform in print” was right on then and is right on now. No, I haven’t read the Book of Mormon, but I still believe it’s true. I’m an outlaw; I don’t have to read it to believe that.

Last year, the prophet urged us all to read the Book of Mormon together as families. I’m a thirty-two-year-old single man (eegads, I am such an outlaw), so I had no family to read it with. I tried to read the whole book, cover-to-cover. I tried; I fell asleep. I tried; I failed. I was successful, however, in initiating an email conversation with my parents about it. I mean, it seems ridiculous, but I never really thought that either of them had read it. Growing up, I don’t recall any fervent testimonials about the book from either of them. I always got the impression that they read it because someone told them to, and that in turn, they told me to read it out of some vague notion about, “doing the right thing.”

I never really understood what that meant, “Do the right thing.”

Until he was fifteen, my dad’s exposure to the Book of Mormon came from his grandmother. “Dad’s mom was something, he writes:

Some said she had the book memorized, begin-

ning to end. I don’t know if that was true, or not. But she did know what was in it cover-to-cover. She could tell story after story from the book all day long. When she did, her eyes sparkled, she had a big smile, she just radiated. She told the stories well, to boot.

Before this, I knew nothing of my dad’s grandmother. I hadn’t even known that she was a member of the Church. Interesting that my dad’s fond memories arise from an oral tradition and have nothing to do with actually reading the book.

Then at age fifteen, my dad took a Book of Mormon class in Sunday School that was taught by a West Point graduate. “At that stage in my life,” Dad writes:

religious doctrine was in the esoteric, Never-Never Land. I had no doubts about the veracity of the Church because that was what I had been exposed to all my life. A deeply questioning mind was never one of my traits. If it was good enough for my dad, and my friends, it was good enough for me.

While my father never had a “deeply questioning mind,” his fourth son somehow inherited one. My mind is in a state of perpetual questioning, and among Mormons, that definitely makes me an outlaw. Like 99 percent of all the Mormon males I know, my dad was drawn into the Book of Mormon by its military tradition. As he says:

A good fight was always more interesting than a nebulous doctrinal concept. What my teacher (the West Pointer) brought to the table was an understanding of war—troops, strategy, material, motivation and result. He taught with a military understanding—got across the winning and losing reasons—and he had the ability to weave in the doctrinal stuff (faith, prayer, obedience, among others) that had a direct influence on the outcome of any particular fight. It was inspiring, and really got my interest in the book up.

War is yet another qualifying reason for my being a Mormon outlaw. I don’t believe in war. Not for any purpose. Not ever. The warrior spirit my dad writes about is the chief reason why so many Mormon men (like my namesake) go into the military and government service. They’re used to taking orders and used to following them. They believe in war; they believe that killing is justified if it’s for a righteous cause.

In this, I am proud to be an outlaw. Killing is just killing. It is never justified. The warrior spirit has led us precisely to where we
are now, ignorantly following orders while on the verge of World War III.
How's that working for you?

Of all the people on earth, the one who has most directly shaped who I am has been my mother. The one lesson she wanted me to learn more than any other was that the wisest policy is always to act in your own best self-interest. She taught me how to read and write. She taught me to love music and the arts. She has a few thoughts on reading the Book of Mormon. "I can see why President Hinckley was encouraging people to read it," she writes.

If it's not a commandment, people won't do it—kinda like the Word of Wisdom. It's hard to "sell" people on Mormonism when most Mormons haven't even read the book. But then I read on the Internet that most kids can't find the USA on a globe. And, besides which, the only way you could have a testimony of Joseph Smith is to believe he transcribed it by the gift of God. If you don't believe that, he's just another Mark Twain.

I love that. Just another Mark Twain. I should be so lucky: "They were saying in the Relief Society lesson on Sunday that Joseph Smith had very little formal education," Mom informs.

He could read mostly thanks to his mother reading him the Bible at home. Poor farm boys were needed to work the farm, and if they weren't busy enough, his father would parcel him out to work for other neighboring farmers who needed help. (No child labor laws.) Apparently, this was the primary reason Emma's family objected to their marriage—she was better educated than he was. So, belief in the Book of Mormon allows you to believe that Joseph Smith, a local yokel with a distinct predisposition to polygamy, could still be a prophet.

I've read it three times cover-to-cover. Once in Seminary, second time was at BYU, and third was when I taught Seminary. Reading it through cover-to-cover is not how I got a testimony of its truthfulness. It's just how I learned the history lesson of what's in there. It has always seemed like a rather mundane, pedantic morality play, written when the prophets were the only ones who could read and write.

The way I came to believe it is from God is the only way I know how to believe anything is true—put it to the test. Does it work? Can I apply it, improve my life?

My pragmatic answer: The Book of Mormon is true for me because I've seen it work in my life to the extent that I apply it. Just like the church, or the Savior, or the Celestial Kingdom. I choose to believe in the concept and work to understand how it can enlarge my life. I know truth when I see it or hear it—it just rings true. That's so much better than anything you can read in any book.

Amen, sister.
Since I’ve never read the Book of Mormon all the way through, I only learned of this scripture recently, when it was read in a sacrament meeting. Alma said it way better than I ever could:

Now they had never fought, yet they did not fear death; and they did think more upon the liberty of their fathers than they did upon their lives; yea, they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them. And they rehearsed unto me the words of their mothers, saying. We do not doubt our mothers knew it. (Alma 56:47–48)

Yes, this is about yet another group of warriors in the Book of Mormon (and perhaps the most famous one, the Stripling Warriors) and yes, this is yet another continuation of the hateful war metaphor in the book. But those words speak to the outlaw in direct terms—they define his fight. They tell him why he keeps struggling, why he keeps looking, why he keeps fighting, why he even bothers to go to church at all.

By becoming a writer, I am honoring the tradition of my fathers. I am saying I want to be like my father’s father, the G-Man, and my mother’s father, the poet. I am saying that I want to emulate my own father, who more than anything else was a jock. By being a writer, I am thinking more upon the liberty of my fathers than I think upon my own life. And by being a Mormon writer, I am honoring my mother.

I do not doubt that my mother knows it.

I WORKED WITH a person at the News-Miner whom I like to call Sam the Photographer. Sam is a hippy with a long braid of hair down his back. I respected him the moment I met him, because he is from Kansas and because he is wise like the mighty oak. He is someone I can imagine being a great peacemaker, an arbiter of reason who mandates common sense.

One of the six dwellings I lived in in Alaska was a cabin over on Goldhill Road. When I lived there, Sam lived in a cabin across from my driveway. I used to wander over to his place on weekends when he would have a bonfire, and we would chat about things. You know, life.

When I told him I was thinking about going back to church, he asked me, “Which church?”

I told him, “Mormon.”

He looked at me out of the corner of his eyes. They glinted in the firelight. “Is that your mother’s church?” he asked.

It gave me pause. I’d never heard it phrased like that.

“Yes,” I said. “It’s my mother’s church, and it’s her mother’s church, too.”

The answer seemed to satisfy him. It was what I came up with on the spot. But I should have answered something better.

“Yes, it’s my mother’s church,” I should have said. “It’s the only church I know that accepts outlaws.”

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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 31 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.

E LAINE SWALLOWED DOWN DOWN DOWN HER fear. There, it was there someplace ricocheting around inside her ribs. She couldn't tell anybody, certainly not Stevie and Ben, who were wrestling over Stevie's last Tootsie Roll in the back seat. If she told them, they'd beller, and she'd have to think of some way to calm them down. She stared out the front window of the Pontiac, across the shimmery asphalt parking lot to the supermarket.

Mama and Daddy had disappeared through those doors more than an hour ago. She'd kept track on her Minnie Mouse watch. An hour and fifteen minutes.

And she just knew they weren't coming back.

“E-laine!” whined Stevie. “Ben's pinching me.” He kicked the back of her seat, Mama's seat really—Elaine had climbed over as soon as Mama had handed her the bag of Tootsie Rolls, hissed, “Be decent to each other,” and closed the door behind her. Elaine had divided the candy—which Ben gobbled up first—and settled down to read her Archie and Veronica comic book while her brothers read Superman and Donald Duck. But they were all fast readers, even Stevie, who was just six, and by now they had read each other's comic books and eaten all but that one Tootsie Roll and were feeling cramped and hot in the car even though they'd rolled the windows down all the way.

“E-laine!” Stevie yelled again.

She turned around. “Stop it!” she shouted. Ben paused for an instant, then resumed secretive manipulations of Stevie's thigh. “Ben!” She reached over and tried to pull his hand away.

“When are they coming back?” Stevie spluttered. “Why are they so long?”

“They're always long,” Elaine said, but it seemed to her they weren't always this long. What could they be doing in Safeway all this time? She knew that, unlike the little grocery store in Boulder City, the big Las Vegas grocery stores had slot machines, and Mama saved up her nickels to play them. But an hour and fifteen minutes?

She peeled a big red star off the back of her left hand, the one Miss Hunsaker had stuck on this morning to reward her for playing Miss Hunsaker's favorite song, “Deep Purple,” without one mistake. “Listen,” Elaine said, “if you stop fighting, I'll tell you a story.”

“'Bout what?” asked Ben. He finally let go of Stevie's leg. Stevie started unwrapping the last Tootsie Roll.

“'Bout what?” said Stevie, taking a big bite. “Good.”

“What kind of angels?” asked Ben.

“Boxcar angels,” Elaine said.

For an instant, Stevie and Ben both sat still.

“Boxcar angels don't exactly live in boxcars.” Elaine pulled a stick of gum out of her shorts pocket and divided it in two.

“Angels live in heaven,” Stevie said, swallowing the last of the Tootsie Roll and stuffing in the gum.

“But boxcar angels spend a few days every month hiding out on freight trains. That way they can see the world from down here and see how they can help people. People don't even know they are angels until afterward.”

“Do they have wings?” asked Stevie.

“They hide their wings. They wear big coats. And hats to hide their halos. Anyway, once upon a time, there was a girl who was almost ten years old . . .”

“Once upon a time means it isn't true,” Ben said. “And in Sunday School, they said that angels don't really have wings.”

“Well, this is my story, not a Sunday School story. My angels have wings. Anyway, this girl—her name was Joya—she lived in a trailer with her mother and her little brother and her cat and they hardly had any money and they all slept in one bed.”

“Joya's a funny name,” said Ben.

“I wish we had a cat,” said Stevie.

“And when it got to be Halloween, Joya didn't have a costume for the carnival at school. She hated to tell her mother because her mother worked so hard, she was a waitress at the
E

ELAINE STRAPPED MINDY into her carseat, then handed her the plastic bowl full of Rice Chex she was supposed to have eaten in Sunday School, if they'd stayed. “Don’t wolf them down,” Elaine said. “Eat them one at a time.”

“Little squares,” said Mindy, who was used to Cheerios. “Good.”

Elaine climbed into the front seat. Rob was already behind the wheel.

“I don’t know,” he said, loosening his tie. “I don’t think I can do it. Can you?”

“We should probably try it more than one Sunday. Maybe it was just the speakers today.” She shook off her shoes onto the floor. “We could try a different place. How about Pasadena? There are more colleges in Pasadena, and it’s about the same distance.”

“It wasn’t just the speakers. It was all the people around us. Young marrieds like us. They are probably very nice people, they probably would bring us lasagna and brownies and help us unpack the U-haul if they’d known we were just moving in.” He sighed. “They’re so sunny and cheerful and sure of themselves. I could tell. They believe it all—they even know it is true—angels and gold plates and stone tablets and burning bushes and everything else. And I know it’s not true.”

“Well,” Elaine said, “I don’t even know it’s not true. I don’t know anything. I never knew anything. But I hoped it was true once. Didn’t you?

Rob closed his eyes and nodded. Elaine chewed on her lower lip. “Maybe I still hope that. And maybe some of them are like us, underneath.” She grinned. “It’s just that it’s hard to trust all those blondes with gorgeous tans.” She fastened her seat belt and yanked on her too-short skirt. “I kept looking around the chapel, and it seemed to be getting smaller and smaller. Then I got a cramp in my foot.”

Rob sighed. “Well, I know it’s for Mindy that we were going to try it, but let’s rethink this. We’re going to tell her that a lot of this is malarkey but it’s good to have a community and heritage? So she can go to meetings but she should keep her mouth shut?”

“Maybe she won’t think it’s malarkey. Maybe she’ll be a true bleached believer.”

“Hungry,” said Mindy, holding out her empty bowl. “More little squares.”

“Is that someone coming?” asked Rob. A man in a light suit was walking across the parking lot. Rob stepped on the gas and backed the car into the street. Elaine smiled at the man, who may or may not have intended to talk with them.

“I liked singing the hymns,” she said as she opened up the Rice Chex. “I love ‘The Spirit of God like a Fire Is Burning.’”

“Yeah,” Rob said. “Those hosannas are great. Let’s teach Mindy the best hymns.”

“More little squares,” said Mindy.

WHERE WERE YOU?” Mama asks when Elaine opens the heavy passenger door of the ancient Oldsmobile, the one Mama stopped driving, thank heaven, three years ago, before she broke her hip and forgot how to walk. “Why did you leave me alone?” Her voice is high and hysterical.

“I just ran into the clinic to get their wheelchair, Mama.” She clamps the wheelchair brakes, much stiffer than those of Mama’s own wheelchair, which she had laboriously heaved into the trunk back at Mama’s condo garage. “I was only a couple of minutes. Here. Let’s get you out.” Mama swivels awkwardly towards the door. Elaine bends her knees, braces her back, and puts her arms under her mother’s arms. “Hang onto me,” she says, and gets her up and rotated. “Now sit.”

“Everything’s so much work.” Mama reaches for her heavy black purse. “The simplest things are so much work.”
Sometimes Elaine contradicts her. Today she just wheels her into the clinic, gets the medical card out of her mother’s purse, and presents it to the receptionist.

“Shirley, how are you?” Doctor Teal, her brown hair pulled back in a shiny tail, plops onto the examining room stool so she’s eye level with Mama. She knows she has to speak loudly.

“I’m rotten,” says Mama. “How are you?”

“I’m fine,” laughs Doctor Teal. “But why are you rotten?”

“Listen,” Mama says, “if you were eighty-eight, you’d feel rotten too.”

“Eighty-nine,” says Elaine. “You’re eighty-nine now, Mama.”

“That’s even more rotten,” says Mama.

“Do you hurt anywhere?” asks Doctor Teal.

“I hurt everywhere.”

Doctor Teal looks concerned. “Where exactly?”

“You name it,” Mama says.

“Her knees and legs and feet mostly,” Elaine offers.

“And my hands and shoulders,” says Mama.

Doctor Teal stands and puts her stethoscope on Mama’s rounded back. “Take a big breath for me now.” She listens.

“Sounds fine. You’re quite a remarkable lady, Shirley. What’s the secret of your good health and longevity?”

“Clean living,” Mama says promptly. “No cigarettes, no alcohol, no caffeine.” She looks darkly at Elaine who uses, she knows, though in moderation, alcohol and caffeine.

Doctor Teal pats Mama’s arm. “Where are you living?”

“My own home.”

“Do you have someone to live here with you? A wonderful woman, Conchita.”

“A busybody,” says Mama. “And she picks her nose.”

“Where do you live, Elaine?”

“In L.A. But I’m here for a week at least every other month.”

“Have you thought of moving her down here with you?”

“She ought to move up here with me,” says Mama. “I’ve got plenty of room.”

Elaine sighs. “She made me promise years ago that we wouldn’t take her out of her home. In L.A., she’d have to be in an assisted-living facility. We don’t have any bedrooms on the first floor.” She shrugs. “Our lives are in California. My husband is still working. And we help our daughter with her new baby. They live close to us.”

“Everybody’s just waiting for me to die,” says Mama. “Me, too. I’m more eager than any of them.”

“You’ve probably got years yet, Shirley.” Dr. Teal holds her hand, and for a moment, Mama softens.

“Know how much I weighed when I was born?” Mama says.

“That’s not in your chart.”

“I weighed thirteen pounds, four ounces. Ended my mama’s birthing days.” She squeezes Dr. Teal’s hand. “I had a hard time getting into this world, and I’m having a hard time getting out.”

“Thats because you aren’t ready.”

Mama grunts. “Every night I pray the Lord to take me. I’m ready.”

MAMA TAKES LITTLE naps in her reclining chair in the den. She can sleep and still hold onto the newspaper or the pen she uses on the crosswords or the TV remote. Elaine waits till Mama wakes up, then sits on the piano bench to strap on her sandals. “I’m going down to the grocery store. I want to fill up your larder so that you and Conchita won’t have to worry much about food till the next time I come.”

“We used to do that two-year food storage program,” says Mama. “But you can’t do that in a condo.”

“This will be for about two months.” Elaine poises her pencil over a pad. “I’ve made a list. Do you have any special requests?”

“Cashews,” says Mama. “And root beer.”

Conchita is watching television in her room when Elaine knocks on her door and tells her where she’s going. Then she drives the massive Oldsmobile over to Safeway and parks near the cart-return. She relaxes once she passes through the automated doors into the cool store. Las Vegas is much hotter than L.A.

A woman who looks familiar is holding up a large cantaloupe and sniffing the stem end. Someone from school maybe—Elaine hasn’t been good about keeping in touch with
her high school and college friends, hasn't gone to any reunions. She smiles at the woman in a vague, non-committal way.

“Elaine,” the woman says.
The name comes to her. Lou Anne's partner on the college debate team. “Susan.”

“Are you living here?” Susan puts the cantaloupe in her basket.

“No,” says Elaine. “But I'm here a lot now. I have a high-maintenance mama. And you? Have you been in Vegas all this time?”

Susan nods. “Twenty-five years in the classroom. Married the principal my fifth year.”

“You teach English.”

“English, yes.” Susan shifts her weight to her other foot.

“Does it show?”

Elaine laughs. “I remember how literary you were.” Susan looks literary still, with her narrow, Virginia Woolf face, her little round glasses. “Do you have kids close by?”

“Remember Lou Anne?”

“Lou Anne Garston. Sure. I thought of her when I saw you.”

“Lou Anne Raven now. She has ALS. She can’t even talk. It’s so sad. And her youngest is only a junior in high school. And A.J. Hunsaker, remember him?”

The name takes Elaine by surprise. “I remember A.J.”

“He died last month. Shot himself.”

“No.”

“Yes. You had something going with him, didn’t you?”

“We both worked on the campus newspaper. We ran around a little together. His aunt was my piano teacher back in Boulder. He shot himself?”

“It was on the front page of the Sun. He was the president of the Rotary Club or something like that. They found him in his office. Maybe he had cancer. I think Lou Anne wishes she could shoot herself.”

“The Rotary Club!” Elaine says. “But we were all such radicals!”

“Well, shooting himself sounds radical. But nothing else. I was driving behind him one day about a year ago. He was in one of those humongous SUVs, the kind that could do combat with a tank. And on the back were all these revolting bumper stickers, NRA, Armed with Pride, stuff like that.” She stopped talking. “You aren’t into that now, are you?”

“Lord no.”

“Alone,” Mama says again. “I'm always alone. When is your daddy coming back?”

“Mama,” she says. “Daddy isn’t coming back. He can’t. Don’t you remember?”

“Promise me you’ll go to church again the way you used to believe.”

Elaine pulls the piano bench over close to Mama’s feet. “You weren’t alone.” She sits. “Conchita was here. We wouldn’t leave you alone.”

“Alone,” Mama says again. “I’m always alone. When is your daddy coming back?”

Elaine stares at Mama. She looks normal.

“Mama,” she says. “Daddy isn’t coming back. He can’t. Don’t you remember?”

“Promise me.”

“Promise you what, Mama?”

“Promise me you’ll go to church again the way you used to believe.”
when you were young."

"Oh, Mama," Elaine says. "None of us can be the same as when we were young. I could just as easily climb the monkey bars at the elementary school, I could just as easily take tap dancing lessons again as I could be the little girl who believed everything told me."

Mama sniffles. "You never believed everything everyone told you."

"I tried. I wanted to."

"If you don't promise, I can't die. I want for us to all be together in heaven. I've got to stay alive till you go back to church."

Elaine laughs. "But Mama, I don't want you to die. You've just given me another reason to not go back to church."

"I don't think Rob would mind your going." Mama rarely mentions Rob. She pauses. "If you really cared for me, you'd do it."

"People can't believe things just because they love someone who believes."

"If your Daddy had believed, then maybe you'd believe."

"Like Daddy," Elaine says. "He adored you, but he couldn't believe all the things you believe."

"If I'd been a better mother, you'd believe."

"Mama! That's a terrible thing to say about both of us. You're a wonderful mother. And I'm a pretty good mother, too. We care for our children; we teach them the best we know how, the best we can." Elaine fusses with the maroon fleece blanket over Mama's legs. "You know, I'm glad you believe even if I can't. And if you're right about things, if you're right about heaven, then you can pray me and Daddy right into heaven with you. And if you're wrong, Elaine thinks, you'll never know. "Look," she says, "you got two out of three church-going kids. In our family, that's probably a record."

Mama's chin wobbles. "But girls matter more. Nobody expects girls to leave."

"All of Aunt Mildred's girls left. Four of them."

Suddenly Mama looks weary. "Hey," Elaine says, "speaking of family, I haven't shown you these pictures of the world's cutest baby. She reaches for her shoulder bag, extracts a fat envelope. "Look." She sticks big glossy prints in front of Mama's face. "Here Rob is holding her." She looks at her watch. "He's tending her right now, too, so Mindy can work a few hours a day. And here she is on Greg's shoulders—he's such a doting dad." She smiles at another print. "Look. Isn't she adorable? That's the outfit that I got her with the money you sent."

Mama glance at the photograph. "She looks a little like you," she says.

Elaine gathers up the pictures and drags the piano bench back.

"Whatever happened to Miss Hunsaker? You remember—my piano teacher?"

Mama tries to concentrate. "I haven't heard anything about her for a long time. I don't think she ever married. Guess she's still in Boulder. There was another Hunsaker though, one you knew in college, and something happened to him."

"Her nephew. A.J. He died." Elaine sits up straight. "Do you know what I remember about Miss Hunsaker? It was in the sixth grade, and Mrs. Gould couldn't teach the last month because she was too pregnant, and they didn't let too-pregnant women teach grade school then, and so they got Miss Hunsaker to substitute for all of May. I don't think Miss Hunsaker liked kids much, and I know she didn't like teaching the sixth grade. Anyway, one morning, she stumbled into the classroom in a long, yellow, organdy kind of dress and high-heeled sandals. She kept giggling. And then the principal and the fifth grade teacher came in and took her off to the teacher's room, and when she came back, they'd cut about two feet off the bottom of her dress and probably filled her up with coffee. Do you remember that?"

Mama cocks her head. "I think so. It was a scandal."

"It was! Hey! How would you like to drive over to Boulder tomorrow? Look around the town?"

"I'm so hard to move," says Mama. She looks at her legs, now elevated, under the fleece. "We can stay in the car if you want. Just see how the old house looks. My schools. Maybe Miss Hunsaker's house. The tennis courts where we used to roller skate. Daddy's grave in the cemetery."

"And the church," says Mama. "If you don't mind hauling me around." She points to her wheelchair. "Did I tell you I want to be buried in that chair?"

"You did, Mama."

"You're going to tell me it's not possible, aren't you? That's what Steve says."

"He doesn't know everything. Maybe we could get a custom-built coffin. It'd cause quite a stir at your funeral."

They both laugh.

Elaine opens up the piano bench. "Want me to play something for you?"

Mama closes her eyes and nods. Inside the piano bench are old piano books and older sheet music. Elaine pulls out, then puts back "On Wisconsin" and "Shrimp Boats Is A-Coming" and a blue hymnal. She flattens "Deep Purple" against the music stand and sits down.

"When the deep purple falls," she sings to the chords, "over sleepy garden walls . . ." She can almost see, standing at her right elbow, Miss Hunsaker, a pen in her right hand, a short, fat glass of something clear and tinkly in her left. When she would lean over Elaine to correct her hand position or draw arrows to the problem notes, Elaine could smell Miss Hunsaker's strong, juniperish breath.

"And the stars begin to flicker in the sky . . ." Miss Hunsaker wore gauzy, low-necked blouses, even at 9:30 on Saturday mornings. "Through the mist of a memory, you wander back to me . . ." Elaine looks over at Mama, dozing in her chair, "breathing my name with a sigh."

Elaine plays on, humming the second verse. Conchita peers in, surveys the room, disappears with a quick wave. In the mist of a memory, Miss Hunsaker also waves, waves with her angel wings, waves with her glass of gin, and winks at Elaine. Then she too disappears.
You and me, taking up space. And food. . . .
But then we’re sort of not participating in the gene pool, are we?

PECULIARITIES
PIZZA AND A MOVIE

By Eric Samuelsen

CHARACTERS

CARLENE . . . BYU co-ed, early twenties,
COURTNEY . . . BYU co-ed, early twenties,

CAST

Peculiarities was first presented at the Villa Theatre, Springville, Utah, mid-October 2002.
It was directed by Tony Gunn. The original cast for the “Pizza and a Movie” portion was:

CARLENE . . . Shelley Burton
COURTNEY . . . Sarah Nielsen

EDITOR’S NOTE: “Pizza and a Movie” is the third of five storylines from Eric Samuelsen’s play, Peculiarities, that SUNSTONE has agreed to run serially. The first two installments, “Tahoe,” and “Temps,” were published in the December 2005 and April 2006 issues. Samuelsen wrote Peculiarities as an exploration of LDS attitudes toward sexuality, in particular situations in which moral rigidity and sexuality collide in Mormon culture.

An early cut of the film version of Peculiarities, was screened at the 2006 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium. We are pleased to announce that the film has now been completed and has been submitted to several film festivals. We’ll announce any screenings or other news of the film at sunstoneonline.com and in future magazine issues.

NOTE ON SCRIPT

In this play, a dash (—) indicates an interrupted line. An ellipsis (. . .) should suggest a pause, a line trailing off.

ERIC SAMUELS, Ph.D., is head of playwriting and screenwriting at BYU, where he has been on the faculty since 1992. This is his fourth play published in SUNSTONE (Accommodations, June 1994; Gadianton, July 2001; Family, March 2005). Sixteen of his plays have been produced professionally.
her, "Listen, I'd better get you home."
COURTNEY: Okay, so he takes her home.
CARLENE: And she's like, "Okay, can I hold it for ten more seconds." I mean, she's bursting, she told me. And then, he goes around, opens the door for her, a real gentleman, and she's so impressed, but also wants to, like, Olympic sprint into the house.
COURTNEY: Right.
CARLENE: He walks her up to the apartment. Slowly. And he's so nice, and he's funny, and he's thoughtful, that's what makes it so horrible. They get to the porch. And he wants to stand and talk! Okay? And she's in agony.
COURTNEY: This is so amazing.
CARLENE: So finally, finally she gets the door open, and he says goodnight, and he starts to walk back to the car, and she's like, okay, ten more seconds, ten more seconds. And then he turns around again, and he says "Oh, one more thing." And she turns to him. And he kisses her. Right there on the porch. The shock, the surprise. And she loses it. I mean whoosh. Right there on the porch.
COURTNEY: Oh, my gosh!
CARLENE: I swear, I love ham and pineapple. You can't even get it back in K.C.
COURTNEY: Really? We got it.
CARLENE: Well, Seattle. I mean, that's practically west coast.
COURTNEY: It is on the west coast, doofus.
CARLENE: You know what I mean. The closer you are to Hawaii—.
COURTNEY: I mean, you can see the ocean from our house.
CARLENE: You know what I mean.
COURTNEY: I guess. What time is it, anyway?
CARLENE: Eight-thirty.
COURTNEY: (Tempting her.) You know what's on at nine?
COURTNEY: MTV's. DisMissed.
CARLENE: No. No, no, no, no, no, no—.
COURTNEY: Come on. You know you want to.
CARLENE: That show is so gross.
COURTNEY: We both saw the preview, and we both thought that guy was hot.
CARLENE: I'm not listening.
COURTNEY: Come on. Humiliating personal rejection on national TV... What's not to like?
CARLENE: I hate that show.
COURTNEY: Don't give me that. You love it; you know you do.
CARLENE: I don't.
COURTNEY: Plus this is the one where the guy gets naked doing karaoke.
CARLENE: All these no-morals losers—.
COURTNEY: Who we're supposed to laugh at.
CARLENE: No. Seriously. I don't want to watch it.
COURTNEY: Come on. It's healthy. It's, like, educational.
CARLENE: Educational.
COURTNEY: It tells us a great deal about relationships.
CARLENE: Well, you can watch it.
COURTNEY: It's more fun with someone.
CARLENE: I'm just gonna read my book.
COURTNEY: Carlene. Please.
CARLENE: No.
COURTNEY: Please?
CARLENE: Look, okay, but the first girl who talks about how she's bi, we're turning it right off.
COURTNEY: Oh yeah. Ick. (CARLENE has another piece of pizza.
COURTNEY watches her, has one, too.)
CARLENE: I wonder how those guys are doing.
COURTNEY: What, Brittany and Todd? Climbing all over each other, of course.
CARLENE: Two weeks to the wedding. I don't think they're gonna make it.
COURTNEY: She had to see the bishop last Sunday.
CARLENE: No!
COURTNEY: Oh, yeah.
CARLENE: I didn't know that.
COURTNEY: Allison told me. She had an appointment, and Brittany was coming out as she went in.
CARLENE: Well, that's none of our business.
COURTNEY: Hey, how much of a surprise is it? You see 'em.
Right here on this sofa ’til past midnight.
CARLENE: Oh, I know.
COURTNEY: You ever see his face?
CARLENE: Who, Todd? He’s dating my roommate, of course I know his—.
COURTNEY: No, I mean, while they’re, you know. Like they do.
CARLENE: Hi, like I watch ’em?
COURTNEY: It gets all red.
CARLENE: What are you talking about?
COURTNEY: His face. I came in the other night to get a drink of water—I mean they were really, I mean, like, tongues and stuff.
CARLENE: Gross.
COURTNEY: And he, like, looks over the top of the sofa at me. His face was, like, totally red.
CARLENE: Do you think that’s . . . you know.
COURTNEY: All I know is, he was holding this pillow in front of himself. A big pillow.
CARLENE: (Whapping her.) Courtney! (They laugh.) No, actually, though, I meant those other guys. Erin and Lynda, and those guys from 2A.
COURTNEY: Group date. It’s better than nothing.
CARLENE: It’s just . . . that guy, what’s his name, Mitch something.
COURTNEY: Sweeney?
CARLENE: Yeah, him. He was going.
COURTNEY: There were like ten of ’em.
COURTNEY: It’s just a group thing. Movies 8.
CARLENE: It’s a start.
COURTNEY: I guess. You coulda gone.
CARLENE: I wasn’t invited.
COURTNEY: It was a group thing. Informal.
CARLENE: No. Look. They came over. I know.
COURTNEY: They go, “Hey, we’re going to Movies 8. Erin, Lynda, you guys wanna come?”
COURTNEY: “You guys” inclusive. “You guys” as in, all you guys in the apartment.
CARLENE: No, “you guys” as in Erin and Lynda.
COURTNEY: You coulda gone. No one woulda thought anything of it.
CARLENE: I didn’t feel right about it.
COURTNEY: Okay. (Pause.)
CARLENE: You coulda gone.
COURTNEY: Me? No.
CARLENE: Seriously, you could have.
COURTNEY: I saw it.
CARLENE: What?
COURTNEY: What they were going to see. With what’s-his-name.
CARLENE: Oh.
COURTNEY: So instead we watch DisMissed.

I really truly wish, one time, I could . . . you know. Do the deed.
CARLENE: Yeah, “Who’s she gonna sleep with, big suspense.”
COURTNEY: It’s educational. Think of it that way.
CARLENE: Whatever. (Blackout.)

SCENE TWO
(COURTNEY and CARLENE watching television.)
CARLENE: I would just die.
COURTNEY: Hey, that’s the way it works. They do that time out thing, and that’s the cue to start making out.
CARLENE: I would just die.
COURTNEY: She coulda stopped before he came back in. See, she wants him to know.
CARLENE: He looked like he was going to cry.
COURTNEY: He’s fine; he’s cool about it.
CARLENE: He’s the only one who looks like a halfway decent . . . Really, let’s not watch this any more.
COURTNEY: No, I wanna see who she chooses.
CARLENE: You know who she’s gonna choose. Cleft chin guy.
COURTNEY: Come on, five minutes.
CARLENE: Shallow airhead like her, you know she’s gonna—.
COURTNEY: Shh, shh, look what they’re . . . aaaaannnd the tongues come out.
CARLENE: Gross.
COURTNEY: Yeah, like you’d know.
CARLENE: I don’t have to watch it. (She does for awhile.) It’s like showering in a sewer.
COURTNEY: Five more minutes and then they announce.
CARLENE: (After a pause.) You know, it’s so dumb.
COURTNEY: What do you mean?
CARLENE: Well, these people, they don’t need to be on this show to meet someone, right? They’re all the type who can meet people if they want to.
COURTNEY: Because they sleep around.
CARLENE: It’s not just that. They can sleep around because they’ve got no problem finding people to sleep around with.
COURTNEY: Well, duh. “Hi, I want to fool around, who wants to go out with me?”
CARLENE: I'm not talking about that.
COURTNEY: Yes you are. And I'm saying, if you want to be a slut, you'll have no problem finding someone who—.
CARLENE: No, that's not what I'm saying. I mean, okay, up to a point. But it's more a confidence thing. They've got confidence.
COURTNEY: Okay.
CARLENE: That girl, look at her. She knows guys are gonna want her. She just knows it. And they do. And she's not even that cute.
COURTNEY: She's cute.
CARLENE: Cute, okay. But also kind of a big butt, and . . . you know what I mean. (Pause.) She's not afraid. Guys have wanted her, so she figures they always will.
COURTNEY: I'm not afraid of anything.
CARLENE: “Fear of intimacy.” “Self-esteem.” That's so bogus. (Pause.) If you're a girl guys hit on, then you know that and you can expect to be hit on. You can live your life that way. Whereas—.
COURTNEY: I hate these Old Navy commercials.
CARLENE: You know what I mean?
COURTNEY: Sure.
CARLENE: (Getting up.) You want some more pizza?
COURTNEY: One more.
CARLENE: Okay, and there she is now with the other one! I would just die. (Slow blackout.)

SCENE THREE
CARLENE: Okay, I'm not watching this anymore.
COURTNEY: Okay . . .
CARLENE: I mean, they're in front of a camera, they know everything they do is, like, being broadcast.
COURTNEY: Of course they know.
CARLENE: How is this different from porn? Okay, they're just making out, but really. Can we turn it off?
COURTNEY: Can I just mute it?
CARLENE: I don't want to wait—.
COURTNEY: Mute and surf? They got Dinner and a Movie on USA.
CARLENE: If you want to.
COURTNEY: Okay.
CARLENE: I just . . . I feel like I'm rubbernecking at a car wreck or something.
COURTNEY: No, I know, it's okay. Oh, look, it's Road House. Patrick Swayze.
CARLENE: He was so good in Dirty Dancing.
COURTNEY: So this is okay?
CARLENE: I guess. (Pause.) Hey, Courtney?
COURTNEY: Yeah?
CARLENE: Okay, the naked karaoke thing. They sorta blurred it all, right?
COURTNEY: Unfortunately.
CARLENE: I was just . . . Did you ever . . . have you ever seen a . . . a . . .
COURTNEY: What?
CARLENE: A guy's . . .
COURTNEY: No! Well, sort of. I mean, my little brother, when I used to change him.
CARLENE: Okay, I've seen little kids. And, like, statues. But I mean . . . . you know.
COURTNEY: Plus that movie that one time. Room with a View. It had that one scene—.
CARLENE: Okay, that—.
COURTNEY: But a real one—live? Is that what you're asking?
CARLENE: I mean, they get bigger. Right?
COURTNEY: Well of course they get b—.
CARLENE: That's what I mean. (Pause.) Did you?
COURTNEY: Oh, man, this is the big fight scene. Oh, that musta hurt.
CARLENE: I mean, for real.
COURTNEY: What?
CARLENE: Have you ever seen one?
COURTNEY: I told you, my little bro—.
CARLENE: Never mind.
COURTNEY: Pool cue across the head. I wonder how they do that. (She watches. CARLENE watches her watching.)

SCENE FOUR
COURTNEY: See, I know. I'm gonna die a virgin.
CARLENE: You don't know . . . you could meet—.
COURTNEY: Get real.
CARLENE: No, I just think you—.
COURTNEY: Seriously, my whole education, it's about career, because face it, when I graduate, I go to work, and that's what I'm going to do. With my life.
CARLENE: That's depressing.
COURTNEY: I'm not depressed by it. I'm not going to. . . . you know the one thing I really wish.
COURTNEY: What?
CARLENE: You're awful!
COURTNEY: Don't you?
CARLENE: No.
COURTNEY: Liar.
CARLENE: No!
COURTNEY: I just wish I could feel it. I mean, whatever God wants, I'll . . . . Stay pure. Whatever. But I really truly wish, one time, I could . . . you know. Do the deed.
CARLENE: (A long pause.) You're totally awful.
COURTNEY: Just once.
CARLENE: You could still meet someone.
COURTNEY: Yeah, and the Rock of Gibraltar could break off
and fall in the ocean.
CARLENE: You could.
COURTNEY: Not.
CARLENE: (Playfully.) Meet someone. Across a wide dance
floor. And his eyes will sweep across the room, past you at
first, and then his glance will return. And your eyes will
meet. And suddenly, it will be as though you’re alone, just
the two of you, as though all the other dancers have disap-
peared.
COURTNEY: (Laughing.) Stop.
CARLENE: And he’ll lean towards you. . . . (She leans towards
COURTNEY.) And his eyes will glance quickly down to your
decolletage, and he’ll say “Ma chère.”
COURTNEY: Oh, yeah, he’ll be French, why not?
CARLENE: “Ma chère. I feel zat ve haf met before, in a previous
lahf. Can I buy you a drink?”
COURTNEY: (Laughing.) You nut.
CARLENE: (Slight French accent.) And you will say, “But of
course.” And he will take you in his arms, and sweep you
across the floor. (She takes COURTNEY, they dance.)
COURTNEY: Wait a sec—are you leading, or am I?
CARLENE: (Laughing, too.) I thought you were. (Steps on her
foot.)
COURTNEY: Ow! (Limps to the couch, sits.)
CARLENE: Well, it could happen!
COURTNEY: They’re probably having a good time.
CARLENE: And then they, like, tie themselves under their
truck and have a friend drive it so they can see what’s wrong
with it. And die, of course. And so, the Darwin awards. A
death that improves the gene pool.
CARLENE: That’s . . . sort of not all that funny.
COURTNEY: What? I can think of lots of people the world
would be better off without. Rednecks like on this movie,
for one group.
CARLENE: Don’t.
COURTNEY: Muslim terrorists. Bill and Hillary. Teachers who
grade on a curve.
CARLENE: I wish you wouldn’t.
COURTNEY: (Laughing.) Guy-magnet girls. The whole cast of
The O.C.
CARLENE: Someone could make that argument about us.
COURTNEY: (Pause.) I was just kidding around.
CARLENE: You and me, taking up space. And food. Right? But
then we’re sort of not participating in the gene pool, are we?
So I guess we don’t have to worry about it.
COURTNEY: I was just joking.
CARLENE: I know.
COURTNEY: Geez!
CARLENE: I’m sorry. Really, I am. (She gets up.) You want more
pizza?

SCENE SIX
CARLENE: So anyway, I went in there, and my dad still had all
his shaving stuff out. And he had this brush. A shaving
brush. He used it to spread shaving cream on his whiskers.
COURTNEY: I’ve seen those.
CARLENE: Well, I hadn’t. And it just seemed like such a guy
thing. You know what I mean?
COURTNEY: Mysterious.
CARLENE: That's it! Exactly. Like something unique to the male of the species.
COURTNEY: I mean, they probably feel the same way about us, all that personal hygiene stuff that they don't get.
CARLENE: Oh, sure. I'm just saying. Like football. Stuff we'll never understand.
COURTNEY: I like football.
CARLENE: Not the same way. I promise.
COURTNEY: What? You like watching it, or you don't.
CARLENE: No. Not really. I tell you—boys like football at a totally different level than the way girls like it.
COURTNEY: How do you know this?
CARLENE: I just do, that's all.
COURTNEY: Not the same way. I promise.
CARLENE: Not really. I tell you—boys like football at a totally different level than the way girls like it.
COURTNEY: Big deal. Oh, look, Back to the Future's next.
CARLENE: Which we've only seen nine million times.
COURTNEY: Can we at least watch the scene where he plays "Johnny Be Good"?
CARLENE: Like at the end of the movie?
COURTNEY: I'm not sleepy. Are you?
CARLENE: I guess not. (They watch together.) Hey, Courtney.
COURTNEY: Yeah?
CARLENE: You know we were talking earlier? And you were saying that you were planning on a career, and probably wouldn't ever marry?
COURTNEY: Sure. You want some more pizza?
CARLENE: I can't.
COURTNEY: Mind if I finish it?
CARLENE: Go ahead. (COURTNEY helps herself.) Anyway. Do you remember? That conversation? And you were thinking about buying a house?
COURTNEY: And having cats. Several cats. What about it?
COURTNEY: Why wouldn't it be?
CARLENE: You hear all those stories.
COURTNEY: You get a decent security system. . . .
CARLENE: You wouldn't . . . you don't think you'd want company? (Pause.) A roommate, say. (Pause.) What do you think?
COURTNEY: Oh, look, I love this. He's so good on that skateboard.
CARLENE: Yes, he is.
COURTNEY: Love Michael J. Fox.
CARLENE: Yeah. Me, too. (Watches wistfully. Blackout.)

SCENE SEVEN

CARLENE: Man, it's late.
COURTNEY: They're having a good time.
COURTNEY: This is my favorite part.
CARLENE: Yeah.
COURTNEY: I love the reaction shots. He's doing all that Eddie Van Halen stuff, and they're all just shocked.
CARLENE: Yeah. Me, too.
COURTNEY: And then his mom just doesn't know how to react. (She yawns.) Man, I'm getting tired.
CARLENE: All that pizza.
COURTNEY: Listen, I may just stretch out for a sec. Do you mind?
CARLENE: Of course not.
COURTNEY: Just rest my eyes a little. (She stretches out.)
CARLENE: Of course. (A pause. As COURTNEY drifts off.) I'm a senior. And you're a junior. So . . . I'll graduate and probably just stay here, this apartment, while I work. It makes most sense. And then, maybe next year, you'll get a job, too. And it won't matter where, or doing what, because I'll have a year's experience, and I'll be able to find work wherever you do. And we'll find an apartment. And, maybe, look for a house. A two-bedroom, say . And we'll divide chores, you know. In fact, you could just pick the ones you don't like doing, like maybe toilets, and I'd just do those, and you could only do the chores you like. That'd be okay with me, really. And rent, we'd share that. And . . . we'll garden. You want cats, that's great. Cats would be fine. I just think . . . we're going to be single, you and I. Single. And life is so much harder when you're lonely. And it would be so much better if we were together. And I'd take good care of you. You know what a good cook I am. And from time to time, we'd treat ourselves. Order pizza. Watch bad movies together. And . . . we'd chat. Or not, if you didn't want to. It would really all be up to you. (Gently strokes COURTNEY's hair.) What do you think? Does that sound good to you? (Pause. She looks at COURTNEY sleeping.) It's settled then. (She sits looking at COURTNEY. Slow blackout.)
INTRODUCTION

STATES OF CHANGE

A Conversation with Richard Dutcher

RICHARD DUTCHER is Mormonism’s preeminent filmmaker. Although Latter-day Saint filmmakers have been telling quintessential Mormon stories since the 1930s, the release of Dutcher’s films, God’s Army (2000) and Brigham City (2001) mark what some consider to be the birth of “Mormon cinema”—feature-length films with LDS subject matter produced independently of the Church and released theatrically. Now, some six years after God’s Army, and in support of the DVD release of Dutcher’s most recent film, States of Grace, the director sat down with SUNSTONE editor Dan Wotherspoon during a rare day off from shooting his current project, a supernatural thriller titled Evil Angel, to discuss States of Grace, the state of Mormon cinema, and where his work is taking him in the future. He’s also finishing another, very personal, film, Falling, which should begin making the rounds at film festivals next year.

Before we talk about the DVD release of States of Grace, tell me: what in the heck are you doing shooting a supernatural thriller?

I know people are surprised by that. I like to tell them that I’ve made my Easter film (God’s Army). I’ve made my Christmas film (States of Grace). And now I’m doing my Halloween film. I’ve been a fan of horror movies my whole life, and so those who know me aren’t surprised by what I’m doing. But yes, it’s a supernatural, sort of edgy, horror film, titled Evil Angel, which stars Ving Rhames. It’s my biggest film so far. Like my other films, it’s one I wrote and am directing myself. We’re shooting it primarily in downtown Salt Lake City and are about five or six weeks into production with a couple of weeks left.

Why did you choose to shoot the film in Salt Lake City? Is Mormonism part of the story?

One of the main reasons to shoot in Salt Lake is simply that it’s more convenient for me. With this film’s long schedule, I wanted to be at least somewhat close to my family. But Salt Lake also really fits the story well. I’m using a lot of old, kind of cool buildings in downtown Salt Lake City. The film doesn’t take place in Salt Lake; its story isn’t dependent on a specific location. And I don’t think the film will naturally lead people to recognize where I shot it, but it will have an old, gothic urban feel to it, so Salt Lake has been great.

There is no Mormon content in it at all. But given my LDS background, that fact that I’m working in the area of the supernatural, and that I wrote the script, I’ll be interested to see if people pick up on any Mormon influences in the film.

Let’s talk about States of Grace. Many familiar with SUNSTONE will already have a sense of what the film is about, but can I get you to give a quick framing of it for those who may be learning about it for the first time?

Sure. The film is about a half-dozen people in Santa Monica, California, two of whom are Mormon missionaries, and about how their lives intersect and their impact on one another. That’s what fascinates me: putting a very diverse group of people into an interesting circumstance and seeing how it might all turn out. But as far as the storyline goes, it all begins with the two missionaries getting pulled into a gang-related drive-by shooting. And the film follows in the aftermath of that and what happens to these missionaries and some of the gang members involved.

Some reactions to States of Grace have focused on its edgier, darker elements—that you show LDS characters “warts and all.” What’s your reaction when you hear that?

That term is way overused and doesn’t reflect my approach at all. I want to tell an honest story—that’s all. I don’t set out to show warts; in fact, my natural inclination would be to put a little make-up on the wart if someone had one.

What I want to do is tell stories about something real and important, something that fascinates me and that I feel the need to explore. Sure, someone may end up seeing more warts than they’d want to, but in other ways, I think my LDS films have been very sincere and open-hearted. I hear people say my films have violent elements or that they talk about thematically mature themes. But at the same time, I believe they have such a positive outlook on life and on religion and on human relationships that I just can’t buy those easy descriptions. They aren’t dark; they’re about something. And unfortunately there has been so little in Mormon art that’s had any degree of real honesty toward the reality of the human condition, that when many Latter-day Saints encounter it, they call it dark when all that means is that it resembles reality more than anything else overtly Mormon they’ve seen.

During the session on the film at this summer’s Salt Lake Sunstone symposium, you were visibly moved by what the panelists shared about their experiences with the film. Would you be willing to talk about your reaction to their remarks?

As I said then, I’d been fighting for the film for so long—not just to make it but also because I was distributing it myself and wanting it to be seen and understood—that I was pretty beaten down by having to constantly defend it to people who didn’t understand what I was trying to say. I had been on the defensive so long, that sitting there and being reminded of why I had made the film—and seeing that people had actually understood what I was doing, and that the film meant something to them really hit me hard. I’d been so focused on how it hadn’t succeeded financially in the way I needed and wanted it to do, and they reminded me that it had succeeded in doing what was most important—communicating the thoughts and feelings and experiences about the atonement and repentance that I wanted to share. It made that panel a wonderful experience for me.

There are a few specific elements in the film that I haven’t heard you talk much about. First, your two uses of two Book of Mormon—one comic; one very serious.

Yeah. The ideas for using those came together in the writing as the characters devel-
opened and simply as settings suggested it. In the scene with Louis, the homeless preacher, it was just fun and endearing to have him preach from King Benjamin’s speech about not suffering the beggar to put up his petition in vain. In the scene with Carl and Elder Banks, it just came naturally. A gang banger and a Mormon missionary having a very serious conversation about repentance—what image could work better than the story of the people of Ammon and their vow to end their violent ways, to bury their weapons forever?

You also introduce the symbol of the cross in a powerful way. That’s pretty unusual in an LDS setting.

That was really important to me. In art, visual iconography is so important, as you can communicate so much with iconic images. Having entered Mormonism from a background in Pentecostal and Baptist churches, in which crosses are everywhere, I’ve always viewed the reaction many Mormons have to the cross as very strange. I don’t know all the cultural and doctrinal reasons Mormons have felt it important not to incorporate that symbol—but I think it’s gotten way out of whack. How did such a prominent, important symbol of our savior become almost demonized in our community? We seem almost angry toward the cross.

So what I wanted to do in the film was to try in some small way to communicate the beautiful concepts that people in other religions associate with the cross. They aren’t conflicted the way Mormons seem to be. When Mormons see a cross, they almost instantly start to explain why we don’t wear them and how we’re different from other religions. I wanted to try in some way to make it a beautiful image again—or at least to communicate to the Mormon community what it communicates to others so meaningfully.

It was also important to bring that in because the movie is about the atonement of Christ and the cross is the central visual image about that. And it was crucial for me to have it appear in the film the way it did—in the storyline of a missionary who has been teaching about the atonement and understanding it from a doctrinal or intellectual standpoint but not really understanding it on a personal, real level. So having the missionary taught about the atonement was very, very important to me.

This interview will run in a SUNSTONE issue in which an essay brings up the statement one hears in LDS settings about parents who say they’d prefer their children be dead than alive and having lost their virtue through sexual sin. You have one of the characters in the film say that whoever thinks that is a jerk.

I did. And I stand by that. I’ve always found that notion repugnant and have seen how it has caused so much damage and heartache. So I loved having an opportunity to kick at that a bit and to say, hey, this is what this communicates, and to ask out loud if we believe this, can we really call ourselves “Christian”? How can someone believe in the atonement of Christ and have something like that come out of his or her mouth?

Earlier you mentioned the financial picture for States of Grace. Are you willing to share any specifics about that?

Well, we have had zero real income on the film. Everything we’ve taken in has just gone back to paying for what we’ve had to spend just to promote it. We need to sell a heck of a lot of DVDs just to come near breaking even, which is what, at a minimum, we are hoping to do.

What really has me discouraged is that although the film did better there than most other places, in Provo, Utah, which has about the highest percentage of Mormons anywhere, States of Grace did nothing compared to Saw II and other films that came out near the same time. So for me, it’s frustrating that the Mormon community doesn’t want to see my kind of movies—States of Grace and Brigham City. They want to see Saw II. The death of Mormon cinema is going to come about simply because the Mormons are going to kill it. This isn’t all at blame the audience. I know why people don’t come to these films. It’s because there have been so many crappy Mormon movies that the filmmakers have completely violated the trust of the audience. People are not going to spend $8, or $30 or $40 on a date, to go out and see another bad Mormon film. So when something good comes along, convincing them that it’s good is very difficult. So I get pretty worked up about it.

When I first saw what Mormon cinema could be—I saw that there was enough of a community in Mormonism that if that community would support serious, important, spiritual films—I’d have been willing to produce serious, important, spiritual films and would immediately become the breeding ground for those films. Since the beginning of cinema, hardly anyone has been interested in exploring spiritual themes or expressing spiritual feeling through film. So I knew that if this community would step up to the challenge and produce those kinds of thoughtful, excellent, meaningful, real, honest films, that immediately whenever someone thought of spirituality in film, they’d think of the Mormon community. And that’s what I tried to preach up through Brigham City.

But we blew that so quickly. That’s why, as soon as The Singles Ward came out and I realized that Mormon cinema was going to be just like Mormon literature, just like Mormon theatre and Mormon music, I became discouraged. It was then I began to realize that as much as I’d been talking, either nobody understood what I was saying, or they understood and just didn’t want it.

You don’t mean that there’s no place in Mormon cinema for something like The Singles Ward, do you? Isn’t it that The Singles Ward and many of the other films that followed immediately upon the success of God’s Army represent something more for you?

Yeah. They represent a lack of reverence and respect. There’s far too little reverence for cinema as an art form to begin with. But in these films, there’s also a lack of reverence and respect for Mormonism. Had Singles Ward been followed up by three serious, well-made films, then sure, why not do something like Singles Ward? But when that’s all you start to get, when all of a sudden you get people who aren’t taking Mormonism or cinema seriously—there’s no reason to wonder why Mormon cinema is dying away. Don’t get me wrong. I love comedies and will see silly movies and have a great time doing that, but that Mormon cinema so quickly became just that—that’s what I object to.

You said that for you, Mormon cinema has become just like Mormon literature and Mormon music. What do you mean by that?

It seems to me that in every field of Mormon artistic expression, it’s always followed the same pattern: some bright, talented artist—such as Avard Fairbanks or Mahonri Young in sculpting, or Minerva Teichert in painting—will come along, and we will suddenly see the potential of the art form and what Mormon expression through that art form might be. But as soon as these things become clear and achieve the recognition they deserve, they are immediately buried under a mountain of garbage. Right away, a bunch of knock-off works get produced just to satisfy someone’s ego that they are an “artist,” even though their work isn’t worthy of the marketplace, or by others who hope simply to cash in and make some money. It’s killed us every time. That’s
Some have called it dark, when all that means is that it resembles reality more than anything else overtly Mormon they’ve seen.

For example, what if David B. Haight had been a filmmaker? I got to know him some before he died, and I loved him. I recognized what an amazing human being he was, that he understood things that I really wanted to know. So what if he had been a filmmaker and could have crafted something that encapsulated his relationship with God or his understanding of life? How absolutely amazing and valuable would that be!

And that’s why I have such little respect for films like The Singles Ward, because they are an insult to the potential of what Mormon cinema could be. And I do get angry about it. I went through a period where I would get angry and passionate, and then I felt like I didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, so I’d play nice again. But I don’t do that anymore, for I feel the message has to get out. I don’t care if I’m stepping on people’s toes, because I want to see change. I want people to understand what Mormon cinema could be. I want Mormon cinema to continue even though I won’t be part of it anymore. I want to see it continue to achieve its potential. I want to be an old man and know that I had a part in it, and I hope I will see that it grew into something beautiful and powerful.

Hold on! You’ve shared with me before that you’re making your Halloween movie partly in an effort to make enough money to fund future film projects like The Prophet—your film about Joseph Smith. And now you are saying you’re not going to be part of Mormon cinema anymore. What do you mean?

What I’m expressing is just a shift in the way I started looking at things a couple of years ago when I realized I really don’t want to talk about Mormon cinema any more because I saw that I had zero control over what it was going to become. I came to realize that all I have control over are my own films, so now I am just thinking about Richard Dutcher films. I’m not averse to doing films with Mormon content. I’ve had thirty years in Mormonism, so I’m sure a lot of that will always be part of me and will find expression in whatever I will do. Especially as I continue to reach toward God in my work, my Mormonism will, by necessity, be part of that. But I don’t want to be associated with Mormon cinema if it is going to continue to be what it is now.

So what I’m saying is that I will never make another film for the Mormon audience. I just won’t do it. I’ll make films for myself, and hopefully some of the Mormon audience will go along with what I do, but that will never be my target audience again.
I recently found a second message in my email inbox addressed to the mysterious Wormwood. It had been forwarded by someone interested in this column. I simply present it here.

My Dearest Wormwood,

It was good to see an email once again from my favorite nephew! I am really enjoying this new communications genre. It certainly opens up many possibilities for us.

But on to more important matters. I am becoming quite distressed about the slow joying this new communications genre. It was good to see an email once again from my favorite nephew! I am really enjoying this new communications genre. It certainly opens up many possibilities for us.

But on to more important matters. I am becoming quite distressed about the slow progress in the tempting of your man, that young new convert to the Christian sect, the "Mormons."

I note with some alarm that your man was recently married to his fiancée (and in the Mormons' Bountiful temple no less!) and that you were not successful in getting them involved in premarital sex. I just can't fathom what could have happened! Slopgob reported to me that he sent you quite a few email messages identifying our free pornographic websites that you were supposed to forward to your man. According to our infernal spyware reports, you spent a considerable time reviewing those sites, so it is beyond me why you didn't forward them in a timely manner. I expect a report.

Meanwhile, we will simply have to pick up from here. Not all is lost, but a "family man" can be more difficult for you, especially as he takes on new responsibilities, has children, gets a serious job, etc. I will instruct you on how to handle this dangerous new situation as time permits.

Incidentally, our Internet spyware is providing a wealth of information about the hearts and minds of Mormons in Utah. Just this past May, Salt Lake City residents recorded the second highest number of Google hits on "pornographic" sites for larger cities in the USA. We can thank Slopgob and the Infernal Tempter Department (ITD) of the Lowerarchy for the development of "Internet temptation" and its obvious successes here in these valleys of the mountains!

Before detailing my recommendations for trapping your man, let me remind you once again that your continued naive, ham-handed, and crude attempts to corrupt your man just won't work with these Mormons. Please! Imagine trying to tempt your man to steal a set of tires, for goodness sakes! Or to lie about his education on his resume? What were you thinking? Many Mormons recognize the "big sins" and will avoid them so long as they have "no need of bread" or think they might be caught.

You must be more judicious in your use of temptations. You must be clever and hide temptations behind screens of public acceptance and apparent good will. Your man must think he is going the "right way" when in fact he is on our path.

O Kay, let's get down to today's tempter training lesson. The most effective approaches to corrupting the practice of charitable giving are based on my favorite temptation principles: fear, greed, and pride. There are many variations, but if you handle them correctly, these three principles will work very well with your man.

For example, try to instill in your man a fear that if he does not pay tithing, he will incur the displeasure and wrath of a God who keeps score. Let him believe, for example, that he will get sick and won't be able to work, or that his money will be stolen, and so forth. I have put into his mind the old Mormon saying, "I couldn't afford not to pay tithing." This fear-based approach to giving is beneficial to our side because your man will not be sharing out of a sense of love and generosity, no, he will be paying in order to avoid trouble.

The second tactic is based on greed. Point out to your man the folklore common among many Mormon men that paying tithing will result in an outpouring of material blessings that will compensate for any sacrifice made to pay tithing. Be sure you emphasize the word "material" as it is central to the greed approach. Yes, yes, I know that our Enemy often rewards those who are generous and unselfish, but often it's in the worlds to come and in non-material ways. Your man must not be allowed to dwell on those facts.

Pride can be useful here, too. Your man is a bit too young, but my man's experience with prideful giving will be educational. Over the past few months, I have quietly reminded my man that liberal but discreetly public donations to the Church might be rewarded with future plum callings such as mission president, director of a visitor's center, or other "white collar" or administrative callings that don't involve getting directly involved in genuine service such as callings at Deseret Industries or the Humanitarian Center—those we must avoid like the plague. I have had my man envision the potential shoulder-rubbing with the very elect that may ensue. . . or the eventual call to a real position of authority, such as a Seventy! Of course it is pride that tells my man that this will come as a result of his "generosity" and "Christlike demeanor."

We must be careful, of course. Unless fear, greed, or pride continue as the prime motivators for giving, your man may actually get caught up in that dangerous spirit of giving that relates to unselfishness, and this may put him on a path to assist in the work of our Enemy. It's a danger we have to work...
around. I will be here to help you if your man doesn’t respond well to the fear, greed, and pride ploys.

When you are using money to tempt your man, it will help, of course, if your man adopts the prevalent assumptions of “to be successful, I need to make good money” and “I am expected to provide well for my wife and kids.” We have been very successful in encouraging many Mormons (and Americans in general) to “need” things. We’ve made them think it is their duty, even their prerogative, to “get stuff.” It makes it easier if your man, for example, thinks he is doing it “for the family.” Yes, “a Humvee for the whole family!”

NOW to the matter you wrote about in your email. You state that your man, because he desires to be a good and religious fellow, is leaning towards a conservative viewpoint and, more especially, joining the Republican Party. You express concern because most Utah Mormons are conservative and Republican. Now on its face, yes, if not handled carefully, this could be a bad move for our side. The “permissiveness” of many liberals and Democrats is often helpful in our work. And conservatives tend to express a liking for Jesus, and they often carry a Bible around. Yeah, it sounds dangerous to our work. But let me show you how you can corrupt the process for your man (as we have done for countless others).

As you know, our Enemy’s true gospel is actually grounded in the very dangerous principles of honesty, sharing, caring, generosity, humility, forgiveness, thoughtfulness, love, kindness, selflessness, peacemaking, healing the sick, caring for the poor and widows, the search for truth, and other attributes that take people outside themselves. These we must help your man avoid at all costs. He should not be allowed to understand this... or even to think about it.

We have found it useful to help religious conservatives move to the far right—into what is called “fundamentalism”—where they tend to hold exclusively to the “religious concerns” of homosexual orientation, secular humanism, evolution, helpless people who exploit society, welfare “bums” and “cheats,” illegal aliens who get a “free” education, and so forth. Now our Enemy himself never addressed any of these issues during his ministry on this earth, and certainly he would not have handled them carefully, this could be a bad move for our side. The “permissiveness” of many liberals and Democrats is often helpful in our work. And conservatives tend to express a liking for Jesus, and they often carry a Bible around. Yeah, it sounds dangerous to our work. But let me show you how you can corrupt the process for your man (as we have done for countless others).

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The election of the current President, by the way, is our most notable triumph in exploiting Christian fundamentalism in the clever guise of “compassionate conservatism.”

Furthermore, you may encourage your man to use his Bible and Book of Mormon, but only to prove that the age of the earth is 6,000 years, that a homosexual orientation is an abomination, that an actual worldwide flood occurred about 3,000 years ago, that God is a vengeful father, that women should be subservient to men, that life operates according to a precise “works = blessings” formula, that blacks are the descendants of Ham and thus cursed, that war with “heathens” is okay, that we must support Israeli wars in order to hasten the Millennium, and so forth. These are the pesky and perilous principles of Christianity. It makes my job of bringing him to our Father Below much easier.

My man’s recent “religious devotions” can teach you something. Thanks to my efforts, he is becoming a well-regarded financial supporter of a local “send ‘em back to Mexico” movement, plus I recently enticed him to financially support a group that fights “homosexuals teaching in the public schools.” He is coming to see these “moral” activities as a major part of his personal religion (based on the fact that he actually donates money to these endeavors). Others in his circle applaud him for his generosity—which helps nurture his pride and encourages him to continue with these “religious” endeavors. And all this zeal and activity takes his mind away from those pesky and perilous principles of Christianity. It makes my job of bringing him to our Father Below much easier.

Okay, how does my man’s seemingly religious activities make my job easier, you might well ask? Well, for one, he recently told his wife that, deep down, he could see the “occasional burning” of abortion clinics (by others, of course) because “it is what God would want if nothing else works.” He also turned his head and walked away recently when he saw two young ruffians bullying a gay man. Envisioning our Enemy endorsing or even justifying such behavior will move towards our camp! Incidentally, if the son does come out, I will try to justify to my man that some kind of dreadfull responsibility—such as throwing his son out of the house—will be acceptable, even expected of him by his friends. That could help salvage the situation, but I prefer not to risk it.

So, to conclude, encourage your man to move into far right-wing “fundamentalist” thinking as soon as possible, and persuade him to actually provide financial support. That solidifies the deal. Doing so will keep him occupied. He will not dwell on the perilous principles of true Christianity, and he will feel within himself that he is a righteous man and better than others—just what you want him to think and feel! And those feelings and attitudes will be reinforced by today’s society.

WELL, my good Nephew, let this be sufficient for today. I am looking forward to your response and praying for some good news, finally, about the downfall of your man.

—Your affectionate uncle

NOTE

1. In my first column (which is the twenty-second), I introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatable 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. Copies of all past Borderlands columns are available at www.forthosewhowonder.com.
BOOK REVIEW

“THE NEXT WEIRD SISTER PUBLISHES A BOOK”

THE EYES OF A FLOUNDER
by Laura Hamblin
Signature Books, 2005
100 pages, $15.95

Reviewed by Stephen Carter

In The Eyes of a Flounder, we encounter a woman deeply sensitized to negative space, to the action outside the narrative . . . a prophet who sees things not as they are, as they were and as they are to come, but who hears the distant rustle and breath of unseen beings.

Why? Well, one day the Clothesline Project came to Utah Valley State College. It's an exhibit comprised of T-shirts decorated by women who have survived abuse. They're amazing, ghostly things. In the background, a stereo plays a series of noises, representing the frequency with which assaults, molestations, rapes, and even killings of women occur nationwide. As I walked through the exhibit, I felt myself taken apart little by little until I was completely eviscerated.

I remembered that during one class Laura had said the places that scare us most are the ones we need to explore. She had a way of unfolding those difficult places in front of us, like the T-shirts at the Clothesline Project. In her classes, the subject at hand was so real I could smell it. I could feel it hard in my stomach. And undergirding it all was Laura's fierce sense of compassion.

Getting up the guts to dive back into the Hamblin-o-sphere after my initial wimp-out started me into many remarkable conversations with Laura about religion. One day, in the time before my innocent fingers had even touched a SUNSTONE, I was walking with Laura toward her office, wrangling with her as usual about why she didn't cotton to Mormonism anymore. She finally turned to me and said, “Stephen, I stayed up countless nights agonizing over this.”

“Then maybe you should think about it during the day,” I said with all the earnestness of a kid with mission dust still clinging to his shoes. The reasons were obvious to me. During the day we can think more rationally, and, as we all know from Seminary, the Holy Ghost goes to bed at midnight. Nighttime is for visions and dreams. Not doctrine.

If Isaiah had been a woman, if John the Revelator had birthed children, The Eyes of a Flounder is pretty close to what they would have written. This is probably the reason Laura frightened me and my logical little brain to begin with. This is probably why it took me so long to understand her. Laura expresses her spirituality through the wombs of metaphors, through the waters of dreams. And what seraphim, what beasts, do they birth?

Hate “with sockets / of its once / obsidian eyes” (10). A “tailless rat / backbone twitching” (63). Riftia, deep sea worms, “less eye, less mouth, less heart” (61). A drowning man, “his body / repent[ing] of its image of god” (49). An aging woman, “mother of maggots. I lay the eggs of my brain / in night visions, there to incubate, molt and corrode” (4).

These are strange images of spirituality. They're surely not comforting. But then, is William Blake comforting? What do we see in the manic eyes of his angels? What Leviathans swim through his heavens? Why do his earth, heaven and hell rage equally? As we all know from Seminary, the Holy Ghost goes to bed at midnight. What merits the words "the sacrament with a young woman experiencing her period: ‘Ah, dark skin— / unrelenting girl’ (14). ‘To Baptize’ haunted me from the moment Laura read it to me a few months before it was published till the moment I put my own son under the water: ‘to bring him forth as something new / as if there were shades of white, / as if he weren't..."
So many of us live life under the all-seeing eye of God and his commandments. The challenge of living up to this takes up the bulk of our labor and thought.

already water-born” (31).

Other poems touch on more general religious themes, such as “The Next Weird Sister Attempts Repentance” (sadly, the sister’s attempt is thwarted by pork), “Lament for Leah” (a meditation on marriage), “Some Faith” (in which we learn that the water-walking Jesus had asked Peter to talk with him, not walk), and “The Next Weird Sister Loses Light” (a reinterpretation of the parable of the ten virgins).

But despite contact points with Mormonism, diving into this book expecting to find a recognizable Mormon voice is probably a mistake. Well, it’s a mistake unless you think of William Blake as possessing a distinctly Protestant voice, or Dante and Hieronymus Bosch as possessing distinctly Catholic voices.

In a very literate review of The Eyes of a Flounder posted on the blog “A Prayer of Faith,” Naiah writes, “[Hamblin] gives powerful and toothy voice to an aspect of LDS womanhood to which I can not relate... They were not only alien, but even unpalatable to me.”

Probably most LDS women would have this same reaction. And there’s probably a good reason for that. Though Laura is no stranger to Mormon letters, having published frequently with Dialogue and SUNSTONE (often winning awards along the way), as well as with many nationally distributed non-Mormon journals and anthologies, as far as she ever told me, she isn’t interested in being identified as a Mormon.

So what is the voice that speaks from these poems? Is it a bitter voice, or sad, as our budding young philosopher might charge? I think I found a few hints to the answer. In “Letter to No One in Particular,” Laura writes,

The story of poetry is the story of all the doors I have failed to open. (26)

And in “The Next Weird Sister Loses Weight”:

I wander
spindle-legged
through narrow columns,
searching.

Where did
I go?
Where
did I go? (57)

In these and many other places in the text, we encounter a woman deeply sensitized to negative space, to the action outside the narrative, to the picture beyond the frame, to the immensity surrounding her, a prophet who sees things not as they are, as they were, and as they are to come, but who hears the distant rustle and breath of unseen beings.

This voice is of one crying in the desert.

In this time of prophets that appear only in suit and tie, we can forget that there are other kinds, too. Prophets such as John the Baptist and Elijah, who simply couldn’t find a home in civilization. They fed on insects and the offerings of ravens. To find them, you had to take your chances and venture into the wild. Their vision didn’t fit into a good suburban neighborhood; it raged at inappropriate times, it cut too easily. It healed too prolifically.

I believe Laura’s voice grows primarily from similar habitations in the spiritual wilderness. So much of the imagery in her poems evokes the yin and yang of loneliness—who are the horizon rises up / to the sky but never touches”—and solitude—“lacing will and desire / measureless and lucid” (58). The main persona in her poems, the Next Weird Sister, embodies this sense of liminality.

There are three weird sisters in charge of the fate of the past, the fate of the present, and the fate of the future. However, according to such venerable “texts” as The Clash of the Titans and Disney’s version of Hercules, the sisters have only one eye amongst them, which they are continually fighting over. Thus they are never able to bring their entire knowledge together.

Perhaps the Next Weird Sister is the one who has given up on the eyeball, who has offered herself to blindness and allowed fate to work upon her own body, gaining a vision inaccessible to the sighted, a wisdom denied the unravaged, and a commission to “accomplish deeds without names” (4).

And perhaps this is where Laura Hamblin departs from the world of the average Mormon. Perhaps this is why she is so unpalatable. How much do any of us want to find ourselves in no-(wo)man’s land? So much of our worldview is based on cultivating certainty, as mine was when I first met Laura. So many of us live under the all-seeing eye of God and his commandments. The challenge of living up to this certainty takes up the bulk of our labor and thought. But it is also our comfort.

Laura is reminding us of a paradox, one that seems to haunt her own life: on one hand “when labor / is too great—then is when a birth occurs;” on the other “a broken heart is the gift / and the wound” (4).

It’s true, these poems exude a guttural aroma, they lodge in your stomach; they inject themselves into your dreams. But they also stand in a thousand doorways at once.

RESOLVED

I resolve to get rid of the bull of rhetoric
the salve of style
the highflown phrases
the polished syntax
from the lyrical trashbin
to kneel down in winter
and bring you with my inexpert hand
the lamb of snow.

—JAN TWARDOWSKI

(Translated by KATHLEEN SNODGRASS and JUSTYNA KOSTKOWSKA)
PRES. HINCKLEY ADDRESSES GENERAL CONFERENCE, “FEELS WELL”

NINE MONTHS AFTER UNDERGOING colon cancer surgery and six months after telling church members, “I am in the sunset of my life,” a thin yet strong President Gordon B. Hinckley attended all sessions of October’s General Conference and spoke four times.

“Last January I underwent major surgery,” said the ninety-six-year-old president. “It was a miserable experience, particularly for one who had never previously been a patient in a hospital.” He added that he chose to undergo “further [chemotherapy] treatment” after the surgery, and that his doctors “have called the results miraculous.”

“As I said last April, we are in [the Lord’s] hands. I feel well; my health is reasonably good. But when it is time for a successor, the transition will be smooth and according to the will of Him whose Church this is. And so, we go forward in faith . . . .”

On 3 November, President Hinckley became the oldest president in the Church’s history, surpassing President David O. McKay, who died at age 96 plus 132 days.

“Equally Yoked.” During the priesthood session, the prophet touched on familiar themes as he advised young men to dress properly, avoid profanity, and “not partake of pornography,” which he says “becomes an addiction of the worst kind.”

“The computer is a wonderful instrument when it is properly used,” said Hinckley. “But when it is used to deal with pornography or so-called chat rooms or for any other purpose that leads to evil practices or evil thoughts, then there must be self-discipline enough to turn it off.”

President Hinckley also expressed “great concern” about a “troubling trend”—the fact that a higher percentage of women than men are enrolling in college. “It is plainly evident from these statistics that young women are exceeding young men in pursuing educational programs,” said Hinckley. “And so I say to you young men, rise up and discipline yourself to take advantage of educational opportunities. Do you wish to marry a girl whose education has been far superior to your own? We speak of being ‘equally yoked.’ That applies, I think, to the matter of education.”

The Mormon Alliance, which gathers shortly after each general conference to discuss its messages, commented on President Hinckley’s “equally yoked” statement. “I think it’s a good thing that the prophet is saying that partners need to be equally yoked,” said Janice Allred, an Alliance trustee and author of the 1997 volume God the Mother. “However, I do wonder whether he would have made the same statement and have been equally troubled had the number showed that more men than women are getting higher education.”

Mormonism and Politics

LDS LEADERS, BYU OFFICIALS ACCUSED OF CAMPAIGNING FOR ROMNEY

A SERIES OF ARTICLES IN THE BOSTON GLOBE ACCUSE leaders of the LDS Church and officials at BYU of using those institutions to campaign for presidential hopeful Mitt Romney—a dangerous move that could jeopardize the Church’s non-profit status.

In an email obtained by the Globe, Don Stirling, a paid consultant for Romney, tells Deseret Book CEO Sheri L. Dew of a 19 September meeting that Romney’s son Josh and brother Kem Gardner held with Apostle Jeffrey R. Holland about building a network of Latter-day Saint Romney supporters. “According to Kem, Elder Holland has been designated/assumed the role of coordinating these matters,” Stirling wrote to Dew. “Elder Holland surfaced the idea of using BYU Management Society and its locally based organization as a starting point to rally and organize the troops on a grassroots level. Elder Holland subsequently surfaced the idea with President Hinckley and Faust, who voiced no objections.”

According to the Globe, eight days later, Stirling, Romney’s top aide Spencer Zwick, and the governor’s brother Scott Romney held a dinner with prominent Mormons to further discuss the effort. One of those invited, Steve Albrecht, is an associate dean of the BYU business school. On 9 October, Albrecht and Ned Hill, the business school dean, used their BYU email address to promote Romney’s presidential bid.

“We are writing to you as a friend to see if you have any interest in helping Governor Romney by volunteering to serve as a Community or Neighborhood Chair,” reads the email they sent to fifty Management Society members and a handful of the National Advisory Council. BYU spokesperson Carri Jenkins later told the Salt Lake Tribune that by sending the emails, the deans violated BYU’s policy of political neutrality. “Albrecht has acknowledged the error,” Jenkins told the Deseret Morning News, “and the university took immediate action when we were made aware that the emails had been sent.” According to Jenkins, neither Albrecht nor Hill was reprimanded.

On 22 October, Gardner told the Salt Lake Tribune that he was “to blame for this whole mess,” and denied having told Stirling that Holland had been appointed by the Church to campaign for Romney. “This is so far beyond what actually happened that Elder Holland didn’t know what hit him,” said Gardner. “I’m terribly embarrassed by it.”

Church spokesperson Dale Bills said that “Elder Holland has never discussed with the First Presidency the matter asserted in the Don Stirling e-mail.” The Church also issued a
statement according to which “it is completely erroneous to suggest that Elder Holland was either designated or assumed the role of some sort of coordinator for matters associated.” Spokesperson Michael Otterson characterized the 19 September meeting as a “casual visit with no declared agenda” and added that “Holland re-emphasized the church’s political neutrality rules.” According to Otterson, when the topic of using BYU came up, Holland said that “they would have to check with BYU on how the rules applied to these other entities like the management school.”

Deseret Morning News columnist Bruce Wilson, LDS Senator Orrin Hatch, and some of the Globe’s readers criticized the Globe for the way they handled the story. “When you read the account,” Wilson complains, “you can’t escape the impression that Elder Holland was orchestrating a sinister plot on behalf of the church, despite the fact that Holland emphatically denies it.”

**STAKE PRESIDENT BLASTS REID FOR POSITION ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE**

According to a story in the Las Vegas Review-Journal, a former Nevada stake president sent a blistering letter to Harry Reid in which he accuses the LDS senator of having “defied God” in opposing a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage.

“You chose your party’s agenda over Nevadans’, over your Prophets’ wishes, and defied God in the process,” wrote James Howard, who has been recently released after serving for nine years as president of the Las Vegas East Stake. “You have sold out for power and position. . . You fear your party more than God.”

The Review-Journal story does not clarify if Howard was Reid’s stake president. Reid has repeatedly stated that he believes that marriage should be between a man and a woman, but that he opposed the constitutional amendment, which he saw as a ploy by the Republicans during an election year. Last February, the LDS Church announced its public support for the amendment (see Sunstone, April 2006: 74–74).

“Having sold out your Church, your State and possibly your soul for political power, I will have a hard time supporting you or voting for you in the future, should you attempt to hold on to your seat,” Howard wrote to Reid. “Your soul is vacant, and you have lost your moral compass.”

After Reid’s office released the letter, Howard said that the letter was never intended to become public. “This was a personal letter,” Howard said. “I was not speaking for anybody else. I was not speaking for the Church. It was my opinion.”

Reid didn’t respond to Howard’s letter, but following a request from the Review-Journal, his office supplied a copy of an earlier letter Reid had sent to Nevada bishops explaining his positions. “I have been shocked and offended at the malice and rancor with which many who disagree with me on this issue have personally attacked me,” the letter read in part. “Frankly, I expect better of my fellow saints who share with me reverence for Jesus’s example of forbearance, patience, and love.”

“We protest this preposterous accusation that the Church is involved in politics.”

“We are representatives of the campaign to elect Mitt Romney. Would you like to know more?”
Deceased. Mormonism’s most prolific critic, JERALD TANNER, 68, of complications related to Alzheimer’s disease. In 1959, Jerald, together with his wife Sandra, left the LDS faith and began publishing materials countering many Church claims, eventually founding the Utah Lighthouse Ministry. In their long career, the Tanners published some forty books, including, in 1964, their major work, *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality*? Despite their reputation as a thorn in the Church’s side, some believe that by addressing controversial issues and publishing historical materials, the Tanners have made important contributions to Mormon scholarship. As described by author Lawrence Foster, “in addition to publishing many hard-to-find Mormon historical documents, [the Tanners’] criticisms have highlighted issues that professional Mormon historians, operating from a very different perspective, have also sought to address” (Dialogue, Summer 1984, 35). Jerald Tanner was also the first LDS critic to go on record doubting the veracity of Mark Hoffman’s “Salamander Letter.”

Deceased. JOHN SKOOR, 23 October, after being struck by a rogue wave and washed out to sea. Skoor, 66, was walking along a Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, beach with his wife, Susan Skoor, and sister, Debbie Fenske, when they were struck by the wave caused by tropical storm Paul. Skoor, of Renton, Washington, was an artist, art instructor, and lay minister in the Community of Christ church. His wife, Susan, who spoke at this year’s Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, is a member of the Community of Christ’s council of twelve apostles.

Poised. To serve as Senate Majority Leader, LDS Senator HARRY REID, D-Nev., 67, after the Democrats took control of the Senate in the 7 November election. As majority leader, Reid will be the highest-placed Mormon ever in U.S. government. Reid grew up in a Mormon family in the small mining town of Searchlight, Nevada, and has developed a reputation for his sharp wit and, as Senator Hilary Rodham Clinton calls it, his “spine of steel.” As a moderate Democrat, Reid is pro-life, supports the death penalty, and has a mixed record on gun politics. Although he does not support same-sex marriage, he recently voted against a constitutional amendment that would have banned same-sex marriage nationwide. (See related story, page 75).

Awarded. The Nobel Peace Prize, MUHAMMAD YUNUS, 66, a Bangladeshi banker and economist with ties to BYU. The collaboration between Yunus and BYU professor of social entrepreneurship Warner Woodworth led BYU to raise $8 million and start more than 20 microcredit organizations, which this year will provide about a million microloans globally. In 1998, BYU honored Yunus with an honorary doctorate of humane letters.

Featured. By the media, BYU-Idaho history professor RYAN CRISP, for banning jeans and T-shirts from his classes. In a tougher standard than the LDS-standards school’s dress code, students in Crisp’s 200- and 300-level courses must wear “business casual,” which includes khaki pants, sweaters, skirts, and collared shirts. Students in his 400-level courses must wear “formal business attire”—suits and ties or dresses. “A university is preparation for the real world,” Crisp told the Post Register, “to teach students to think and act at a professional level.”

Censored. From the Ensign, a story penned by OLEG BARABASH, 27. Barabash’s article “I Will Never Go to Church Again” appeared in the October 2006 issue of the magazine but was removed from the online version currently posted at www.lds.org after the 27-year-old BYU student pleaded guilty to lewdness involving a twelve-year-old boy. The article and the accompanying illustration were replaced without editorial comment by a testimonial by a different author entitled “Groceries or Tithing.” Although it is highly unusual for the Ensign to censor articles after publication, Mormon cybersleuths have also noticed that an October 1972 calling for environmental protection, written by feminist and activist Helen Candland Stark and entitled “Another Kind of Tithe,” was never included in either the online or CD-ROM editions of the Ensign.

Executed. JEFFREY LUNDGREN, 56, on 24 October. Lundgren was a member of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now the Community of Christ) before breaking away in 1987 to start his own group near Kirtland, Ohio. In 1989, following a series of revelations regarding the need to “prune the vineyard” in preparation for the Second Coming, Lundgren killed five
of his followers whom he felt were cooling to the group's beliefs and activities. The victims were Dennis Avery, 49, his wife, Cheryl, 46, and their three daughters, ages 7 to 15. In 1990, when Ohio still performed executions by electric chair, Lundgren told the jury "If the world does not end before (my execution), I will be in shock—both in the literal sense and mentally. I expect such events to occur long before the electric chair." Under current Ohio law, Lundgren was put to death by lethal injection.

Victorious. Upon appeal to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, STANLEY M. SHEPP, the right to teach his daughter, Kaylynne, about his fundamentalist Mormon beliefs, which include plural marriage. The 27 September ruling overturned an earlier decision in which Shepp won joint legal custody of Kaylynne, now 13, but was “specifically prohibited while the child is a minor from teaching her about polygamy, plural marriages or multiple wives.” Tracey L. Roberts divorced Shepp following his conversion to fundamentalist beliefs after they married, beliefs she did not share. Roberts argued against Shepp's petition to teach their daughter about plural marriage, expressing concern, in the words of the ruling, "that [Shepp] would introduce Kaylynne to men so that she would be ready to engage in polygamy once she reaches the age of thirteen." Her desire is that her daughter not interact with polygamist families or "to be taught polygamy in any way." The supreme court ruling overturned that prohibition, which Shepp fought because "in order for [Kaylynne] to be happy, she has to have choices," and that it is his job as a father "to help her learn about and understand alternatives." Shepp spoke at the 2002 Salt Lake Sunstone about his conversion to fundamentalist beliefs after they married, beliefs he does not share. Roberts argued against Shepp's petition to teach their daughter about plural marriage, expressing concern, in the words of the ruling, "that [Shepp] would introduce Kaylynne to men so that she would be ready to engage in polygamy once she reaches the age of thirteen." Her desire is that her daughter not interact with polygamist families or "to be taught polygamy in any way." The supreme court ruling overturned that prohibition, which Shepp fought because "in order for [Kaylynne] to be happy, she has to have choices," and that it is his job as a father "to help her learn about and understand alternatives." Shepp spoke at the 2002 Salt Lake Sunstone about his conversion to fundamentalist Mormon beliefs and his own unique synthesis of doctrines he calls "original Mormonism."

Apologizing. Polygamist ADDAM SWAPP, eighteen years after bombing the Kamas, Utah, stake center, in a dispute that resulted in the death of Utah corrections officer Fred House. "What I did . . . went contrary to the teachings of Jesus," Swapp wrote from his cell in Arizona. "And I am sorry that I have been blind to this fact for so long. And sorry that I did it." Swapp sent copies of the letter to the LDS Church, to the Park Register (the Kamas newspaper), and to law enforcement. He sent a separate letter to officer House's family John Timothy Singer, a fellow member of the polygamous Singer/Swapp clan, was recently released after being convicted for killing House. The conflict between the government and the group started in 1979 when clan leader John Singer was shot and killed by officers trying to serve a warrant. During a thirteen-day standoff in Marion, Utah, John Timothy fired ten rounds from a 30-caliber rifle, one of which killed House.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, DIALOGUE!

DIALOGUE TURNS FORTY

DIALOGUE: A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT HAS turned forty, and more than three hundred subscribers and supporters gathered 22 September in Salt Lake City to celebrate the milestone. The celebration included perspectives from current and former editors Levi Peterson and Ross Peterson, as well as others in a short documentary film that had been commissioned for the occasion. Founded in Stanford by a group of LDS graduate students and professors, including Eugene England, G. Wesley Johnson, and Frances Menlove, Dialogue pioneered the field of Mormon studies.

According to former editor Robert A. Rees, "Dialogue is committed to the belief that where people have an opportunity freely to enter into discussion with one another, where ideas can be presented and challenged without fear of reprisals or intimidation, where brothers and sisters as well as friends and neighbors can talk and listen to one another, not only is there a greater opportunity for increased understanding, but also for new discovery. Such dialogue has the possibility of expanding our minds and spirits, of enlightening us.”

Once called by Time magazine "the first unabashedly highbrow publication in Mormon history," Dialogue has helped advance Mormon scholarship by exploring a wealth of topics and ideas dealing with Mormon history, biography, culture, theology, literature, and art. Because of its independence from the LDS Church, Dialogue has often advanced discussion on uncomfortable topics such as polygamy, women’s status, race issues, and Church positions on homosexuality and gender.

Over the years, some fourteen editors have given their time and talents to the journal. In a recent Salt Lake Tribune editorial, former associate editor Gary James Bergera honored the editors, saying that “their contributions, largely unheralded, are a permanent reminder of the value to any organization of independent thought and freedom of expression.”
COUNTERPOINT CONFERENCE TACKLES ISSUES OF TODAY'S LDS FAMILIES

WITH THE THEME "MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND Mormonism: The Eternal Family in the 21st Century," the Mormon Women's Forum held its annual Counterpoint Conference 14 October at the University of Utah. Conference topics ranged from, "How Well Does the LDS Church Support Real Mothers," to "Can Singles Survive in a Married Church?" to "Is There a Place for our Gay Sisters and Brothers in the Eternal Family" and "Can Eternal Marriage Last?"

Sarah Ray Allred participated in the motherhood panel and discussed her experiences as the mother of a three-year-old and a one-year-old, and the struggle to balance the demands of work, family, and church. After quoting Apostle Neal A. Maxwell, who once equated motherhood with priesthood, Allred said that, in her opinion, it is "parenthood"—not just motherhood—that is valuable.

"In many traditional relationships, more parenting is done by mothers than fathers, but it doesn't always have to be that way," said Allred. "Placing rhetorical value on parenthood, by pairing motherhood and fatherhood rather than motherhood and priesthood, would encourage fathers to become active participants in their children's lives. If fathers were more involved in the day-to-day work of caring for their children, rather than 'babysitting' them or occasionally taking them on a date, I believe that fathers will achieve stronger relationships with their children, more possibilities of a Christ-like existence, and a genuine appreciation, rather than a sentimental appreciation, for the work that mothers do."

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If You Could Hie to Graceland. Can an urban legend become a faith-promoting melodrama? Ask Rob Diamond, the director of Tears of a King (www.tearsofaking.com), a soon-to-be released film according to which only days before his death, Elvis Presley received the missionary discussions, read the Book of Mormon, and accepted a baptismal challenge.

"I spent many months pouring my soul into the screenplay," Diamond told the Deseret Morning News. "The Book of Mormon changed my life as a young man, and I believe this movie will help people understand that it did the same for Elvis in the latter days of his life."

Diamond's evidence for Presley's conversion is a copy of the Book of Mormon which, according to Presley fan Cricket Butler, the King studied and marked days before his passing. Butler claims that in August 1977, Presley received the missionaries and even set a baptismal date. Although it is widely known that Presley did receive some of the missionary discussions at the Polynesian Cultural Center in 1966 while shooting Paradise Hawaiian Style, no returned missionary can be found to corroborate Butler's story.

Presley's copy of the Book of Mormon, now in the LDS Church archives, has never been authenticated, and some experts believe it has tell-tale signs of a fake. According to a KSL television news story, the word "king" is underlined throughout the book, and the bottom of a page about the innocence of children reads, "My daughter Lisa needs this church. She's nine. Please help her."

Apparently Lisa Marie didn't get the message: In the early 1980s, she and her mother Priscilla became Scientologists. As for the King himself, he followed the path of all dead celebrities and was baptized, vicariously, numerous times.


"We are recalling the book Secret Santa," reads the email, "which was recently shipped to you. It is a Distributed Product sale item that somehow missed our usual close scrutiny and has material in it that we would not publish."

The recall notice circulated on LDS mailing lists and generated an interest that the novel would otherwise not have received. Mormon readers soon found an account of sex outside of marriage: "But I don't want you to think it was just some cheap, physical thing," Ryan said, lowering his eyes... "It was so much more. It was more like a... Magical... Sharing of souls." Other readers noted the word "Jeez" and the phrase, "...his tie flashing like a strip club."
vision who has made significant contributions to Mormon women, was given to Gay Blanchard, who was honored as a mother, a wife, and “a woman who has pursued her own personal path of knowledge, spirituality, and beauty through the arts and nature.”

**WHO IS THE REAL “LORD OF THE RINGS”?**

**LAST OCTOBER, THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE PUBLISHED A story honoring the memory of Helen Alldredge who, as a member of the Primary General Board in the 1960s, had been involved in creating the motto, “Choose the Right” and sketched the CTR logo which today adorns millions of rings.**

Not so, says Douglas “Cloy” Miles, 90, who says he came up with the idea for the logo. According to Miles, Primary President LaVerne Parmley approached him in 1970 and asked him to come up with a ring. Joel Izatt, 66, confirms that he worked for Miles at the time and designed the logo per Miles’s directions. A craftsman employed by Miles made the first ring sample, and Miles was the sole manufacturer and distributor for the first ten years.

But Alldredge and Miles are not the only claimants. As reported in another Tribune story, several people claim to have created the motto, the logo, and the ring—a situation that often arises when committees make decisions. For instance, in a 2001 Deseret News story, Jerry Johnston said that Norma Nichols, who also served on the Primary board, came up with the motto, and “chaired the committee that invented the ring.”

No one knows exactly how many people claim to be creators of the ring, but Miles says he once spotted on the road a vanity license plate that read, “Father of the CTR Ring.” “I tried to run him down and couldn’t follow him,” Miles says, laughing.

According to statistics given in the Tribune story, in 2005, the LDS Church distributed some 522,455 new CTR rings in twenty-four languages. That figure doesn’t include the thousands more sold by Deseret Book in models that can cost more than $200.

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**Sunbursts**

A NEW MORMON studies group has just formed: The European Mormon Studies Association” (EMSA). The group is seeking to gather together European scholars interested in studying Mormonism from various perspectives and any other scholars interested in studying the European manifestation of Mormonism. The new association welcomes people regardless of religious affiliation. They hope to hold the first EMSA conference in 2007. To learn more, visit [http://www.euromormonstudies.com](http://www.euromormonstudies.com).

CLAREMONT GRADUATE UNIVERSITY has announced that its Provost and Board of Trustees have officially approved the creation of the Howard W. Hunter Chair in Mormon Studies and is beginning its search for a preeminent scholar to occupy the chair. At press time, the position description was still being written. The posting will soon be available at: [http://www.cgu.edu/pages/1825.asp](http://www.cgu.edu/pages/1825.asp).


IRREANTUM MAGAZINE ANNOUNCES it has appointed new co-editors to replace editor Laraine Wilkins, who died tragically (see SUNSTONE, September 2006, 77). VALERIE HOLLADAY and SCOTT HATCH will now shepherd the literary journal of the Association for Mormon Letters. Both editors obtained bachelor’s and master’s degrees from BYU where they took classes in creative writing, and both have experience in editing and publishing.

A NEW PUBLISHER seeks adventurous Mormon readers. Zarahemla Books has announced the publication of its first offering, *Brother Brigham*, a novel by D. Michael Martindale in which “the main character’s childhood imaginary friend—none other than Brigham Young himself—comes back in an unexpected way.” According to ZB’s founder Christopher Bigelow, the new publisher hopes to serve readers “who want more frankness and edginess without sacrificing their faith.” The publisher has also announced a forthcoming short-story collection, *Long after Dark*, by SUNSTONE columnist Todd Robert Petersen, as well as Bigelow’s own novel *Kindred Spirits*. For more information, visit [www.ZarahemlaBooks.com](http://www.ZarahemlaBooks.com).

AFFIRMATION: GAY & Lesbian Mormons has produced a CD-ROM containing past issues of *Affinity*, the organization’s newsletter that began in 1980. For more information, visit [http://www.affirmation.org/affinitycollection](http://www.affirmation.org/affinitycollection).
All serious readers of the scriptures are familiar with the instances in which Jesus juxtaposed particular adjectives, which was more than accidental.

Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign. . . . (Matthew 12:38-39; italics added)

A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign. . . . (Matthew 16:4; italics added)

Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation. . . . (Mark 8:38)

Why that particular juxtaposition? Why not “wicked and merciless generation”? Or “wicked and proud generation”? Such words might have been equally and descriptively accurate. But the linkage with sexual immorality is too deliberate to ignore. . . .

Sign seekers, like adulterers, often do have a clear preference for repeated sensation. Those who do not understand why adultery is intrinsically wrong will also fail to understand why faith is a justified requirement laid upon us by God. We are to walk by faith and to overcome by faith (see D&C 76:53).

Those who will not humble themselves “because of the word” (see Alma 32:14-16) are no different than the magicians of Pharaoh’s court. Those men must have been impressed by the miracles which came from the Lord through Moses. But their proximate reactions made no ultimate difference! The magicians merely became hardened again, as if to say, “What has the Lord shown us lately?”

By contrast, the faithful, who are intellectually honest but are confronted with new and present challenges, sing of the Lord, “We’ve proved Him in days that are past.” . . .

Those who are adulterous have also a strong preference for “now” rather than for eternity. Impatience and incontinence, quite naturally, team up.

Such erring individuals or generations also have a strong preference for meeting the needs of “me” over attending to others, a lifestyle which speeds selfishness on its endless, empty journey.

By making demands of God, the proud would attach conditions to their discipleship. But discipleship requires of us unconditional surrender to the Lord. Hence the proud neither understand nor really love God. Therefore they violate the first commandment by seeing God as a sign provided upon request; as a function, not a tutoring father.

Is this not precisely how some regard their sexual partners, as something to be used and then dismissed or discarded?

But God will not be used: “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (James 4:3). Yet God is ever ready to respond when a request is right.

Ask not, that ye may consume it on your lusts, but ask with a firmness unshaken, that ye will yield to no temptation, but that ye will serve the true and living God (Mormon 9:28; see also 3 Nephi 18:20).

Nor does God, who is perfect in mercy, require perfection of us before He responds. If we are seeking and striving, it is a beginning which is welcomed and rewarded with gifts.

For verily I say unto you, they are given for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments, and him that seeketh so to do; that all may be benefited that seek or ask of me, that ask and not for a sign that they may consume it upon their lusts. (D&C 46:9; italics added)

Clearly in examining Jesus’ words wicked and adulterous generation we are dealing, therefore, not only with the true nature of faith but with the true nature of real love as well—whether love of God or of man. . . .

This . . . spiritual view is, of course, in stark contrast to those who urge, “Eat, drink, and be merry,” because “you only live once!” The gospel response to that assertion is, “Yes, we only live once, but that once is forever!” How constant the contest between the spiritual and the sensual, and how different the consequences, as Jesus’ prophecy foretold.

As the foregoing attempts to illustrate, divine deliberateness was at work when the Lord juxtaposed two words so directly as he has done with “wicked and adulterous generation.”
Faith and doubt.

The Articles of Faith
James E. Talmage
Foreword by James P. Harris

It might appear to be a simple task to outline LDS beliefs, but as James Harris documents, Talmage went the rounds with the First Presidency and a committee of the Quorum of the Twelve on such issues as the nature of the Holy Ghost. Talmage was even threatened with excommunication for the content of his book, now considered authoritative. Included with this edition are Talmage’s recommendations for shortening the Doctrine and Covenants to eliminate false doctrines.

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The Pre-Nicene New Testament: Fifty-four Formative Texts
Robert M. Price

In this erudite and exhaustive commentary, Professor Price demonstrates that most of what is known about Jesus began as revelation to Christian oracles rather than as historical memory. Major characters in the New Testament, such as Peter, Stephen, and Paul, are composites of several historical individuals each—just one more critical insight to ground the New Testament in history and allow readers to appreciate its radical message. Price is editor of the Journal of Higher Criticism.

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Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God
by Blake T. Ostler
ISBN: 1-56698-095-8 Retail: $34.95

In volume two of this ground-breaking series, Blake T. Ostler explores inside the box of Mormon thought and resolves difficult issues that have troubled theologians and philosophers for ages. He outlines issues about prayer, grace, original sin, and man’s relationship with God which gives way to his “compassion theory of atonement.” Ostler also gives a detailed analysis of Russell M. Nelson’s article about God’s love as conditional. This book is written for those interested in the relationship between Mormonism and classical theism—Mormon or non-Mormon.

Also available: Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God (volume 1). Retail: $29.95

Mormonism and Evolution: The LDS Authoritative Statements
edited by William E. Evenson and Duane E. Jeffery
ISBN 1-56698-091-2 Retail: $15.95

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) has generally been viewed by the public as anti-evolutionary in its doctrine and teachings. But official statements on the subject by the Church’s highest governing quorum and/or President have been considerably more open and diverse than is popularly believed.

This book compiles in full all known authoritative statements (either authored or formally approved for publication) by the Church’s highest leaders on the topics of evolution and the origin of human beings. The authors provide historical context for these statements that allows the reader to see what stimulated the issuing of each particular document and how these stand in relation to one another.

The Incomparable Jesus
by Grant Palmer
ISBN: 1-56698-092-0 Retail: $14.95

In this slim volume, Palmer sensitively shares his understanding of what it means to know Jesus by doing his works. He lists the qualities of divine character attested to by the Apostles Peter and Paul, and also those that Jesus revealed about himself in his masterful Sermon on the Mount, particularly in the Beatitudes.

With reverence Palmer shares personal spiritual experiences that were life-changing assurances of Jesus’s love for him—a love poured out unstintingly in equally life-changing blessings on prisoners whose crimes have now stopped short of sexual abuse and murder. Reading this book offers deeper understanding of the Savior’s mercy, a stronger sense of his love, and a deeper commitment to follow him.

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