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UPDATE


Cover art by SR Carter
MUSINGS ON 8

"I ♥ MY GAY MORMON HUSBAND. SAY NO TO H8"

These words, hand-printed on a large protest sign and held high for the crowds by two grad students, (dentistry and law), are the focal point of a prominent photograph in the Sunday Oregonian Newspaper (16 November). The accompanying article about the Portland rally, decrying California's ban on same-sex marriage, features the story of these two men, together for five years, wed in California last June (with the marriage certificate to prove it!) and now—because of the Church's role in the Proposition 8 campaign—ex-Mormons.

For me, this story puts a human face on the pain and dismay that is the outcome of the Prop 8 train wreck. I am saddened and disheartened.

It seems to me like deja vu. I remember the controversy about the definition of marriage around the 1950s and 60s. Then it was black intermarriage, miscellanea laws. Apostle Mark E. Peterson told us “God has commanded Israel not to intermarry.” Apostle Bruce R. McConkie told us “casting systems have their root and origin in the gospel itself,” and both were very vocal opponents of interracial marriage with blacks.

The year I graduated from high school in Salt Lake City, Apostle Peterson called intermarriage with Negroes “spiritual death” and opined at a BYU convention, “We must not allow our feelings to carry us away, nor must we feel so sorry for Negroes that we will open our arms and embrace them with everything we have. Remember the little statement that we used to say about sin, ‘First we pity, then endure, then embrace.’”

I cringe as I recall these words even as I try to remember that most white Americans in the 1950s were opposed to interracial marriage and did not see laws banning interracial marriage as an affront to the principles of American democracy.

I understand homosexuality to be one of nature’s many variations, not an illness nor a disability, nor moral depravity. The etiology of homosexuality is complex. We are learning also that the simple dichotomy of male or female doesn’t begin to capture the complexity of human sexuality.

God is not fragile, and faith does not require denying the realities of this world. Offering this group radical inclusion in the life of the Church, without demanding that they become who they are not, would seem to reflect the radical inclusiveness of Jesus. This love would lead us to ask forgiveness of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters whom we have persecuted, excluded, called ‘sinners,’ and sought to hinder in the creation of lives rich in self-respect and covenant relationship.

Perhaps after a few years, we will look back at this and be appalled and dismayed, just as the old screeds against interracial marriage leave us appalled and dismayed today.

FRANCES LEE MENLOVE
Depoe Bay, Oregon

A MARRIAGE MORMONISM COULD ABDIE?

LONG BEFORE THERE WAS A Proposition 8, I heard from a gay, celibate, temple-recommend-toting Mormon friend why and how Mormonism could abide gay (even temple) marriage. While I remain unconvinced that it should (at least at present), Christopher Bigelow’s reasoning in the October 2008 SUNSTONE reminds me that it could.

Bigelow writes: “In order for same-sex marriage to be accepted by Mormons, we would need to become convinced that God himself could conceivably engage in such a union, including its sexual implications.” His argument relies upon the Mormon performance of “posthumous sealings for any and all couples ever married on this earth” and the “procreative purpose” of marriage. These are the fundamental premises of Bigelow’s argument. The first is wrong, the second erroneous because it is incomplete.

For years, Mormonism made no objection to the marriages of men or women beyond climacteric. Such marriages have no procreative purpose. Instead, they have social, emotional, and economic purposes. “It is not good for . . . man [or woman] to be alone” Genesis 2:18; Moses 3:18; Abraham 5:14. Procreation is a purpose of some but not all marriages recognized and performed by the Church. Of course, if it were true that we perform “posthumous sealings for any and all couples ever married on earth,” one could argue for a possible eternal procreative purpose even for marriage after climacteric, but we don’t. Instead, we happily perform marriages for time only (even in the temple) for widows who have been sealed to their first
husbands. At least for many years (I have not researched current practice), such marriages were not sealed for eternity, posthumously or otherwise.

Thus, there is room within Mormon theology for time-only marriages with no procreative purpose. Accommodating gay marriages for time only would do no violence to such theology though it might imply recognition by the Church that the particular parties involved are not capable of changing their sexual orientation and that God is likely not going to do it for them in this life. Accommodating gay marriage might also call for recognition that “[i]t is not good for . . . [even a gay] man [or woman] to be alone” and that heterosexual marriages including a gay partner generally do not work. Yet a gay partnership can be a loving, committed relationship fulfilling the emotional and economic purposes of marriage, as well as at least some of its societal purposes. The fact that some gay partnerships are not such committed relationships is irrelevant; the same is true of heterosexual partnerships or marriages.

The possibility of a Mormon gay marriage might also require recognition by the prospective gay marriage partners that such a marriage could be for time only and that God could change their orientation and provide other opportunities for them in the hereafter. One of my gay friends was advised by then Apostle Thomas Monson that he would probably have to live with his gay orientation the rest of his life and that the blessing Elder Monson could give him was not likely to result in the Lord’s changing it.

While a gay-marriage family may not be forever, neither is the second marriage of a widow sealed to her first husband, or a widower married to a previously sealed widow. (But can you imagine the horrendous metric and musical problems of singing “heterosexual families can be together forever?”) Mormon gay marriage would not necessarily imply that gay orientation, gay marriage or gay sexual activity exists in the hereafter on the part of anyone—not even God!

JIM RASMUSSEN  Albuquerque, New Mexico

Establishing an objective context for any emotionally charged issue presents a particular challenge, especially when, as with Duffy, one is already a participant in the dialogue. Nevertheless, I feel Duffy sets a high standard for “mapping” other issues. As someone who has been involved in the Book of Mormon historicity debates for the past several decades, I have some awareness of and appreciation for how difficult a task Duffy faced in presenting a clear, objective picture of the landscape.

I have often been dismayed by the tenor of the discussion between those who feel the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient record and those who do not. I believe the anger and accusations on both sides have prevented what should be a respectful, even if impassioned, conversation among scholars committed both to responsible scholarship and Christian (or other religious) principles.

We may disagree, but we don’t have to be disagreeable. Hopefully, Parts I and II of Duffy’s mapping articles will help raise the historicity conversation to a higher level.

ROBERT A. REES  Brookdale, California

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ROBERT A. REES  Brookdale, California
SUNSTONE

Telling our stories

REFLECTIONS ON PROPOSITION 8

California’s Proposition 8 opened painful divides between LDS Church members. In an attempt to heal these rifts, SUNSTONE presents a collection of personal reflections from people who worked and believed on all points of the Proposition 8 spectrum. The purpose of this collection is to help Latter-day Saints with disparate points of view on the issue to have compassion—to feel deeply—with one another.

WHY I CAME OUT TO MY ENTIRE WARD

An earlier version of this essay was posted on SOYMADEMEGAY.COM.

YOU KNOW HOW THERE’S ALWAYS THAT ONE testimony every month that makes everyone feel really awkward? The one that makes the congregation avoid eye contact and shift uncomfortably in the pews? Well, I decided to get it out of the way early this month.

“I just want to let everyone know why I am here,” I told them.

“My entire life, I’ve on some level known that I am gay. Growing up gay in the Church was really hard. Being gay and active in the Church can still be really hard.

“But no matter what I want to be true, no matter what I hope to be true, no matter what I think to be true, I know that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is true. It’s a knowledge that is impossible to take away from me. (I’ve tried.) I know President Monson is a prophet of God. I know the Book of Mormon is true.

“I don’t say all this to solicit pity, fill you with guilt, or cause shock. I say this because no matter what our individual situations, the Church is amazingly, frustratingly, inconveniently, wonderfully true . . . so what else matters?

“In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”

I walked past the bishopric and the stake president (of course he would happen to be there) and down the aisle to my seat in the chair section. A third of the way there, I realized that I was looking down. “Hold your head up!” I told myself, “You are not ashamed!” And I did. I held my head up all the way to my distant seat. When I slid into my chair, one friend put his arm around my shoulders, another smiled at me through teary eyes, and another turned around and gave me a thumbs-up.

So why did I out myself to my entire ward yesterday?

1. To bear my testimony.
I wanted to come out in testimony meeting because I want everyone to know what I believe. Plus, a lot of my testimony was built while I was sorting out my sexuality. It is a part of my testimony like my mission, youth classes, and everything else in my life.

2. To let other gay Mormons know that they aren’t alone.

I don’t know if there are other gay members of my ward, but if there are, I want them to know that there are others like them out there, doing our best to live the gospel. Loneliness and isolation are the kryptonite of the gay Mormon.

3. To raise awareness.

I’ve had people tell me that they thought I might be gay but dismissed the idea because I am active in the Church. Well, now they know. A gay person can be as active in the Church as the next guy.

4. To help remove some of the stigma associated with homosexuality.

I had blessed the sacrament just a few moments before I stood to bear my testimony. And as I stood, wanting to be the first to the podium, I realized the significance of what the congregation was seeing. I was standing up from behind the sacrament table and, in front of the bishopric, the stake president, and my entire ward, revealing that I am gay. I was helping to dispel the myth that if you are gay, you are a vile sinner and unworthy of participation in the Church’s ordinances. I wanted to show that gay people aren’t disgusting pervs. That they bless the sacrament. I wanted everyone to know that you shouldn’t be ashamed—that I am not ashamed—of being gay. Or Mormon.

CLINT MARTIN
Atlanta, Georgia

A TALE OF TWO WARDS

An earlier version of this essay was posted on ROUGHSTONE ROLLING.COM.

WHEN THE STAKE PRESIDENT SAT US DOWN, it wasn’t about “getting out the vote,” knocking on doors, or putting a sign on our lawn. It was about making a contribution—a rather sizable contribution. He already had a figure in mind. Interestingly, my wife and I both heard the figure in our heads before he said it.

The hard part about being asked by the Church to do something like this is, despite free agency, we really don’t say no. And if we do, we just don’t get it. So after kneeling in prayer, we mailed a check the next morning for the requested amount.

Then, the members of the congregation piled into their cars and crawled out of the parking lot to go home and break their fasts, high priests manned the exits, handing out stacks of Prop 8 signs to each car so everyone could plant them in public places around town. The goal, I believe, was to make sure that when people closed their eyes that night, they would see blue and yellow “Yes on 8s” burned into their retinas.

Despite my disappointment with ward members—and conversations with friends who surprised me with firm “No on 8” positions—I never softened on my own support for Prop 8. It’s just that the whole affair had such a right-wing flavor to it and was therefore ill-fitted for these free-spirited “industry” types. It was just . . . inconvenient.

My current ward is thirty miles from Hollywood: thoroughly ‘urb, clean cut, white bread. The families are older, with teens and older Primary kids. The men all have “suit” jobs, and everyone sparkles.

My previous ward had to work very hard to drum up sufficient numbers to walk the neighborhoods and attend the meetings. It’s not that a lot of the members were against Prop 8. It’s just that the whole affair had such a right-wing flavor to it and was therefore ill-fitted for these free-spirited “industry” types. It was just . . . inconvenient.

The Sunday before Election Day was truly disappointing. The members kept shoe-horning Prop 8 into their testimonies and lessons. The greatest infringement was when the high priests group leader sermonized the issue during his testimony, mentioning Jesus’ name only to close.

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That same day, a miracle happened for my family which, although I won’t go into it, we believe came as a direct result of our decision.

We moved into a new area in September, and in the thick of the great Proposition 8 crusade, I noticed distinctly different reactions from people in my previous and current wards. My previous ward is a mere four miles from Hollywood. It’s attended by men and women who work in all areas of the entertainment industry. It’s known as a “maverick” ward, an eclectic ward, full of young couples just starting to spawn and new converts still donning their pre-born-again tats.

My current ward is thirty miles from Hollywood: thoroughly ‘urb, clean cut, white bread. The families are older, with teens and older Primary kids. The men all have “suit” jobs, and everyone sparkles.

These two wards—old and new—are about 25 miles from each other.

And worlds apart.

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more difficult to halt longer between two opinions (see 1 Kings 18:21) ... This is a hard doctrine, but it is a particularly vital doctrine in a society which is becoming more wicked. In short, brothers and sisters, not being ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ includes not being ashamed of the prophets of Jesus Christ.”

The rift between members—the passion and commitment—tells me this is a complex exercise that also, in simplest terms, comes down to each individual’s relationship with God and Christ. It’s a test and opportunity for each of us to exert our faith and wrestle with the issue through prayer and pondering.

That isn’t to say that everyone will, or should, come away with the same answer, and it isn’t whether the Church is right or wrong. It is, however, about whether each of us can individually attain a solid confirmation and sense of peace from the Lord that it’s all right to embrace the position we do.

That may be difficult for those who believe that not following the prophet in this cause is no less than disobedience to the Lord. I can’t offer any defense for members who opposed Proposition 8. I just can’t relate to them, and this frustrates me tremendously. Maybe I’m just too obtuse.

That being said, we should recognize that whatever answer we each receive is valid to no one but ourselves—and we should keep from the polling office door, gave me some advice and told me to hold for a while?” I swear I wasn’t just trying to get a date with Jeanette.

Jeanette handed me a sign, told me about the distance I should keep from the polling office door, gave me some advice about not being confrontational, and said that she and her buddy were about to go pick up some more volunteers.

Great, sounds like a party.

I PICKED A SPOT near the entrance of the parking lot, turned on my iPod, and smiled and waved like a homecoming queen.

Within fifteen minutes, Jeanette and her buddy left, and I found myself alone in the parking lot with my sign. The clouds moved over the sun, and a cool breeze began to blow, just enough to make me slightly uncomfortable in my shorts and thin running jacket.

Two hours crept by, and I was still alone. No other volunteers had shown up. The woman across the street, however, had been joined by an eight-year-old boy who was very excited about the whole affair. He shouted, “Vote yes on prop 8!” as loud as his little voice would allow.

An elderly couple drove by and smiled, both of them giving me a big thumbs up. I waved back.

Then a man about my age drove by with his middle finger waving proudly.

A married couple, middle-aged, their faces dour with disgust, rolled their windows down to point their thumbs to the ground.

The weather continued to get colder, my fingers started to go numb, and my back was aching from standing for so long. I wasn’t sure how much longer I could stay out.

And yet, I couldn’t leave. I didn’t want to leave. I am com-
I and the Lord—one horn him.

Tears welled up in my eyes. I wanted to hug him and beg for his forgiveness. I wanted to tell him how sorry I was for the actions of all the people who had decided he wasn't worthy of marriage. I wanted him to know that I hoped he would forgive them, especially since I go to church with so many of them, for they know not what they do.

Instead, I smiled and wished him luck.

As I drove out of the parking lot, the woman across the street was still there. I smiled and gave her a friendly wave. She smiled and waved back.

LOYD ERICSON
Claremont, California

I LOVE YOU, PERIOD

I TRIED TO REMAIN AS NEUTRAL AS POSSIBLE ON THE gay marriage debate, passing it off with, “Well, I don’t live in California, so I don’t have to make a decision.” However, as the saying goes, “The personal is political.”

My sister is gay. That has made this debate personal.

Just a few months ago I was talking with my sister’s friend (who is also gay) defending my LDS friends who believe the “I love you even though you’re gay” sentiment. I was arguing that one could love a gay family member and not accept (or even like) his or her sexuality.

My thinking shifted when she explained that for many people (possibly even me), their sexuality is a fundamental part of their personhood. So to truly love any kind of person, gay or otherwise, you cannot say, “I love you even though . . .” you have to say, “I love you, period.”

If my sister is gay, and God made her that way just as He made me straight, then I love that she is gay. For me, to be against gay marriage is to be against my own sister. How can I tell her, “You know, I love you, but I really hate this particular fundamental part of who you are.” I refuse to do that.

If that attitude conflicts with the teachings of my faith, then it is something that I will have to just sit with, perhaps for the rest of my life. I love my sister too much, and I love my faith too much (which, paradoxically, has become more personal and more inspiring than ever in my life).

I hope my friends and family who disagree with me will be understanding and not decide that I have lost my testimony or am not following the prophet, both of which miss the point. There are simply some things you cannot reconcile or explain into neat categories. You just have to sit with them.

The best I can do is to allow this tension to make me a little softer, a little humbler, a little more patient. A little more like the One I claim to follow.

UNDERSTANDING DAD

An earlier version of this essay was posted on LATTERDAYMAIN STREET.COM.

WITH ONE (BRILLIANT) EXCEPTION (ME), MY immediate family members are all active Mormons. They are, however, split pretty much down the middle: my mother and sisters are conservative, and my father and brothers (and I) are progressive.

My father always taught us, by word and deed, that all people are equal and deserve the same rights. Think of the most accepting, tolerant, respectful person you know. That person has nothing on my dad.

So try to imagine how utterly shocked I was—how completely my world was shaken—when he told me he was going to vote yes on Proposition 8.

Actually, don’t try to imagine it: you can’t. I thought I knew him and, therefore, myself. But I didn’t know this man who raised me to never follow authority blindly, to always follow my conscience, and to respect the paths of others because they are all valid. That man would never have voted against equal rights.

My dad has always been an advocate of gay rights (for all rights), and has never been one to follow whatever Church leaders say just because they say it. He had always followed his own conscience. And he tells me his conscience says gay people should have the right to get legally married. However, the Church leadership told its members to pray about this decision—and here the plot thickens. My dad prayed about it, and, according to him, God told him to vote yes.

We talked about it for quite a while, and he finally asked me what I would do in his position, if I received divine inspiration that went against my own sense of morality. I told him that if something went against my sense of morality I would never believe it was divine.

Fast forward a month or so:
Proposition 8 passed, to my dismay. My dad and I have made a wary peace. He emails me he loves me, that he'll always love me, and that it hurts him that I cannot accept what he believes. I reply (using my words and not my fists, like a big girl), telling him that I love him but I don't understand him, I don't know him—maybe I never did, and it hurts me that he's betrayed everything I thought he stood for. He tells me that God has asked him to do something he does not understand.

How can I be against that? But how can I be all right with it? I guess for some Mormons it comes down to this: are you going to do what you think is right, or are you going to obey God?

I understand that, but I cannot accept it. Or maybe I don't understand it. Because as sure as my dad is that God told him to vote against equality, that is how sure I am that his vote was horribly wrong—yes, even immoral. I can't accept it as an act of justice, mercy, or love; yet my Mormon upbringing taught me about a just, merciful, loving God. It seems like so many people want to worship a God created in their own image, instead of a God that is truly divine and eternal.

This issue isn't something we can work through or get over—not now, maybe not ever—but that doesn't mean everything changes. I think my dad and I have taken this issue, given it a swirlie, and shoved it in a locker where it can be contained. Things might never be quite the same between my dad and me, but things change, relationships change. It's inevitable.

Some day that thing we've contained might escape and seek revenge (Night of the Living Social Justice Issue. Ooh, scary). For now, though, I've relearned one of those lessons that never seem to sink in all the way: even the greatest people are not all good, and even the most monstrous people are not all monster. Some people are a little bit country, a little bit rock 'n roll.

REBECCA ELLSWORTH Princeton, New Jersey

INSPIRED MINDS

I WON'T BE VISITING UTAH THIS WINTER.” MY brother’s anger was palpable even through email. “I don’t want to support a state run by bigots and I am so frustrated by the Church’s support (and I assume yours!) of Proposition 8 in California.”

Despite the hurtful words, I had to laugh out loud. My absent brother thought he knew me better than I knew myself! He simply assumed my support for Proposition 8, but my reconciliation with my own feelings and the Church’s position had been a difficult process.

My brother is gay—my uncle, too, and my nephew, and my favorite fitness instructor. So although I endorse traditional marriage, my initial reaction to Proposition 8 was, “Gay marriage is inevitable. It doesn’t hurt me; why fight it?” I was ready to sit back and let it happen.

Then my dad called from his home in California. “I’ve been asked to lead efforts to pass Prop 8 for my stake.” The relationships are much closer for my dad: his brother, his son, his grandson.

“Are you ready for this, Dad?”

His voice was firm. “I’m ready.”

Like all parents, my mom and dad made a slew of mistakes. My brothers probably shouldn’t have been allowed to build pipe bombs, every kid needs a turn on dishes (not just the meek ones), and I would have appreciated some counseling on applying to college. But despite our paltry family home evenings and years between scripture study, my parents installed one unfailing virtue: love people. My dad constantly brought home strangers he’d met on an airplane or at a meeting. He hired homeless men to work in our yard (it was safer in those days). And more than once, I saw him take the coat off his back and the shoes off his feet for someone who needed them more. Bigotry was so absent from my household that I thought it was something that existed only in books or truly awful movie villains.

Not until junior high and high school in the 1980s did I clue in on the racial and homophobic slurs that surrounded me. I once told a very nasty joke to my friend without understanding the homosexual innuendo (it makes me blush to this day). “I don’t think you know what you are saying,” he advised. “Don’t repeat that to anyone else.”

As awareness of homosexuals increased in the community in the 1980s, I had a parallel awakening at home. My brother announced his preferences quite openly, and suddenly tolerance at my house was no longer a luxury; it was a necessity.

“Dad, you’re not going to stand on corners and wave signs are you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“But Dad, it’s a losing battle. This isn’t worth your time.”

“Maybe, but the Prophet doesn’t think so. And I think he might know a few things we don’t.”

My father’s words sent me into a flurry of investigation. The arguments against Prop 8 were and are simple: say no to bigotry, say no to hate, say no to discrimination. But the arguments supporting Prop 8 are complex: protect religious freedom, maintain parental rights, preserve traditional marriage.

Visiting NOONPROP8.COM and PROTECTMARRIAGE.COM, I found both websites well designed with passionate prose and persuasive rhetoric. But neither site was convincing. The No’s dismissed legitimate concerns about parental rights and education, and the Yeses relied on “the sky is falling” arguments. The radical factions of both sides made me shudder. I couldn’t align myself with the “haters” who truly believe all gays are going to hell, nor with the “lovers” who want to teach my children all about homosexuality.

At LDS.ORG, I found my middle ground. The press releases and commentary used facts and legal cases instead of accusations. Tolerance and love for all people were stressed on every page. As I read through the words of Elder Bednar, Elder Ballard, and especially Elder Oaks, I found myself nodding my head, “Yes, yes. Yes, that’s right.”
Their comments were clear and compelling, but it is my reverence for these men as prophets that cemented my support for Proposition 8. As a society, we simply can’t predict the long-term consequences of gay marriage; I’m relying on more inspired minds than my own.

I recognize that many, including family members, will view me as blindly obedient and yes, bigoted. Still, I hope they’ll accept my help in securing civil unions for homosexual couples in the state of Utah. But when it comes to marriage, I’m taking the Prophet’s word on it. Because I believe the Prophet talks to God. And I believe God knows a few things I don’t.

MICHELLE LARSON
Salt Lake City, Utah

A DIFFICULT JOURNEY

MY CONSCIOUSNESS CHANGED ONE NIGHT when I was six years old. After a ward swimming activity, as I dressed in the locker room, I looked up and realized that there were naked men all around me. Their bodies were compelling to me, and even though I was years away from the hormone rush that would make my hair curl and turn me into a sexually aware being, my heart beat loudly in my throat, and I recognized that I was somehow different. I also distinctly knew that what I felt was forbidden. On the drive home, I sat on my sweaty hands on the leather seats of Dad’s car, trying to make any sense of these feelings that were at once confusing and tantalizing.

In time, I learned that what I had experienced that night was my burgeoning homosexuality. I read encyclopedias, our family health guide, Childcraft books—anything I could get my hands on—in an attempt to understand something about the attraction inside me. I hid in the city library with forbidden reading tucked inside other books. By the time I was in high school, even though I didn’t know a single gay person in my world. Devotion hadn’t fixed me.

I left for a mission after a year at BYU, wondering if I simply hadn’t tried hard enough to change. I was a good kid, but all my work to playact the person I wanted to be still left me feeling fraudulent and defective. But I held a fervent belief that throwing myself completely into missionary service would rid me of my demon. Mustering all the determination and discipline that had helped me succeed in virtually everything I had endeavored until then, I channeled my focus into my mission. I continually promised God that I would be his forever if he would just deliver me from my attraction to men. Doctrine & Covenants 132:50 became a prayer that I clung to with both hope and desperation.

Behold, I have seen your sacrifices, and will forgive all your sins; I have seen your sacrifices in obedience to that which I have told you. Go, therefore, and I make a way for your escape, as I accepted the offering of Abraham of his son Isaac.

I convinced myself that if I worked hard enough, prayed earnestly enough, God would make a way for my escape. So I worked as I never had. I strictly obeyed the mission rules. I studied the scriptures and the language obsessively so I could convey God’s message flawlessly. I prayed until my knees were asleep and often until I was asleep on my knees. Those prayers were always variations on a theme:

I’m yours. I’m here. I’m giving everything I know how to give. Please make me whole. Please, Heavenly Father.

Depression settled on me like cold fog when my mission ended and I had to confront my failure. God’s failure. I spent a full week in my room at home, coming out only long enough to mumble a few words, eat something, and then disappear back into myself. I ultimately couldn’t stand being alone with my thoughts, so I found three jobs, one as a hotel night clerk. In that miserable little hotel office, I passed night after night of darkness and spiritual defeat. One night I found a number for the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in Salt Lake. It was very late. I dialed the number, not expecting an answer, and when a man said hello, I sobbed and shuddered uncontrollably for minutes.

That phone call was only the beginning of increasing darkness and tarry desperation that seeped in from the edges of my world. Devotion hadn’t fixed me.

I stumbled back to BYU, but I no longer believed that change was just a matter of persistence and time. I lost my faith in God’s plan for me. Even though I excelled in school and hung a convincing façade of normalcy (even dating a beautiful, amazing woman for nearly three years), my self-esteem was in tatters. Increasingly, I thought about suicide. I resisted only because I was afraid to hurt the people who loved me. When I tried to pull away from them, my family and friends pulled me closer. But even still, I came dangerously close to finding oblivion.

One night after a guy I worked with propositioned me in a

It seems like so many people want to worship a God created in their own image, instead of a God that is truly divine and eternal.
INDEX OF MY HOMOSEXUALITY WOULD BE SERVING A MISSION.

I spent most of my life thinking I was broken, that my desires were condemned by God, that I could be fixed if only I worked hard enough. I prayed, fasted and worked for years to become straight, and felt that the final step to the eradication of my homosexuality would be serving a mission.

Looking back, even writing about those grim years seems like telling fiction; I’m looking through hazy, cracked glass at a brittle, tragic person I knew in a different world. Loving friends and family, as well as a kind, affirming therapist at BYU (after several miserable false starts with other BYU therapists) helped me realize my life had value. My gay self had value.

I am now in the fourth year of a beautiful, committed relationship with a man I love more than I can explain. And I know he loves me with the same depth. Our bond nourishes me every day and continually reinforces my understanding that I am as worthwhile as everyone else. I’ve also come to know on a profound personal level that God loves me just as I am. During all those years of pleading and cursing in the darkness, He was there, waiting for me to figure out that I was whole, long before and long after that night at the swimming pool.

BENSON DASTRUP
Seattle, Washington

A NEW PRAYER

LIKE MANY LDS HOMOSEXUALS I HAVE KNOWN, I spent most of my life thinking I was broken, that my desires were condemned by God, that I could be fixed if only I worked hard enough. I prayed, fasted and worked for years to become straight, and felt that the final step to the eradication of my homosexuality would be serving a mission.

It didn’t work. I came home as gay as ever. The defenses I had had up for so long crumbled, and I entered the darkest time of my life. I was worn out by years of denying who I was. One day, while speeding up the freeway to my home in Salt Lake, I slipped off my seat belt and gripped the steering wheel. I wanted nothing more than to turn that wheel sharply into the median. I was spiritually exhausted. I had failed the test.

I didn’t kill myself that day, thanks to a dear friend who happened to call at that very moment.

Not long after, at a singles ward in Sugar House, I met the man I am with now, five and a half years later. At that time, our ward was very diverse, with people from many different backgrounds, including many other gay men. It was the most spiritual ward I have ever attended. In this period of a new relationship and new spiritual strength, I went to God with a new prayer.

For the first time in my life, I didn’t ask to be made straight. Instead, I asked to be OK with who I was, to be OK with being gay and to accept the way I was created. The feeling I had then was like a burst of light and warmth in my mind—I finally got it. Everything pointed to the fact that God has no disdain for the person I am.

In the past five and a half years, I have lived with my partner the only way I am legally able. We attend church and are active in callings. I have taught and participated in the Church in many capacities, bringing the Spirit to the congregation or class through my testimony, in spite of the fact that I am gay and supposedly far from anything godly.

A NEW PRAYER

LONE IN MY HOTEL ROOM, I LED FOR RELIEF FROM MY PROFOND

FEELINGS OF SADNESS AND FOR UNDERSTANDING.
the respect of my peers. I will speak to whoever will listen, write for whoever will read, and march with whoever will march, until my fellow Saints start to listen.

RICKY RENEER
Anaheim, California

MY TRIAL

I SPENT SIX HOURS HANGING PRO-PROP 8 DOOR hangers on the doorknobs of my California neighbors. This might seem odd to anyone who knows me as a lifelong Democrat, a libertarian of sorts, a financial supporter of Hillary Clinton, and an occasional pro bono litigator for civil rights groups.

In the midst of my doorknob-hanging marathon, my Blackberry informed me that some partners at my international law firm objected to my pending visit to UCLA. Being a trial and appellate lawyer in Los Angeles, I had been invited to the UCLA Law School to provide the only pro-Proposition 8 voice the students would hear among the cacophony of its opponents.

Some of my law firm partners had been highly visible, using the firm’s name to speak out against Proposition 8. Hearing about my pending speech, they had taken the matter to my firm’s management committee. So, stopping in a downtrodden trailer park in the corner of my ward, I stood in a warm rain for two hours doing some serious negotiation over the phone. My firm’s management finally consented to let me give my speech, but the irony of forbidding me to identify my firm affiliation was not lost on me, my partners, nor the friends I told the story to later.

Why was I doing this? And enthusiastically, to boot?

The First Presidency’s call to action is the force that galvanized me to rethink my “live and let live” view of the California Supreme Court’s 5 May 2008 decision. I read the decision several times in connection with the First Amendment work I do, and came to believe that it was unfairly and wrongly decided. In addition, the conclusions in a sociological study from Witherspoon Institute, “Marriage and the Public Good: Ten Principles,” persuaded me that gay marriage would lead to a European-style degradation of marriage. My children would grow up in a community which would not value, and perhaps even denigrate, traditional marriage.

I found that there was a distinct sub rosa group of people among my colleagues and clients who believed as I did but lacked the courage to speak their minds for fear of losing business or being branded a “bigot” and a fascist. I understood these concerns. I had them, too. After all, there weren’t fancy parties and fundraisers going on among the Los Angeles elite to support Proposition 8.

A few weeks before the election, I sat in our lunchroom with a group of my colleagues, some gay, and listened to their discussion about Prop 8. I remained silent, feeling some remorse. I walked with one of my gay law partners to his office. I have known this man for almost two decades. I have tried cases with him. He is active in politics and was Hillary’s chief fundraising contact in California. He knew I was a Hillary supporter.

With some trepidation, I confided to him my planned participation in the pro-Prop 8 campaign. “Is it because of your religious beliefs?” he asked. I answered in the affirmative. He was not upset. He was not critical. I appreciate his nonjudgmental response because I felt more secure in the wildly politically incorrect stand I would be taking. I was converted, and I believed.

ROBERT CROCKETT
Los Angeles, California

THE STILL, SMALL VOICE: HAVE FAITH

An earlier version of this essay was posted on YOUNGSTRANGER.COM.

MY MARRIAGE LAST SUMMER WAS ONE OF THE most joyous occasions in my life, if not the most joyous. It was a loving and intimate time with family. A time when my father prayed for me, put his arm around me, and encouraged me. A time when the man I love was embraced by my family. A time when we deepened our relationship with our foster son. The fact that we had to sacrifice for that event, and the fact that it had meaning beyond what a merely private ceremony would have offered, helped to make us more of a family.

But on 5 October 2008, I saw a picture of the Prop 8 organizers in the L.A. Times online. They were laughing, cheering, and holding up clenched fists upon learning that their referendum to strip me of my marriage had succeeded.

The certificate that hangs on the wall of our bedroom, the one that has given me joy every single day I have looked at it, has been voided. Thousands of people spent millions of dollars to make it so. When they succeeded, they laughed and cheered and celebrated at what they had taken away from us.

The next morning, my prayers, usually peaceful, focused and centered, were just a kind of mournful outcry: “God, please help me! Please!” And the day that followed was just dull and gray and tired. I wished I’d had the strength to just shrug it off, but I didn’t.

It wasn’t until I was heading home after work that day, walking down the Minneapolis skyway that connects all the major buildings downtown, toward the parking ramp where my bike was locked, that the still, small voice of the Spirit finally came.

It said simply, “Be not of little faith.” That got my attention. I interrogated the Spirit. “What do you mean?”

The Spirit replied, “Don’t be angry. Don’t be afraid. Everything will be well. Everything will be made right.”

And that was the extent of it. I wanted more than that, but it was clear to me that if I wanted more, I had to be, for the
time being, content with merely that.

I felt beautiful inside and out. I felt blessed peace. And genuine love. Even for those people with the laughing faces, jeering my loss from the image posted in the L.A. Times online.

So I walked down the street and reflected on the fact that the same Spirit that encouraged me and mine to head out to California and get married, the same Spirit that has blessed me with so many spiritual gifts in the aftermath of that marriage, was now telling me to “be not of little faith.” It was commanding me not to be angry, not to be resentful. That was my task. If I would make some effort in that direction, the Spirit would help me.

Does that mean I won’t continue to talk about Prop 8, about marriage, and about this very strange journey of mine? Of course not.

But it does mean I need to be ever attentive. And ever faithful.

JOHN GUSTAV-WRATHALL
Minneapolis, Minnesota

A DREAM

IN 2000, WHEN THE CHURCH ANNOUNCED THAT IT was lending its support to the campaign for California’s Proposition 22, I felt as if a brick had been dropped on my heart. I found it impossible to attend church without weeping throughout meetings. I would just sit there in the pew with tears streaming down my face. I tried to stop, but I couldn’t. It was so terrible, it was funny.

And to make matters worse, I had just moved to a new ward. Imagine trying to introduce yourself to a new bishopric through a veil of tears. No one knew what to do with me. Much to everyone’s relief, I stopped attending church for a few years. My only contact was with my visiting teacher, whose tenderness and understanding I cherished.

It took almost seven years and a lot of prayer for me to find the courage to go back to church again in January 2008. I did so in large part because I had become a mother to two young daughters and I wanted them to learn about the basic principles of faith not only from me at home but also from a community of Mormons in a neighborhood ward.

Six months after I returned to church, the First Presidency letter asking members to “do all you can” in support of Proposition 8 was read over the pulpit. Again, I felt as if a brick had been dropped on my heart. I tried to be as strategic as I could about ward contact, so I could just experience the basic principles of the gospel and the spiritual uplift I hungered for. But the Proposition 8 campaign soon became impossible to avoid.

One weekend in late October, I was away from home on a work assignment, and I was feeling particularly punished by the upcoming election. (I knew that the proposition was going to pass.) When I was not in professional meetings, I was in tears. I set aside one night of my trip to spend a few hours praying for consolation and understanding. Alone in my hotel room, I begged for relief from my profound feelings of sadness and for understanding.

That night, I dreamed that my husband and I were riding our bicycles down a long avenue to the ocean. At the end of the avenue, a large crowd had gathered; they were watching animals caught in the ocean reefs, drowning.

We have to save them, I thought as my husband and I tore off our shoes and socks and ran down the dunes into the water. We plucked the drowning animals one by one from the reefs and threw them to shore, where they began to breathe again. Still feeling a tremendous sense of urgency to rescue more drowning creatures, I stood and turned away from the shore seeing the tide withdraw through the reefs. A tremendous sense of peace overtook me, and I realized it was going to be okay. The tide was turning. It was good that my husband and I had done our part to rescue the drowning, but greater powers than mine were in control.

I woke with a luminous sense of peace. It has been work to keep that feeling about me every day since the campaign, but I am grateful for the blessing of a dream, the prospect of the tide turning, and for loving powers much greater than my own.

JOANNA BROOKS
San Diego, California

LOYAL TO BOTH

I HAVE A BROTHER I DEARLY LOVE WHO WAS A practicing homosexual. He was honorably discharged from the Navy in the late 1960s because of his attractions. He contracted AIDS from one of his partners and passed away from the disease in 1982. His was one of the first 500 AIDS-related deaths in the United States.

He told us that he felt he was a woman born into a man’s body. He had attempted to “cure” himself by going to “houses of ill repute” but found himself completely turned off by the women there (“disgusted” was his word). One day I blurted out an insensitive joke in the house. At the punch line, I suddenly became aware that my brother was nearby and had heard it. I know it was painful for him to witness my insensitive, juvenile actions. To this day, I am pained at the thought that I might have hurt his feelings.

Because of my guilt, perhaps, and my love for my brother, I have been particularly interested in issues of Latter-day Saints struggling with same-sex attraction. I have been invited by two stake presidents to serve in an advisory/specialist capacity at the stake level. I have worked with dozens of individuals who struggle with homosexual tendencies and behavior, and with the families who love them. I have witnessed the overwhelming feelings homosexual Saints experience of being ostracized, not just by society, but often by family, church, and even God. From time to time, I try to imagine what I would do if I were told that my feelings towards my wife were a perversion and that I could not act on them. My heart aches for these people.

My compassion, combined with my experiences, leads me to overwhelmingly want to give those with same-sex attraction what I enjoy. I want them to feel accepted by society, to enjoy
the fulfillment of affections, and to have stable, meaningful relationships. While in this condition of compassion, I was asked by my living prophet to take a position on the topic of marriage as recognized by society. Not only was I asked to take a position, but I was asked to give my time, talent, and resources to support it.

On the surface, that position seemed to conflict with my heartfelt desires for people who live with same-sex attraction. After all, would not a committed married relationship afford them stable relationships, the fulfillment of affections, and societal acceptance? Of course it would. But it is not that simple.

As a believing Latter-day Saint, I accept the eternal nature of families. I recognize that priesthood ordinances in the temple seal relationships such that they extend into the eternities and allow flawed and sinful humans the opportunity, through the Atonement, to become exalted. I recognize that the sole sum of our existence, and the purpose of this life, is to become like Heavenly Father and be part of the eternal family. As such, I realize that whatever serves as a substitute for the full commitment of the temple is damaging to our eternal welfare.

Consider some of the things that substitute for the eternal. Premarital sex, for example, gives individuals a semblance of fulfillment, but it is fleeting and does not lead to eternal joy. It feels good and fulfills a longing but is not acceptable to our Heavenly Father. What is worse, it impresses upon the mind, heart, and soul a distraction from the loyalty that intimacy within a chaste relationship affords. It is like candy as a substitute for fruits and vegetables. You can consume it and enjoy it, but it likewise produces temporary benefits that may actually harm you in the long run.

By allowing SSA individuals to “opt out” of the eternal by condoning marriage among themselves, aren’t we simultaneously giving them the option to forego eternal blessings that are much more desirable? When I place boundaries on my children’s behavior, am I doing it because I hate them or because I love them, wanting them to live a life that will bring more than temporary fulfillment? In the same way, when President Monson looked at the eternal, foundational principle of exaltation, a sealed marriage, and concluded that it is better to forego the semblance of the eternal, is he doing it out of hate or love?

As I considered these thoughts in light of my compassion for SSA individuals, it was not difficult for me to solidify my loyalty to the eternal principle. This loyalty is not because my compassion is any less, but because it is so very real. I love these people, and giving them a semblance of the good is actually to rob them of it. Rather, I would encourage relationships that can lead towards exaltation.

I ache inside for those who live with SSA. They are some of the best, most noble souls I know. They are often compassionate beyond others and are deserving of the very best. For me, a “substitute” solution of calling same-sex relationships a marriage does not give them the best. Rather, it invites them to step away from the best Heavenly Father can offer his children. Thus, it is because I love my SSA brothers and sisters that I supported Proposition 8.

I realize that this alone does not provide much consolation for those whose affections make opposite sex unions desirous, and I do not claim to fully understand the how’s and why’s of same sex attractions. It is sufficient for me to appreciate that those who experience them did not necessarily “choose” to have those feelings. As such, my heart goes out to them. I do believe, however, that the best thing I can do for the eternal happiness of all of my Father’s children is to encourage those committed bonds that can be sealed through eternity. While I also have a great sense for other reasons why society should uphold the position of Proposition 8 beyond religious justifications, what I share here are my religious convictions, my moral convictions, and my spiritual convictions.

In the end, the Church will be judged by God, not by society. We are not friends of the world, although we love those in it. We are loyal to our Father, and we subject ourselves to the leadership of his prophet. I know for a fact that Thomas Monson has a wealthy heart when it comes to others, and I am confident that his motives were as mine when he asked members to support Proposition 8.

I was embarrassed when I told that joke at the expense of my brother, but I am not embarrassed to have supported Proposition 8. In the perspective of eternity, I believe my actions will be viewed as loyal to a loving God and to his children’s salvation.

JOHN LYNCH
Campbell, California

A LETTER TO MYSELF

An earlier version of this essay was posted on FORGIVENESSFOR8.BLOGSPOT.COM.

DEAR SELF I'VE KNOWN YOU FOR A VERY LONG time. You are smart, funny, an extremely faithful member of the Church, and gay.

I know that it was painful for you to go to church every week and hear the derogatory comments made by not-so-few people in your ward. The majority didn’t know that their hurtful comments about gays were affecting you personally. I know that it was even more painful for you to hear those comments from people you have come out to and whom you assumed would be more tactful about their support for Prop 8.

I know that you quit going to church a few weeks ago because you couldn’t stand to hear the defamation of your gay peers during discourses over the pulpit or in Sunday School classrooms. I know that it’s going to be difficult to really convince yourself to go back. But I urge you to do so. Remember that the gospel is about your relationship with Jesus Christ and not about your relationship with a group of people.

Self, the core doctrines of the gospel are true. The core culture of the Church is not doctrine. Just as segregation used to be preached over the pulpit and is now a faded memory, I sincerely hope that this issue follows suit. Be strong and know that you are loved.

YOUR FRIEND,
Words of Wisdom

FOLGERS AND THE SACRAMENT CUP

I was nine years old when I became a hardened sinner. Grandpa wanted to teach me to fly fish, so we planned a weekend trip—just the two of us. I loved him, of course, but this particular grandparent was more intimidating than the meanest old-lady-substitute-Primary-teacher.

We rode up in Grandpa's ancient diesel VW Vanagon—a vehicle never known for its stealth. Add the fact that, due to a childhood illness, Grandpa was deaf in his right ear, and it becomes clear why all our conversations sounded like shouting matches. But though these barriers to communication were high, they did not stop Grandpa from hollering a few jokes at me as we puttered north from Salt Lake. Jokes I would never repeat to my mother.

“What was the last thing to go through that bug’s brain?” he barked, pointing at a particularly large red-green splotch on his windshield.

“I don’t know,” I shouted. “What?”

“His anus.”

We got to the fishing hole before dark, time enough to pull in a few rainbows. Gramps did not have a pair of waders small enough for me. So I got to “Man up, kid.” Even in mid-summer, the water was icy and numbed my skinny legs quickly. Grandpa had attached a billy club to his waders. He used it to crush the fish’s head as he pulled it out of the water. As for billy-clubless me, I was just supposed to break the fish’s back with my bare hands.

Fishing was rapidly losing its allure.

Finally, the sun sank below the horizon, and I gratefully followed Grandpa to the van, shivering all the way. We drove to a parking lot, warmed up a nice dinner of pork and beans, and retired for the night. I knew that a full day of fishing awaited us tomorrow. A day full of fire and brimstone, damnation and hellfire, because God had me in his scope and was about to pull the trigger.

I woke as Gramps fried up some of the previous night’s catch. I still have no concept of his actual skill at cooking trout—I’ve never been able to bring myself to try trout again. I picked at my fish for some time while he worked at the stove, fiddling with a strange, tall pot with a transparent bubble on top. The clear bubble flashed brown occasionally. After a few minutes, Gramps finally poured me a mug of whatever it was. Pushing the mug across the breakfast table, he mumbled, “And here’s some sugar, if you want it.”

I was nine. Of course I wanted sugar! I wanted even more after I tried Grandpa’s new drink. Could he make nothing that tasted decent? A liberal dousing of sugar was the only thing that made the drink passable. I stopped pretending to eat the fish and nursed this new breakfast drink instead. I soon realized, however, that I had scrimped on the sugar. So I added more after every few sips and quickly found the sugar was not helping anymore. The drink became cold.

There I sat, longing for the pork and beans of the night before, picking at a mauled trout fillet, playing with a half cup of brown swill swimming over a bed of undissolved sugar, when Grandpa’s harsh voice scolded me:

“What, you’re gunna be a damn Mormon brat and not
drink your coffee, either?"

Suddenly the reality of Grandpa’s bitter brown liquid became horribly clear. I sat dumbstruck, my mouth suddenly glued shut. A flood of Primary lessons came rushing back to me. “The Lord has given us these bodies. They are holy temples. And cursed is he who defiles a temple of the Lord,” I could hear Sister X declaring. “How would you feel if someone spray-painted graffiti all over the Salt Lake Temple? Well, that’s how Heavenly Father feels when we don’t respect our bodies!”

And here I was pouring filth straight into my temple!

My mind was racing. “Coffee! How could you be so blind, Bryce? Maybe you wanted to be blind. You wanted to be led away in sin. You wanted to walk close to the edge. Well, you’ve done it now. You’ve walked up to the edge and jumped right off. I sure hope hell is nice this time of year. Hello, Brother Lucifer, long time no see.”

Plainly, I had become one of the vilest of sinners. However, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that my fallen, sinful, horrifying state should be kept from my family, especially my parents. The first few years of my deception turned out to be easier than I had feared. I wasn’t due for my next bishop’s interview until I was 12; and not having the priesthood meant no monthly PPIs investigating my strict adherence to the Word of Wisdom.

THE SACRAMENT, HOWEVER, was a challenge. My education in this area had been quite complete. You were not supposed to partake of the Sacrament if you were not worthy, unless you wanted to ensure your own damnation, of course. Woe unto him who eateth unworthily and whatnot. I knew that I had already bought my ticket to the underworld, but I didn’t need any more flight insurance.

So I developed a strategy to hide my shameful status as a sacrament non-partaker. When the bread was passed to me, I would pinch it between thumb and forefinger, bring it toward my mouth, and deftly palm the piece of bread. I could then slip it inconspicuously into a pocket while a bit of artful misdirection on my part—pretending to chew and swallow—completed the illusion. I was a David Copperfield in training. I could make anything disappear. Until the next tray arrived.

Water. It was just an ounce or so, but it was a liquid ounce. I could not simply palm and pocket this. Nor could I merely pass the tray untouched. The whole ward would obviously see that. Neither could I just press the cup to my lips, as Pops would surely notice. I had no choice but to allow the water to proceed down my throat, only then could I evade detection as the whitened sepulcher that I had become. But once in my mouth, the water could not be allowed to proceed down my throat, lest it nourish the seed of damnation inside me.

I was a skinny, limber child who could easily double over on the pew. It seems only obvious that I would assume this reverent, contemplative pose after taking the water. Letting the water trickle out from my mouth onto my knee thus became child’s play. My father, who could detect whether or not water had been sipped from the small paper cup, would never notice the four-inch wet spot on my knee. Or, if all else failed, I could wait until the sacrament was over, go out into the foyer, run the drinking fountain, and place my lips into the stream. Only then would I allow the damning water to dribble out of my mouth and down the drain.

This continued for three years.

As I neared my twelfth birthday, I realized what would soon bring my house of cards crashing down around me: the required interview with the bishop prior to my ordination to the priesthood. I had the Articles of Faith down pat, but I had no idea what questions the bishop would ask me nor what the consequences would be for failing to answer one correctly.

Public humiliation? Denial of the priesthood? I didn’t know, but my conscience was not completely seared by my wicked past. I resolved that I would not tell a lie to the bishop. I knew I was already in deep enough.

The bulk of the interview passed without note—my worries were for naught—until that last question. The one designed to catch sinners like me.

Yes, there were things in my life that would keep me from receiving the Priesthood.

Lower lip quivering, my mouth opened. And though the powers of hell conspired against me, making the walls close in around me, my throat dry up, and my stomach clench, I confessed.

I can still hear the bishop laughing.

BRYCE KIRTON PETERSEN
Columbus, Ohio

Blogwatch

CONFESSIONS OF A SHOPPING MALL SANTA

An earlier version of this essay was posted 12 November 2006 on SUNSTONEBLOG.COM.

CHRISTMAS SEASON, 1989. I WAS A FRESHMAN AT the University of Utah, my first year away from home. Like any college student, I was looking for extra holiday cash, and the Help Wanted ad for a shopping mall Santa seemed like just the thing.

Despite my 18-year-oldness, the manager was desperate to fill the big chair, so I walked out of my short interview with a prosthetic belly, a red suit, a wig, and some bells.

Christmas had lost its luster a decade before, the day I had gone searching for my swimming mask and snorkel in our travel trailer. It turned out that my parents had thought the travel trailer was an ideal hiding place for Santa’s loot. It had been until their young son decided that he needed a mask and snorkel in the dead of winter.

I spent several years playing along, afraid to reveal that I knew the big secret, afraid that the loot would vanish.

Life as an 18-year-old Santa wasn’t very glamorous. I would lug a large suitcase to the mall and make my way upstairs, beyond the food court, into an access hallway, and finally to my

In this little room, I would transform into a fat, jolly elf. I’d put on my belly, don my red velvet suit, deftly apply the makeup to add decades to my face, and top it off with the beard, wig, and hat.

I was Santa. On the outside anyway.

On the inside, I was recoiling from the ever-lengthening holiday season, the Christmas music beginning on Halloween, the in-store decorations getting dusty even before Thanksgiving, all presided over by the retail juggernaut. I wanted the magic of Christmas. I looked for it. But it had been elusive, making me weary and jaded.

I’d wait until I heard the sound of Santa #1’s bells coming down the hall. We’d exchange pleasantries, I’d wait a few minutes, and then, trying not to sweat, jog to the door and throw it open, shouting “Ho Ho Ho!”

Trotting is best, the manager had told me. It shakes the bells in a rhythmic fashion, it makes you look jolly, and it allows the youngsters to keep up. So, I trotted down the stairs, trotted into Santa’s village, and trotted to Santa’s throne.

It took a bit of politicking to talk as Santa to children. I saw their hope, their excitement, their wonder—and I wanted to keep that, not destroy it. But at the same time, I couldn’t promise anything, especially when I saw anxious parents watching me, silently calculating the damage in their heads. A simple “Santa will do his very best, and you have a Merry Christmas” was usually best for everyone involved.

After a while, I really got into this Santa thing. Even though I didn’t feel the Christmas magic myself, I seemed to have a knack for spreading it around. So I decided to use my Santa costume and visit friends from my hometown. A few days before Christmas, I started attending their holiday parties as the fat man, spreading that Santa-ness around. I loved it.

One night I was driving along a rural road on my way to another party. I saw a flash in my headlights and hit the brakes. But a sickening thump told me I had been too slow.

I stopped and checked my rear view mirror. A deer’s still bleeding body was crumpled in the middle of the road. I couldn’t just leave it; another car was bound to be along soon. So I turned around and illuminated the scene with my headlights. Then I got out of the car, grateful for the warmth of my Santa suit, and began pulling the deer to the side of the road.

At that very moment, a van passed by. Slowly. Mom and Dad stared at me from the front seats; several children’s faces were plastered to the window. They looked as if they’d just witnessed a murder.

Donner. Dead. The big man trying to hide the evidence. Great job, Santa.

The little girl on my lap was eight, maybe nine, and dressed in the finest winter apparel. She arrived with a mom to match. They had probably arrived in a gold-trimmed Lexus. I braced myself for a long list of toys and clothes and games.
But she was polite, she was tentative, and when the moment came, this young girl looked directly into my eyes and, with unquestionable and absolute sincerity, said simply, "I want the kids who don’t get Christmas to have a Christmas this year."

I wasn't prepared. I was speechless, choked up, stunned. What would you say? She believed in Santa. More than any other kid I had met. I could see it in her eyes. Her hopes and wishes were genuine and heartfelt. Santa could do this; he'd deliver. This was Christmas!

LAST YEAR MY older kids wanted electric scooters. Being well-trained consumers, my wife and I obliged. I ordered my daughter a really cute, mini-Vespa-looking thing. Pink. UPS delivered it to the front door. Except it arrived during Christmas vacation, and the box had a big picture of the scooter prominently displayed on the outside.

My daughter signed for it. Fairytale imploded.

I think I handled the whole thing well. Sure, there were trauma and tears, but after a good long talk, Santa had hired a new, world-wise little elf to help out on Christmas Eve.

But it's one thing to have your hopes dashed by a UPS driver at the door with a scooter. It is quite another to wake up and realize that Santa hadn't come through, yet again, for all those kids who don't have a Christmas.

I often think back to that earnest little girl. I wonder about her. She gave a young shopping-mall Santa a gift, but where is she now? Likely a young mother, with her own toddlers in tow, trying to find the spirit of the season she embodied so long ago.

Perhaps it's best that I don't know her; perhaps it's best that she lives on as a memory. But I still look for her, because her memory causes this Santa to be a little more reflective, a little more aware of the people around him. A little more willing to keep being Santa. Even after the costume comes off.

RORY SWENSEN
Stansbury Park, Utah

Around the World

THE KOLOB ORDER

When Mormonism Meets
Masonry in France

EVEN THOUGH THE FIRST LDS BAPTISMS IN Voltaire's country occurred in the 1850s,1 Mormonism never established much of a foothold in France. Today there are only around 35,000 French Latter-day Saints. Mormonism's lack of success can be largely explained by the fact that since the 1789 Revolution, France has been a secular country.2 Even though they believe in spirituality, most people don't feel the need to belong to any particular religious institution.3 Culturally, however, France is still largely Roman Catholic. So even though most people don't attend Mass regu-
Adama says he was inspired to write about the Kolob Order on a piece of paper.10 This mystical experience echoes George Fox’s vision of souls coming to Christ on England’s Pendle Hill, in 1652.11

So far, the Kolob Order has held four public meetings in Paris.12 The meetings were informal, being called “diner-débat.” After a lecture and discussion (“débat”), participants shared a meal (“diner”). All the “diner-débats” took place in a Parisian restaurant.13

PHILOSOPHY OF THE KOLOB ORDER

THE KOLOB ORDER calls itself a symbolist and ritualist association with Mormon and Masonic inspirations. Adama specifies that it is not a religious organization. Some members are Mormons and Freemasons; some are only Masons or only LDS; others are neither. The Kolob Order has no official ties with either the LDS Church or any Masonic organization.14

Because of the diversity of its members, the Order doesn’t focus exclusively on Mormon-Masonic history, even though that remains its primary object of research. As recorded on its Internet forum and blog, some members have interests in various occult movements such as Rosicrucianism and Martinism, and others in different historic subjects such as the Roman Empire.15 Some members study astronomy, and a few even study UFOs.16

The plurality of esoteric subjects the Kolob Order studies is visible through its Internet presence and its meetings. For example, on 24 January 2007, members of the Kolob Order listened to Yves-Marie Kamani, a member of B’Nai Brith and author of the novel, Le Onzième Templier (The 11th Knight Templar).17 Kamani argued during the meeting that the Jewish community of Palestine taught Kabala to the Knights Templar.18 On 27 April 2007, Adama lectured on pyramids located in Egypt, Mexico, and Bosnia. Adama argued that the Hill Cumorah is not a natural hill but a man-made pyramid.19 On 31 May 2007, Alain Boudier, a Ufologist, presented a history of the UFO phenomenon in France.20

The Order has also studied the symbolism of the Book of Abraham, interpreting each character of the book as a moral quality. Adama understands Abraham to be a symbol of obedience.21 The Order has also compared the pentacle found on the Nauvoo Temple to the stars found on 18th-century Masonic aprons. The Kolob Order argues that the stars may symbolize Venus.22

The Kolob Order performs a small ritual at the beginning of its meetings. In silence, and in the presence of any other patrons in the restaurant, a member of the Order opens to the Third chapter of the Book of Abraham and then lights a candle to symbolize light and knowledge. Next to the Book of Abraham is a brick on which is carved “Nauvoo,” as a symbol of Freemasonry and Mormonism in the Illinois city. Members of the Order dress in suits, white shirts, neckties, and long, green Masonic collars. The rituals of the Kolob Order are simple now as they only take place during informal “diner-débats.” Adama is writing more elaborate rituals for future formal meetings.23

NOTES

5. Daniel Beresniak, La franc-maçonnerie en 33 questions (Paris: Editions

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FAUX FRIBERG FURY

THE BATTLE AROUND PROPOSITION 8 WAS fought in every conceivable arena of public opinion: editorials, TV, lawn signs, YouTube. The battle even raged across a most unlikely terrain: Arnold Friberg’s landscapes of the Book of Mormon.

Shortly before Californians went to the polls, two of Friberg’s classic paintings were appropriated by anonymous Photoshop enthusiasts, who doctored the images to enlist Book of Mormon heroes either for or against the controversial proposition to amend California’s state constitution to ban same-sex marriage. The doctored images circulated widely through the Mormon blogosphere.

In one illustration, Samuel the Lamanite displays a “Yes on 8” sign from atop the walls of Zarahemla while enraged spectators—liberal San Franciscans, no doubt—try futilely to shoot him down with arrows. In the second image, supporting the opposing view, Captain Moroni’s standard of liberty has been refashioned as the “Standard of Equality.” The banner’s two upper lines, written in whimsical English characters, read, “Vote No Prop Eight.”


SMOKE SIGNALS FOR SOJOURNERS

And the Lord will create upon every dwelling-place of mount Zion, and upon her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for upon all the glory of Zion shall be a defence.

— 2 NEPHI 14:5 (after ISAIAH 4:5)

Smoke often gets a bad rap in the scriptures. For example, smoke denotes the punishment of the wicked, particularly by fire and brimstone. Brimstone, of course, is the archaic word for sulfur, one of the few minerals which burns with an acrid smoke.

But smoke and the Almighty once kept close company in the form of a signal or sign. In the scripture cited above, Isaiah reminded the Israelites that during their sojourn in the wilderness they had been guided by a pillar of fire at night and a pillar of cloud (or smoke, in the God's Word translation) during the day (Exodus 13: 21–22). It is easy to think of a fire or light to guide us; it is a little farther from our experience to think that way of a pillar of cloud or smoke.

After all, in Mormonism, smoke has few, if any, positive associations. Smoke reminds us of the cigarettes of wayward teenagers or the burning hulk of the Nauvoo Temple.

But smoke still plays an important role in some religious ceremonies. The Vatican, for example, announces the results of the ballots when electing a new Pope by using black smoke to indicate a failed ballot and white smoke for a successful one. The Russian Orthodox Church burns incense in censers as a regular part of worship. And the smoke of incense is important to Eastern religions as well.

According to John the Revelator, smoke in Isaiah's scripture was an outward manifestation of Israel's inward hope that as the smoke of the offering rose to heaven so would their prayers (Revelations 8:4).

Recently I reread Homer's Odyssey, and found in Odysseus someone not so different from me. He is constantly traveling away from home, tied up in seemingly endless business affairs while all the time his greatest desire is only to return home. However, unlike Odysseus, I don't worry that my wife will have to endure useless suitors in the form of home teachers while I am away.

Parts of the Odyssey ring especially true for me, like his descriptions of the “rosy-fingered dawn” and the “wine-dark sea.” Since I have been to Greece and seen the sun's rays break over the Aegean's royal blue waves, I would have to say that Homer is dead on, even two or three thousand years later.

Another striking passage is Odysseus' captivity on an island where there is no hope of escape. Homer describes his longing to be home in this way: “Odysseus, who would give anything for the mere sight of the smoke rising up from his own land, can only yearn for death.”

This passage may strike the contemporary reader as odd. Smoke rising up from one's own land? What happened, did the house catch on fire? No. Back in Homer's day, the sighting of smoke from far at sea was a positive sign. It gave the bedraggled sailor hope that someone was cooking a meal for the family, warming the home in anticipation of his return. It connoted the conclusion of a long journey and the pleasant expectation of reunion with loved ones.

When I return home from a business trip in winter, I drive over the top of the Salt Pass at the southern end of Star Valley, and long before the valley's snow-covered vistas come into sight the first glimpse of home that I see is the haze draped across the sky from wood-burning stoves and fireplaces. When I see those wisps of smoke, I know that home is near.

Perhaps it is not out of place to hope in the holiday season that someone in heaven is keeping the hearth warm for you, no matter how long you are delayed. And what if your first glimpse of that heavenly home is not light but instead the smoke rising from those fireplaces as you come across the horizon.

MICHAEL VINSON
Star Valley, Wyoming

Scripture Notes

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MICHAEL VINSON
Star Valley, Wyoming
NEWS FROM THE 3RD WARD

By Bishop Higgins
(Originally posted on BISHOPHIGGINS.BLOGSPOT.COM, REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

Baby Blessing

LAST SUNDAY, JUSTIN GORBLE BLESSED HIS newest daughter, Cassie. Justin informed me that he forgot to mention a few things in the blessing. And while they won’t “count” now, he did want me to mention some of the things he wishes he had remembered to say.

“You come from a long and proud line of Gorbles. Never forget that you are a Gorble. While the name may be a little silly and sort of sounds like an overweight person with a double chin, you should still be proud of your heritage and just be glad your last name isn't Siemens.

“And Cassie, we bless you to never use swear words until you’re at least 21, and then only if you’re in a play about coal miners. We bless you to be extra kind to Chinese people. They seem to hardly ever get a break. We bless you to not marry anyone named Butch. That name alone should tell you all you need to know.

“We bless you to be healthy, and if you do get a fissure in an unmentionable place, it won’t be until you are at least 93 years old. We bless you to not get vanity license plates.

“We bless you to be able to keep from bursting into laughter whenever you meet people who say they went to LDS Business College. We bless you to be a good speller.

“We bless you that, if during your lifetime, someone figures out a way for humans to become invisible, you will use this power for good, never for evil. Satan will try to tempt you to become invisible and go to movies without paying for them. Resist this temptation.

“We bless you to avoid getting an email address that sounds like you’re a stripper. We bless you to be kind to animals, but never try to elect one to political office.

“We bless you with beautiful singing voice. Learn well the songs of Karen Carpenter. These songs will bless the lives of so many people at the old folks home if you can just get over the smell and humble yourself to go perform there.”

Church Court: The Musical

CHARLIE TIBBLE, THE ward gay, is working on a new musical called Church Court: The Musical. It’s a classic tale of love and betrayal and ultimately, redemption, and even more ultimately, delicate prancing (a recurring theme in all of Charlie’s work). He expects to have the play finished in 2014, so stay tuned for that one.

General Authorityship 101

STARTING THIS SPRING, BYU will teach a class on how to be a general authority. The class not only prepares participants to become general authorities, but it will also help them learn lots more scriptures, including a few about faith and some about prayer.

Class topics will include:

• Which shades of dark blue are appropriate for a suit
• How to lovingly scorn sinners
• Voice intonation
• Avoiding loud laughter
• Avoiding fun
• How to read from a tele-prompter
• Food storage myths
• The two occasions when it’s OK to swear.
• Celebrities we wish had never been Mormon to begin with
• White hair, gray hair, no hair—it’s all good.
• The real reason blacks couldn’t hold the priesthood for a while
• Underground tunnel navigation review
• Where to find stories of kids falling down wells or stories about people picking up talking snakes
• Most hilarious excommunications
• Be sure to marry someone better than you, but who talks to adults like they’re talking to a kindergarten class
• Doctors who will discreetly remove tattoos (no one’s perfect)
A FEW YEARS AGO I SAT IN A SEMINAR ON THE American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), listening to a discussion on Whitehead’s conception of God.

With some surprise, I recognized the physical sensations I associate with feeling the Spirit: a quickened heartbeat and a “burning” in the chest combined with sudden mental clarity. I debated internally whether I should tell my colleagues about what was going through my mind and heart. Then, totally out of character, I piped up and practically bore my testimony right there in PHIL 717. I’m sure no one in that room really cared—if anything, it probably sealed my social status as Suspect—but that didn’t matter; I felt moved to speak my truth and marveled afterwards that I did, quavering voice and all. Though many particulars of similar afternoons have now faded into shadow,1 this moment stays with me, one instant of felt religious experience.

What was it that moved me so deeply about Whitehead’s theories? A 1977 short film, Powers of Ten, explores the microscopic and cosmic dimensions of the universe by zooming in and out from a simple picnic scene by powers of 10. I’m going to follow suit by zooming out from this microcosmic moment to put it in the context of Whitehead’s thought.

EVER SINCE PLATO, everything in the universe—including God—had been conceived in terms of Being. In other words, thinkers have defined the world according to what exists. Generally, what counts as existing or Being is that which is stable, static, and often tangible. Thus, metaphysical systems that emphasize Being are dominated by materialism or the “stuff” of the universe.

Whitehead turned the entirety of Platonic metaphysics on its head by rejecting Being as the king of the universe. In its place, he enthroned Becoming. What exists for Whitehead is not static things but fluid process. “How an actual entity becomes constitutes what that actual entity is,” says Whitehead, “so that the two descriptions of an actual entity are not independent. Its ‘being’ is constituted by its ‘becoming.’ This is the principle of process”2 (emphasis Whitehead’s). Becoming is not only the main characteristic of the world as we experience it, but the fundamental nature of the entire universe, including God. The universe is in process; reality is process. Whitehead thus precipitates a paradigm shift in metaphysics from the systems dominated by materialism and dualism to an organic metaphysics of process emphasizing creative evolution, holistic interdependence, emergence, and aesthetic quality.

For example: one day, while in a meditative mood, I considered my living room. I saw a verse my husband had illuminated on one wall, a feminist sculpture from a friend on a bookcase, a poem on the facing wall composed by another friend, books from university courses on shelves, and drawings of Brahms from my piano teacher. As I contemplated them, I got the vision of myself as a chalk-covered billiard ball bouncing around in time and space, subtly changing hues as I knocked into other differently colored billiard balls. In other words, my encounters with people, places, and ideas create in me a unique combination of experiences that define who I am—or better put, who I am becoming.3

The billiard ball vision is Whiteheadian in spirit; I am who I am because of the specific place I occupy in a vast field of relations. In more technical terms, I am a unique, dynamic, evolving field of relations exhibiting certain patterns and felt qualities.

The billiard ball analogy is one way to envision dynamic re-
lutions. There is a Buddhist metaphor that also illustrates interrelatedness. The Vedic god Indra is said to have a jeweled net hanging over his palace. Each node or connection on the net contains a jewel that reflects all the other jewels on the net, symbolizing interpenetration and the intimate connection of all things.

Combine these two metaphors, and you’ll get an idea of what the universe looks like to Whitehead: an infinite field of relations interacting in constant, creative flux. The universe is a complex, dynamic process; events come together out of disparate “multiplicity” to form a new entity—and then another and another, ad infinitum. And the progression never ends.

“Neither God, nor the Word, reaches static completion. Both are in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty.”

In this whole process, God supplies the fundamental value pattern for creative synthesis. Or, in Whitehead’s words, “the ultimate role of God in the universe is creative purpose or value in the temporal world.” It should also be noted that the entities of creative synthesis (i.e., us) have absolute free will. In other words, God does not control the outcome of the creative process; he does interact with the world, but each entity self-determines the outcome. Each entity is influenced by a myriad of relations (indeed, everything either positively or negatively) but is itself finally responsible for how those background influences are realized in the ongoing process of creative self-causation.

According to my professor in PHIL 717, Whitehead’s conception of God not as “I Am” but as “I Am Becoming” is what makes Whitehead’s God so radical. This idea that God changes deeply challenges the attributes ingrained in monotheistic religious concepts of God: omniscience, omnipotence, immutability, absolutism, eminence, transcendence, impassibility, as well as Aristotle’s ideas of God as efficient cause and unmoved mover.

NOW LET’S ZOOM out some more to include the background I brought to this discussion. One of the reasons religious feeling pervaded me at that moment in my philosophy seminar was because of the ideas I interacted with my Mormon background, like two intersecting waves amplifying resonance. Mormon doctrine comes closer to process theology than any other Christian denomination that I know of because of its espousal of eternal progression.

Mormons make the startling claim that “as man now is, God once was, as God now is, man may be.” We are familiar with this quotation from Lorenzo Snow, but Joseph Smith and other prophets preached the principle as well. Joseph Smith taught about eternal progression in the King Follett Discourse. In that address he states, “[God] once was a man like one of us and ... God Himself, the Father of us all, once dwelled upon an earth the same as Jesus Christ himself did in the flesh and like us.” Not only was God once a man, but human beings can progress to become Gods: “You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods in order to save yourselves and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done—by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection of the dead, from exaltation to exaltation—till you are able to sit in everlasting burnings and everlasting power and glory as those who have gone before, sit enthroned.” Joseph Fielding Smith said that this doctrine has “been known to the prophets of all the ages and President Snow wrote an excellent summary of it.”

The claim that God was once a man presupposes a process for God, otherwise God would still be human. But not only did God progress, prophets have stated that God still progresses. Consider this quote from President Brigham Young: “Some men seem as if they could learn so much and no more. They appear to be bounded in their capacity for acquiring knowledge, as Brother Orson has, in theory, bounded the capacity of God. According to his theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power, but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his faithful.” The late apostle Hugh B. Brown has stated, “The Latter-day Saint concept of eternal progression includes eternal development, eternal increase of knowledge, power, intelligence, awareness, and all the characteristics and capacities that make for Godhood.”

Some scholars have noted that the doctrine of eternal progression has been somewhat controversial within the Church. Bruce R. McConkie, for example, denies any possibility of change for God, and some apostles have emphasized more absolutist attributes of God. However, scholar Eugene England points out that the early prophets of the Church were clear in this doctrine. Indeed he says that “Brigham Young felt that the idea of eternal progression was what he called the mainspring of all action and acted strongly to assure that the central concepts he had learned from Joseph concerning progression in both humans and a finite God must be kept alive in the Mormon heritage, as well as the proper emphasis on God’s power and glory.” England describes a dialectic in popular Mormon theology between those who prefer an “absolute, sovereign, justice-oriented God” and those who prefer “the adventuresomeness of an open, progressive universe” but infinitely loving God working with us eternal moral agents. However, whether or not the doctrine of eternal progression is in ascendancy or decline at the moment in Mormon culture is immaterial for my purposes; Mormonism, at least in its inception, holds the seeds of radicalism also seen in process theology.

Whitehead emphasized God’s loving nature, an attribute many religions champion but often abstractly. In mainstream Christianity, God is described as unchanging, which seems to preclude him from experiencing emotions. But Whitehead’s God cares for and interacts with the world. “God is the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands.” God “dwells upon the tender elements in the world ... slowly and in quietness operat[ing] by love.” “He is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness.” Thus Whitehead’s universe is an open-ended, never-ending progression of creation, with God overseeing the process to maximize value, wasting nothing.

I wonder what Whitehead would think of the account in
the Book of Moses, in the Pearl of Great Price, when Enoch asks the Lord, “How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?” (7:29). God then describes his care for the world: his intimate knowledge and investment in his creations, his careful preparations for salvation, and man’s rejection of his counsel. God weeps because he is so intimately connected and concerned. When Enoch comprehends this, “his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook” (Moses 7:41). There are many scriptures that depict God’s investment in the world. For example, Jeffrey R. Holland refers to the allegory of the olive tree as “an indelible image of God’s engagement in our lives.” The late apostle Marvin J. Ashton even suggests that “love brings eternal progression.”

My encounters with people, places, and ideas create in me a unique combination of experiences that define who I am—or better put, who I am becoming.
NOW LET’S ZOOM out even further to include broader aspects of why these ideas resonate with me. I love Whitehead’s celebration of Creativity, the “category of the ultimate.”20 The idea that the nature of existence is fundamentally creative and in progressive motion is a beautiful one to me. And more than that, the universe is not mere progression, but beautiful progression, aesthetic cosmic harmony: As Dieter F. Uchtdorf recently said, “The desire to create is one of the deepest yearnings of the human soul . . . We each have an inherent wish to create something that did not exist before . . . Creation brings deep satisfaction and fulfillment.”21 Creativity exhilarates. It challenges, engrosses, and consumes. It is acting and being acted upon. It is the process of experimenting, producing something new, making novel connections and combinations. This vision of eternal creativity resonates with me. It uplifts me. It excites me. I find it hard to imagine a state of existence without this neverending change; static angelhood, even static Godhood, seems comparatively boring!

I also love the idea of myself as a being in process. What I am becoming—my potential and future possibilities—comes to the fore and overshadows the flaws that so dominate my being at the present. An emphasis on Being captures me as a product, how I am right now in all my imperfection; an emphasis on Becoming reveals me advancing in process. Seeing myself as a work in progress helps me consider others in such a light as well, making me more interested in who they are becoming, rather than getting stuck on who I have known them to be.

LET’S REVERSE DIRECTION now and zoom back in to the afternoon I sat in class awash in the Spirit. This microcosmic moment constituted a “throb of experience including the [whole] world within its scope.”22 Such an occasion, Whitehead states, “repeats in microcosm what the universe is in macrocosm.”23 That small moment of truth that broke in me like “life-giving light”24 is one jewel that mirrors the process of learning line upon line and precept upon precept forever. It was a discrete moment of spirit, heart, and mind synchronizing and amplifying one another. It reflects the eternal process of increasing in awareness, intelligence, and knowledge. Imagine another verse of “If You Could Hie to Heaven, O God. For a Prophet,” Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints/ Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1983).

ENCOUNTERING ANTELOPE

A herd of antelope looked up from a stony ridge, stood still in the sun, faces curious, crowned by delicate horns, tan and white bodies shivered in the heat.

After a long moment the greatest gave his gaze beyond road and dark pinons; the rest shifted stance and glanced toward him, then heads huddled, backed hooves over smooth rock, pretended to sniff, sample scrub, dry grasses at their feet.

Reluctant, I made a show of leaving, and all eight moved gently across the road heads back, horns black against the noon blue, barely remembered me in the wind.

—BETH PAULSON

NOTES


2. Ibid., 23.


13. Ibid., 76.

14. For further discussion of this dialectic, see also H. Olaiz, “Are We Still Gods in Embryo?” (2008 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, August 2008, SL08221).

15. Whitehead, Process and Reality, 351.

16. Ibid., 343.

17. Ibid., 346.


23. Ibid., 215.

24. “We Thank Thee, O God, For a Prophet,” Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints/ Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1983), 19.
For God did not make death and takes no pleasure in the destruction of any living thing; he created all things that they might have being.

WISDOM OF SOLOMON 1:13–14

Wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?

MOSES 7:37

There are many reasons why the heavens should weep in our day, and there are many reasons why the earth itself should weep. It is good that some are yet able to weep, for in a country far away that can truly be described as both god-forsaken and man-forsaken, black Arab refugees have no more tears. Their tears, along with their blood, have vanished into the desert sand as they have waited for us to respond to their plight. These are the people of Darfur. These are the forsaken and forgotten. Given the refusal of the world to come to their rescue, these indeed are the least of the earth.

Hannah Arendt’s famous depiction of the Nazi’s murder of six million Jews as “the banality of evil” seems appropriate to Darfur. Majid Yar explains that by “banality” Arendt meant that Adolph Eichmann, the chief architect of the Holocaust, saw the extermination of Jews not in human terms but as “indistinguishable from any other bureaucratically assigned and discharged responsibility.” Yar elaborates: “Arendt concluded that Eichmann was constitutively incapable of exercising the kind of judgement that would have made his victims’ suffering real or apparent for him. It was not the presence of hatred that enabled Eichmann to perpetrate the genocide, but the absence of the imaginative capacities that would have made the human and moral dimensions of his activities tangible for him.” Yar continues: “Eichmann failed to exercise his capacity of thinking, of having an internal dialogue with himself, which would have permitted self-awareness of the evil nature of his deeds. This amounted to a failure to use self-reflection as a basis for judgement, the faculty that would have required Eichmann to exercise his imagination so as to contemplate the nature of his deeds from the experiential standpoint of his victims.”

We, of course, recoil in horror that our fellow humans could be capable of such atrocities as the Holocaust. Yet, in regard to what has happened, what is happening, and what is going to happen in Darfur, we too manifest a failure of thought and imagination, a failure of head and heart, a failure of moral courage and, especially, a failure of love.

The genocide in Darfur is the first genocide of the twenty-first century. As of January 2008, it has resulted in between 200,000 and 400,000 deaths and 2,500,000 refugees. If the Rwandan genocide was quick and efficient (nearly a million people were butchered or beaten to death over a span of one hundred days), what is happening in Darfur is “a slow motion genocide,” one that unfolds daily before our eyes and ears—if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. The only thing about slow-motion genocide that could possibly said to be “good” is that it gives us time to act—if we will.

I believe that, because of our history, our theology, and our scriptures, Mormons should play an active role in ending the genocide in Darfur. We have our own near brush with genocide. A century and a half ago, Governor Boggs of Missouri sought to annihilate the Mormons when he issued his infamous extermination order, causing the Mormons to flee for their lives. Further persecutions, creating the trail of blood and tears we honor on Pioneer Day, should make us particularly
sensitive to the horrors of genocide. As we remember our ancestors being driven from their homes in bitter winter, as we think of the shallow graves punctuating their journey across the plains, as we retell the stories of the Martin and Willie handcart companies, and as we hold in our hearts the suffering, privation, and persecution of those early years of exile, these should give us an enlarged compassion for those who are suffering in Darfur.

Our awareness of the horrors of genocide should also be heightened by the massacre at Mountain Meadows a hundred and fifty years ago. What happened on that September 11 is inextricably connected to the extreme acts of destruction on September 11, 2001. Both were motivated by a religious fervor that compels some human beings to assume the role of destroying angels. What happened on the killing fields of southwestern Utah has left its stain on our spiritual history, on our claim to be a chosen people, and on our carefully managed public image. Such an event can remind us how near all of us may be to acting our part on the bestial landscape.3

G

ENOIDE IS SOMETIMES called a crime against humanity, but it is more than that—it is a grave sin against nature, a sin against ourselves and, most of all, a sin against divinity. Genocide is the ultimate expression of blasphemy since the perpetrators put themselves in the place of God, to be the executors of ultimate judgment. They seek to destroy the essential purpose of God’s creation and the object of His glory: to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of his children. Genocide is also a definitive act against Christ since it both increases the burden of his suffering and foreshortens the mortal probation of those striving to work out their salvation with fear and trembling.

Our understanding of the plan of salvation and our place in it, including our understanding of our roles as “saviors on Mount Zion”—which, I contend, refers to our participating in the redemption of the living as much as for the dead—give us a special responsibility to counter evil in the world, including the evil of genocide. If we are indeed the restored church of Jesus Christ, as we claim, then with that claim comes a higher stewardship. Eugene England wrote, “There are great wounds in the world that need healing.”4 And, he would have added, we are charged to be agents of that healing.

Does the Church itself have a moral responsibility to end the genocide? While I believe that it does, I am in no position to speak for it. Consistent with its general policy, the Church is electing not to get involved in the political issues surrounding the genocide in Darfur. When asked by the Bloggernacle Times whether the Church would support the Save Darfur Coalition, Church spokesman Tom Owen is reported to have said, “The Church seldom enters into, nor comments on political issues. However, the Church is standing ready to assist the people in Darfur with volumes of Humanitarian [Aid] when and if we are called to do so.”5 While one can understand the Church’s reluctance to get involved in what is clearly a complicated international conflict, it is important to note that the Church does get involved in complicated political issues when it sees them through what it considers a moral as opposed to a purely political lens. This has been the case with such issues as prohibition, right-to-work laws, the ERA, and various defense-of-marriage initiatives (including its 2008 support of an amendment to the California constitution).6 It is worth noting that in these instances the Church wasn’t simply “standing ready” to participate when invited but in each case took the initiative and waged assertive campaigns. In relation to the ERA and defense-of-marriage initiatives, the Church has framed its involvement as moral acts to preserve the family. One wants to ask, “What greater or more compelling moral issue can one imagine than genocide?” Preserving family values has meaning only if families themselves are preserved.

Although not actively working to end the genocide in Darfur, the Church has sent humanitarian aid to Sudanese refugees in Darfur and Chad. According to Nate Leishman, manager of the Church’s Humanitarian Response program, over the past several years the Church has channeled relief goods for refugees through such organizations as UNIFER and Islamic Relief Worldwide. Sadly, he reports, a recent shipment of fifteen containers of goods is being held up in port by the Sudanese government.7

W

HATEVER THE RESPONSE of the institutional Church, I believe that, as individual members, Mormon Christians are held to a different—even higher—moral standard. It is a standard that requires us to act on behalf of “the very least of these,” who, like us, are Christ’s brothers and sisters, those whom Mother Teresa called “Jesus

As we remember our ancestors being driven from their homes in bitter winter, as we think of the shallow graves punctuating their journey across the plains, these should give us an enlarged compassion for those who are suffering in Darfur.
in disguise.” Although Latter-day Saints live in what has been termed “an obedience culture,” which means we tend to respond more to authority and rely more on direction and instructions from our leaders than to act on our own inclinations and initiative, the Lord makes clear in the Doctrine and Covenants that we are to act as agents of good outside of and beyond official Church structure, policy, and pronouncements (D&C 58:26-29).9

This means that the Lord expects us to do his work in the world. One of the chief ways we can do this is by cultivating what I call a Christian imagination. Some part of our spiritual imaginations must touch, even if tangentially and momentarily, what it would be like to have loved ones killed by the Janjaweed militias, our village burned, and our way of life destroyed. What would it be like to be exiles in a foreign land without sufficient food, water, shelter, or safety? We can imagine what it is like to have sick children and no medicine or medical care and to bury our dead in a foreign land without ceremony. We can imagine what it is like to wait, sometimes for years, for the world to respond to our plight, wondering what could keep them from doing so. Most of all, if I understand the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, the Christian imagination compels us to imagine Christ himself on the barren, windblown deserts of Darfur; Christ in a lean-to shelter without food or water; Christ suffering from illness and no one to attend him, Christ holding a starving child in his arms, or Christ as that child himself.

I am aware that such imaginative touching of the lives of others can lead to what is sometimes called “compassion fatigue,” feeling emotionally overwhelmed or even paralyzed. Our imaginations are finite and our compassion limited, but that does not mean we cannot exercise them to capacity. I contend that we are much less likely to suffer from empathy or compassion overload than we are to suffer from a surfeit of their opposites: selfishness and indifference. It is our indifference, what the Greeks called “acciadis” (which can be translated as “spiritual weariness or distress of heart”),10 that may constitute our greatest sin. Paul warns us against becoming “weary in well doing” (Galatians 6:9).

While it is true that our hearts and minds can hold only so much suffering at any one time, genocide demands that our hearts open wider. As Nicholas Kristof says, “Genocide has always evoked a transcendent horror, and it has little to do with the numbers of victims. The Holocaust resonates not because six million Jews were killed but because a government picked people on the basis of their religious heritage and tried to exterminate them. What is horrifying about Anne Frank’s diary is not so much the death of a girl as the crime of a state.”11

I believe the situation in Darfur warrants one. According to Isaac C. Ferguson of the Church’s Humanitarian Services Department, “Special fasts are occasionally proclaimed by the First Presidency when urgent needs arise. Such was the case on May 15, 1845, when ‘enough was contributed to supply the wants of the poor until harvest’” (HC 7:411). In 1985, Church members observed two special fast days and donated $10,465,000 to hunger relief and community development projects in Africa, South America, and elsewhere.12 I believe that sponsoring such a fast for the victims of the genocide in Darfur would show moral leadership and genuine Christian care (while, incidentally, helping the Church’s image worldwide).

• Allow contributions to the Church’s Humanitarian General Fund to be designated specifically for Darfur. Church policy doesn’t allow contributors to specify the object of their donations, but the fact that it made an exception for the victims of the tsunami disaster in Indonesia in 2004–05 is precedent for doing the same for Darfur.13
• Using its vast organizational structure and communications network, the Church could marshal its human and financial resources to address the tragedy in Darfur, as it has in response to other major crises.14
• Encourage Church members to include victims of the Darfur genocide in their prayers.
• Have Church publications and websites include information about what individual members of the Church are doing to end the genocide or relieve suffering in Darfur.
• Encourage Church members to take the lead in organizing other churches, synagogues, and mosques to join in interfaith prayers, action strategies and fund-raising activities.

Specific additional actions members of the Church could take in regard to Darfur are detailed in Don Cheadle and John Prendergast’s Not Our Watch: The Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond.15

• Become Informed—Knowledge is Power.16
• Sow the Seeds—Raise Awareness.17
• Underwrite Change—Contribute and Raise Funds.18
• Write Letters—Save Lives and Change Lives.19
• Stop Funding the Genocide—Call for Divestment.
• Create Communities of Influence—Join an Organization.
• Keep Pushing and Pushing—Lobby the Government.

In addition, Church members could write to LDS Congressional representatives, most of whom do not have a favorable rating on Darfur.20

“Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?” asks Annie Dillard. “There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure...”
heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a
generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have
come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all
dead—as if innocence had ever been—and our children
busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready,
having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed,
yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and
grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and
involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been.
And there never will be.

NOTES
2. There is a significant difference of opinion as to how many have actually
been killed by sexual or starvation. Sam Dealey’s “An Atrocity That Needs
NGOs have inflated the statistics on Darfur. For example, Saverdaru.org sets
the figure at 400,000, but many experts place it closer to 200,000. Unfortunately,
there is no way to really know the exact number. Whatever it is, it is too large by
far.
3. See my “Lessons Gleaned from the Mountain Meadows Massacre,” Salt
site, as poster identified as “Deborah,” commenting on whether the Church
should be “deeply involved” in Darfur, writes, “Deeply involved? Not necessarily.
But this comparison lacks teeth. Genocide belongs on an entirely different plane
than any other ‘political issue.’ It is an unambiguous affront to humanity, the face
of evil. (I highly recommend reading Samantha Power’s “A Problem from Hell.”) I
don’t think the church needs to become “deeply involved”; but there should be no
ambiguity about our deep abhorrence [sic]. And a shrug to ‘thou shalt not kill’
doesn’t seem strong enough. Armenia, Nazi Germany, Cambodia, Rwanda,
Darfur—we (America, church members, the world) haven’t responded well.” 3
6. On the Bloggernacle Times website, “David” comments, “I find it a bit
strange that the LDS Church has no official statement on the matter [of the
Genocide in Darfur], however, when Gays or Feminists are seeking to exert their
Constitutional rights it’s time to rally the troops and get the opposition out. I think
the protection and sanctity of human life rises above all other issues that the
Church has felt compelled to speak out on and purposely try to thwart.” 3 May
October 2008, the Church’s aggressive involvement on behalf of Proposition 8,
an amendment to the California constitution declaring heterosexual marriage as the
sole mode of marriage, has resulted in Latter-day Saints raising the majority of
the more than $25,000,000 and contributing most of the volunteer labor in support
of the amendment.
Trends Have Materially Compromised the Nation’s Moral Leadership,” paper pre-
sented at the Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, 11 August 2007.
9. On the Bloggernacle Times website, “Brant” comments, “I hope for the day when
Church members will be so converted that they do not need for the Church to ex-
plainly inform them of every worthy cause. When Mormons are known not only
for being ‘so nice,’ but also for being anxiously engaged in good causes of all
Institutes of John Cassian/book_10_the_spirit_of_accidie.htm (accessed 3 December
2008).
2008.
13. Personally, I believe the Church’s policy, whatever its justification, prevents
some philanthropic contributions to the Humanitarian Fund. Several years ago
when my wife and I wanted to contribute funds to help the victims of the earth-
quake in Pakistan, we had to do it through another organization because the
Church would not let us specify whom we wanted our contributions to benefit.
14. According to Garry Flake, director of Church Emergency Response, “In
2005—dubbed the year of natural disasters by the World Health Organization—
the Church responded to emergencies in sixty-seven countries, distributing 1.7
million hygiene, school, and cleaning kits, 7.6 million pounds of food,
260,000 blankets, 1.3 million pounds of medical supplies and 2 million pounds
of clothing. (Sara Jane Weaver, “Unprecedented Year,” LDS Church News, 14 Jan
August 2007).
15. Don Cheadle and John Prendergast, Not on Our Watch: The Mission to End
Genocide in Darfur and Beyond (New York: Hyperion, 2007).
16. This means reading broadly and becoming fully informed about what is
happening in Darfur and what our government is and is not doing to put political
pressure on the government of Sudan and to respond to the needs of the refugees.
For example, most Americans believe that our government is aggressively working
to end the genocide in Darfur. While the present administration was among the
first governments to label the crisis in Darfur a genocide and has sent generous re-
sources to the refugees, in many respects the government’s response has been
both slow and inadequate. One of the main reasons for this is that the Sudanese
government, although one of the most tyrannous in the world, is our ally, ‘a cru-
al intelligence asset to the CIA’ in the war on terror.
17. Becoming informed and informing others helps plant the seeds of reform.
Putting pressure on news media to cover the genocide will multiply the sowing. It
is scandalous that the major news channels (CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox) ’aired
sixty-five times more segments on what amounts to celebrity gossip than on the
genocide in Sudan.” As Cheadle and Prendergast report, “During, . . . June 2005 pe-
riod, NBC and CBS each aired well over three hundred reports on Tom Cruise’s ro-
mantic relationship with Katie Holmes and well over five hundred stories on the
Michael Jackson trial. Fox News had forty-one pieces on Sudan, but an as-
tounding 1,753 stories dedicated to the dehorned King of Pop, Mr. [Michael]
Jackson” (Not On Our Watch, 160-61).
18. Since the major efforts to stop the genocide comes from non-profit NGOs,
funding is a continual challenge. Making even modest contributions to such orga-
izations can help the effort. In addition, many groups and individuals have raised
funds through local, grass-roots activities. Not on Our Watch gives profiles of orga-
izations to which one can contribute. According to Not on Our Watch, “Money
magazine ranks these aid agencies according to how efficient they are at ensuring
their money goes to the intended beneficiaries, and this has helped spark a real ef-
fort in the aid industry to make sure that each dollar that is contributed goes to
help people on the ground.” Today your money will make a difference in saving
lives, more that it ever has before” (172).
19. Senator Paul Simon speculated that “a mere one hundred letters to each
member of Congress could have changed the outcome” in Rwanda. Not on Our
Watch, 176.
20. See www.darfurwatch.com. Of the LDS members of the U.S. Senate, only
Harry Reid and Gordon Smith have positive ratings. Orrin Hatch (UT), D; Robert
Bennett (UT), D; Harry Reid (NV), A; Gordon Smith (OR), B; James Inhofe (OK),
C. LDS Members of the House of Representatives don’t fare any better: Jeff Flake
(AZ), D; Wall Herger (UT), D; John Doolittle (CA), D; Howard McKeon (CA), D;
Tom Udall (NM), B; Mike Simpson (ID), C; Bob Bishop (UT), D; Mark Udall
(CO), B; Jim Matheson (UT), B.

HAIKU
Sundown cool deepens . . .
Bluebells blend with rain pooling
In cow prints along streams
—REBECCA LILLY
I LOVE YOU NO MATTER WHAT

By Emily January Petersen

MY DAD'S NOT GAY! YOU'RE A LIAR!” I HAD NEVER spoken to anybody with such violence, but I did so now to Jenny, a childhood friend.

We were settled in her bedroom, and the emptiness of the newly painted room echoed the grief that rang out in my voice. The walls seemed to be closing in on me. It was well past bedtime, and my two younger sisters were sprawled on the carpet snoring in their sleeping bags.

We had arrived in California a few days earlier, just in time to visit our father for Christmas. My mother, stepfather, and baby brother had remained in Utah. We often spent Christmas at my dad's condo in San Jose; however, this year we drove to Fresno. Dad explained that his friend, Dale and his daughter Jenny, had moved there and that's where we would celebrate the holidays. Since my parents divorce, Jenny and Dale had been part of our lives. Spending Christmas with them sounded fun to me.

Jenny and I had spent the last few days bonding over music and boys. But now I was learning the most devastating news of my life at the age of nine.

I had needed a drink a few moments before, so Jenny and I had crept to the kitchen. We had passed the still-lit Christmas tree, then flooded the kitchen with light and raided the refrigerator. But tiptoeing back to bed, I noticed something I hadn't before. As we passed the master bedroom, I realized that both my dad and Dale were sleeping in the same bed. The door was wide open, and the two of them lay snoring on their backs, unaware that Jenny and I were up way past our bedtime. We reached her bedroom and shut the door softly, thrilled that we hadn't been caught.

As we clambered back onto her bed overfull with pillows to talk, I giggled, “Our dads are having a sleepover, too! They're sleeping in the same bed.”

Jenny's smile vanished, and she looked at me seriously. “Emily, it isn't a sleep-over.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you really want to know?” Her brown eyes widened with concern.

I wasn't sure if I did, but I said yes anyway.

“They're gay, Emily. That's why they're in the same bed.”

And that's when my world exploded.

I HAVE a few memories of my father before he left. My favorite is the one of going to meet his coworkers. Dad would say, “These are my daughters: Emily, Haley, and Afton.” The coworker would inevitably say, “Oh, they're darling, Ron! This one looks just like you!” pointing at me. I'd feel so proud to earn that distinction, the daughter who looked like Dad.

But the most vivid memory is of a Sunday morning, with Dad in still bed while Mom, my two sisters, and I dressed for church. Dad was a San Jose City police officer who often worked graveyard shifts, making this situation unremarkable. He could have been sick. He could have been tired.

But when we returned home, my mom's demeanor seemed to alter. Her hands shook slightly as she fit the silver key into the lock, her palm sweaty and struggling to grip the brass knob. Then, instead of entering the house, she tentatively poked her head in, her hot-rollered waves bouncing as she scanned the living room. She finally stepped over the threshold.

My sisters and I followed, the three of us bumping into her legs and each other, pushing to enter the familiar territory that our mother was suddenly treating as unfamiliar.

“Ron?” she called down the hallway of our rambler.

“Ronald? Are you still sleeping?” She paused to listen for a response, one that didn't come.

She lifted her leg, bending it at the knee, and removed one shoe, then the other. Taking them in hand she walked slowly down the brown-carpeted hallway toward the master bedroom. We followed, tiptoeing so we wouldn't wake Dad. We knew the routine. We had to be quiet during the days; he needed to sleep.

We entered the bedroom behind our mother. What jumped out at me was an envelope lying against the pillows on the neatly made and empty bed. I was five years old, so it was just

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at my eye level. But Mom didn’t see it because she was staring into the open closet. Half of it was vacant, a stray tie dangling from a wire hanger like an exclamation point. Mom gasped as she stared into this void, not too loudly, but loudly enough. We all looked at up her.

But when she turned around, she wore a tight smile, though her chin trembled slightly. “Let’s find Daddy,” she chirped. “He must be here somewhere.”

She began calling his name, stumbling from room to room, finding the bathroom devoid of his toiletries and the linen closet emptier than it had been that morning. Her act worked on me. My dread subsided and I skipped gaily after her, calling for Dad and thinking that he had devised a new game of hide and seek, removing his possessions to show that he wasn’t hiding there.

After five desperate minutes of calling his name, my mother turned on a Strawberry Shortcake video and filled our hands with crackers. We sisters grinned at each other; watching cartoons was way cooler than our usual routine of changing clothes and setting the table for dinner. But the change made me wary and the dread returned pooling in the bottom of my stomach.

Mom went to her bedroom and shut the door. Over the cheerful cartoon voices, I heard her talking in a hushed yet frantic voice on the telephone. Haley wanted to pick up the kitchen extension to see if Dad was on the other line, but I wouldn’t let her. The dread filling my stomach convinced me that Dad wasn’t on the line, that Dad wasn’t coming home.

Grandma was probably the one comforting my mother right now, the envelope doubtless lying opened in my mother’s lap.

While I yelled at Jenny for being a liar, her face deepened with concern. She must have realized what she’d driven me, quiet and shy Emily, to do. “Yes they are gay,” she explained evenly. “My mom told me.”

Jenny then told the story her mom had told her: how our dads had met, fallen in love and decided to leave their wives and children for each other. The news filled me with a sickness because I suddenly knew it was true. My heart knew it so violently that it tried to beat right out of my chest. But I didn’t want to accept it.

“No! No! NO!” I cried. “You’re lying. You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Jenny relented. The tears pouring down my cheeks probably warned her against saying anything more.

“When you get home, you can ask your mom about it. Let’s go to sleep now,” she suggested. She turned out her bedroom light and we crawled into our sleeping bags.

Soon, Jenny’s breathing became even and rhythmic, but I lay there with my eyes open, my heart still smarting. Everything Jenny had said made sense. I knew that Dad would never come back to Mom now, never come back to me. I had thought there was still hope. I had thought there was still hope. I had thought we would someday return to California to live with him again. Because he hadn’t remarried the way my mom had, I imagined that he still pined for her, for his family. But all those illusions now lay shattered.
around me. I felt cold and empty.

Then I realized that Dad’s gayness posed an enormous problem for me.

I remembered that I was a carbon copy of him. So far in my life, I’d noticed that I had inherited his picky, perfectionist personality. I liked to organize and keep things clean. He had always been fastidious in everything, his dress, manners, and housekeeping. Fear crept into my heart. Did my similarity to him mean that I would turn out gay, too?

My only knowledge of homosexual orientation was that it was a sin that people could go to hell for. Kids at school constantly teased one boy in our class because he enjoyed gymnastics and spent most of his time playing with girls. I did not want to be teased as he was. Being gay seemed so gross to me, so backward from everything I’d ever been taught. I began to sob because I suddenly felt that my father would be eternally damned. And me right along with him.

DEJECTED AND GUILT-RIDDEN, I returned home to Utah. Already a worrier in my young life, worrying over my parents’ divorce, my mother’s emotional welfare, my school work, my sisters, my new baby brother, I added to that list my father’s eternal welfare and burning questions about how much of my father was in me. What would I become? It was something so horrible that I couldn’t tell anybody, not even my mother. How could I talk to her about something so awful, so personal for us both?

I felt as if I were living at the foot of a smoking volcano with nowhere to run. But I had no choice but to try to live a normal life. So I resumed playing with my sisters, eating dinner with the family, loading the dishwasher, watching my favorite television show, practicing piano, doing homework, and just being. But each night I’d crawl into bed, turn out the light, and cry myself to sleep, my emotional pain seeming to physically rip through my body.

One night my sobbing became uncontrollable, so loud, in fact, that Mom came in to check on me. As she opened the door, I felt acutely embarrassed at having been caught, but I also felt a great sense of relief. I had wanted to tell my mother what I had learned and ask if it were true, but I hadn’t dared. Maybe my crying had become loud on purpose. Maybe it was a cry for help.

As my mother stood in the doorway, the light from the hall surrounded her, as if she were an angel of mercy. She asked...
what was wrong. Instead of breaking the news gently, as I had been plotting the last several days, I blurted, “Is Dad really gay?” and then sobbed with renewed vengeance.

Mom immediately came to my bed and gently pushed my hair off my forehead. She continued stroking my hair as I sobbed out months of pent-up emotion. When I calmed a little, she took my hand and led me into her room for a talk. I climbed into bed beside her as I had many times before, and snuggled under the quilt. She handed me a box of tissue, then made me start from the beginning.

Through tearful hiccups, I explained to her how Jenny had told me about Dad and Dale. Mom sighed, but answered honestly. Everything Jenny had said was true. This prompted a new wave of tears, but Mom just kept her arms wrapped around me and waited. Which was good, because it gave me the bravery to ask my next question.

Would he be gay like my father? Would I be damned? Would I follow him to hell because I was so much like him?

A little smile crossed her face. “Yes, you look like your dad, but that doesn’t mean you are the same person.”

“I guess you’re right,” I said through a sob. I wiped my nose and rubbed my eyes. The salt left my skin red and raw. “It is just so horrible. I can’t believe he’s gay!”

At this Mom seemed to look far into the distance for a few moments. Then she spoke quietly.

“Your father spends a lot of money to fly you to see him. And he does it every chance he gets. Not all fathers do that, you know.”

I nodded, but I wasn’t quite listening.

“He knows how to sew and he’s an excellent quilter. How many other dads can do that?” She nudged me playfully.

I giggled a little. It was true; none of my friends could say their dads had made them a dress.

I sniffed hard, and said “Dad is good at French-braiding too. You can’t even do that!”

My mom threw her hands up in mock exasperation. “It’s true. He’s always been better at fixing yours and your sisters’ hair than I have. But remember the time he ripped out his pants while chasing a suspect?”

I laughed out loud. “I love his police stories!”

“He’s also an excellent dancer,” she sighed. “And …” “she leaned in close and whispered conspiratorially, “he speaks French!”

We both squealed with delight.

“Wow, what a man!”

My tears were drying, and the dark, heavy feeling of guilt began to lift. After a few more minutes of “mommy-time,” I went back to bed and slept soundly.

That experience with my mom was the beginning of my understanding of what true love is. My religion told me that my dad’s sexual orientation was wrong, yet he remained my father. He was still a good person, still kind, still loving, still wonderful.

So why did I feel like he was so different? Five years earlier, I had lived with the bravado that my religion understood it all, and that my father was just so horrible. I can’t believe he’s gay!”

When the dance floor finally opened up, my dad took me around the room, waltzing and fox-trotting. It was the nicest dance of my life, because Dad now knew that my religion did not make me hate him and I knew that my dad still loved me despite my belief in a religion that misunderstands him.

I had finally said, “I love you no matter what.”
EVERY TIME SOMEBODY READS FROM A PIONEER journal in church, I’m affected. I’m transported to the plains, the cold, the hunger, the foreign land, the leap of faith, the abandonment of home to follow a charismatic young prophet. I imagine the hope of the women for their children and feel their grief at losing them. I can envision their experience: the storm clouds sweeping in across the open landscape, the shallow, rocky graves. Even my senses give themselves over to the experience: I shudder in the cold, my heart feels heavy for the many deaths, I may cry, I might even resolve to find more about my own ancestors and work on my genealogy.

Isn’t it astounding that just hearing a story could have such effects on my physical sensations, my feelings, and my behavior? Religious stories, historically, mythically, or simply faith-promotingly true, are particularly potent. Religious stories present big dilemmas and answer big questions. They give our lives meaning. And if we feel that our lives have meaning (meaning we parse through stories), then we can bear up against even the most oppressive circumstances. The Mormon pioneers crossed the plains because they had a strong story pushing them along: young Joseph Smith’s moving story about prayer, humility, and his conversations with God. The story of a promised land. The story of rewards in heaven.

Humans are unique among animals in that we are a storytelling species. We invent, revise, exaggerate, and deceive. We use our powerful gift of gab to transport, terrify, teach, nurture, advise, and amuse each other. Red Riding Hood’s story warns us not to stray from the path—there are dangers in the jungle. Urban legends warn us to keep a wary eye out on the world and not hire crack-addicted babysitters. But how is it, exactly, that these stories, fables, and legends are able to influence our actions?

A narratologist’s explanation will tell you that engaging with a story can shuttle you into another world—a shadow world of symbol and archetype that gives our physical world meaning. It’s a world that can incite strong emotions within us or even move us to action for good or ill.1 This world, called the Taleworld by Katherine Young, is part of every storytelling experience, including religious ones, and plays a central, if unexamined, part in our religious experience as Mormons.

How are we propelled into the Taleworld? Why does it have such power to guide our actions? I hope to describe what narratologists have to say about it, and invite further examination of the Mormon experience with story and, more particularly, with ritual.

RITUAL

WHEN LUCY FIRST stumbles into Narnia, she experiences the magic of a winter woodland, complete with anachronistic lamppost, hidden within a spare wardrobe. But she doesn’t yet see the scope of the entire Narnian world. She and other children in subsequent adventures must find different portals into Narnia to give the readers a complete picture of the world C.S. Lewis has created.

Ritual serves the same purpose the empty wardrobe serves. Like stories, rituals are entryways into another world. But however magical the view may be from the safety of the wardrobe, we cannot grasp the largeness of the world ritual re-
Engaging with a story can shuttle you into another world—a shadow world of symbol and archetype that gives our physical world meaning.
veals if we linger among the fur coats. We have to venture beyond the ritual frame.

But where do rituals lead us?

According to Young, they lead us to the “Storyrealm” and the “Taleworld.”

I HAVE FOND memories of being a teenager at my stake’s girls’ camp: staying up late, shivering around the summer camp fires, and listening to and telling stories. I loved the stories that built up slowly, like the Taily-po—a huge man-eating swamp creature—advancing from the woods . . . into the house . . . into the room . . . at the foot of the bed and then . . . “Gotcha!” The storyteller grabs the girl next to her, who jumps and screams and giggles. I enjoyed the delicious fear the stories projected onto the shadowed nighttime branches and trees.

Later, whispering in the tent, one girl told stories of her romantic exploits to a rapt audience of tent-mates. She was only thirteen years old, and yet not only had she kissed a boy, she had done it under water! This kissing business was just as shocking and thrilling as the Taily-Po’s advance.

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There are clear gateways into the Storyrealm. Storytellers announce the passage into that realm with phrases like: “You’ll never guess what just happened!” or, “Once upon a time,” or, “I would indeed be ungrateful if I did not stand up and bear my testimony.” And the exit is similarly clear: “The end” or, “Can you believe that?” or, “In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.” Using these signals, we can easily discern the difference between the ordinary world of talk and the Storyrealm.

Just as a window has a frame, a story must have horizons: beginnings and endings, limitations and closures. Part of being a competent storyteller is knowing how to bracket the Taleworld with the story performance.

In Mormon contexts, the Storyrealm is often the speaker at the pulpit and the audience (ignoring, note-taking, nursing, snoring, thumbing through the hymnal, or actually listening). The Storyrealm is the setting where our Mormon stories are told. It can be formal such as sacrament meeting, or as informal as a chaotic family home evening, with audience and teller in a jumble on the couch.

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TALEWORLD

WHEN YOU FOLLOW a storyteller’s “Once upon a time,” you’re in the Taleworld, an alternate reality produced through the telling of the story. The Taleworld is the shadow of the Taily-Po across the quilt, the shimmer of the cute boy in the pool, a pioneer ancestor’s exploits, or a lone Nephite in the wilderness. It can be an imagining of something that actually happened in the ordinary world, or fantasy and fabrication.

If you read a storytelling situation using the Storyrealm and Taleworld, it is clear that the two worlds are coexistent, that multiple realities are simultaneously at play. But we humans are well practiced at interacting with multiple worlds simultaneously. For example, we easily suspend our involvement and belief in a movie-made world to attend to a world of theatre seats and dwindling popcorn. We banish the reality of our hot breakfast tea as we read and imagine the events described in a newspaper. The chapel disappears as we sink deeper into meditation during the sacrament. Our imaginations are engaging-and disengaging from a thousand different scenarios. To experience a teeming infinity of imaginative realities, I simply have to briefly attend to the poltergeist-style rattling of my anxieties and worries: the maybes and what-ifs.

I bring up these examples just to show that the reality we experience is flexible and that we can brush many worlds at once. And that we are adept at navigating the myriad realities we interact with all the time.

However, the Taleworld is much more than just the world of the story being told from the pulpit or around the fire. In fact, it is a potentially infinite realm. The fact that narrators can choose where to begin and end their stories suggests that the Taleworld could stretch beyond the horizons of the told story. In other words, the story forms only a window into the Taleworld and thus the story is necessarily limited. Just as a window has a frame, a story must have horizons: beginnings and endings, limitations and closures. Part of being a competent storyteller is knowing how to bracket the Taleworld with the story performance.

Before the storyteller at girls’ camp fatefuly kissed that boy underwater, perhaps she did her English homework and perhaps afterwards she dried her hair. But as she expertly brackets her narrative, she chooses to represent only the elements of the Taleworld that are momentarily relevant in the storytelling setting: the actual getting underwater, the momentous kiss, and perhaps the tragic but delicious farewell. The rest of the story remains untold in the Taleworld. I find that image very appealing: untold scraps of stories remain floating on the ether, uninvited into the storyrealm, but continuous and extant, somewhere. What did Samuel the Lamanite do after he survived the arrows? Perhaps his story is out there in the Taleworld, inaccessible, untold, but existing.

In contrast, Marie-Laure Ryan has proposed that the whole story pops in and out of existence with each presentation. The story of Samuel the Lamanite is over; there is no more to be told. Stories are told in the moment and then disappear without a trace. Even if the story is told over and over, the Storyrealm context makes it different each time. For example, eventually our young storyteller may come to be embarrassed about the pool boy, and the story may become a cautionary tale, a confession, or a self-deprecating joke. Or even if her version or interpretation of the events stays constant, the imaginations of different listeners in different contexts will create divergent pictures through her telling.

This conception of the storytelling experience is also useful. It explains why the temple endowment can convey a different meaning to you every time you attend the temple. Although the story remains basically constant, the Storyrealm you bring to it is always changing. Your beloved mission stories get dull, or the New Testament gains power—the stories didn’t change. You did.

Whether the Taleworld is “out there” always, or pops into existence when we tell stories, the temporariness and even fragility of the Taleworld is obvious when you are sitting around the campfire. No matter how complete your imaginative engagement in the Taleworld may be, you can be recalled to your physical embodiment around the campfire by a mosquito buzzing in your ear, or to your church pew by a hungry toddler. The Taleworld, which was a unique fingerprint of one moment’s telling and hearing, pops out of existence, never to be exactly captured again. You are recalled to the Storyrealm by your body.

The body! Our wonderful sense organs, deceptive but es-
sentential. Your body can distract you away from the story or ritual—aching knees, watery eyes, heavy head. But your body can also connect you to the story: you may jump when the storyteller shouts “gotcha,” get chicken skin at a particularly exciting moment, become titillated by the kissing story, or feel warmly meditative hearing a testimony. Thus while the tellers are creating the alternate reality, the hearers can abandon their stake in physical embodiment in the “ordinary world” and surrender their physical as well as their imagina-
tive selves to the alternate reality created in the Taleworld. Both our imaginations and our bodies can be simultaneous participants in multiple realities.

However, this “clap-on, clap-off” view of the Taleworld may strike us as uncomfortably relative when we apply it to the gospel story. Does the story of the gospel exist only as we tell it and disappear when we finish? Does the context of the telling make the gospel valid? Or is the reality of the gospel out there, continuous, permanent, and real, even if the story isn’t told?

MORMONIZING NARRATIVE THEORY

STORYREALM AND TALEWORLD are concepts developed to describe storytelling and storyhearing. They are a metaphor for the internal experiences we have with storytelling—the Taleworld is essentially somewhere “in” the hearer and teller. In that way, these two terms may be inadequate to describe our religious experience. Mormons are generally not being metaphorical when they tell religious stories over the pulpit or at family home evening. Most of us probably believe, or feel we should believe, that the celestial kingdom literally exists, or that Nephi really killed Laban. I’ve never heard someone stand up in testimony meeting and say, “I know the Church is myth-
ically and archetypically true.” We take our myths literally.

We are involved in a life-long project of narrating the story of the gospel to ourselves. We retell it in sacrament meetings, in testimony bearing, through family home evenings, through scripture study, in private conversations, by baptisms, and most dramatically through the temple rituals. We can vividly imagine the premortality, where our future grandchildren might be peeking down at us through their cherubic pre-fingers, or the spirit world where our departed loved ones are guiding and protecting us, or the celestial kingdom, where we want to end up. The gospel is the good news, the Great Story. We use rituals to frame and parse this grand narrative into manageable symbolic fragments and to state by our performance, “This is real; this is true.”

We need terms that are more suited to our situation, that more precisely articulate the difference between telling religiously true stories and regular storytelling. I will here give in to the temptation to coin capitalized terms. I propose that we call the physical context in which we interact with the gospel, as well as our physical interaction itself, the “Ritualworld.”

RITUALWORLD

LIKE THE STORYREALM, the Ritualworld is where we reside bodily while we are performing rituals. The Ritualworld is the podium, the water in the blue-tiled font, the endowment room. It’s also the black missionary badge, the temple garments, the white temple dress, the callings that dog us. All of these create contexts for rituals that get us in touch with the Ritualworld. A missionary badge is a tangible mark that sets us apart from regular people and motivates us to preach; the white temple garments are a chafing reminder to be pure, to be Mormon from the inside out. The Ritualworld is also carrying the scripture case to church, opening the hymnal to the right page, and writing the tithing check. It is the physical, the ac-
tual, the tangible.

You can do all these things even without any faith or imagina-
tive engagement and still be in the Ritualworld. The Ritualworld merely provides a context where our bodies are moving in relationship to God.

But we need one more capitalized term, one that can take the metaphorical Taleworld and transform it into something more literal. Let’s call it the Promiserealm.

PROMISEREALM

THE PROMISEREALM IS the world we are imaginatively experiencing and striving for through all of our ritual acts. It is the portal through which worlds without end come into contact with our physical, ritual world. When we are believing in something, that is the Promiserealm. When we are imagining
the light at the end of the tunnel, that’s the Promiserealm too. When we are praying and feeling the Spirit, or hoping our fast offering will help someone, we are in contact with the Promiserealm.

The Promiserealm, like Young’s Taleworld, stretches beyond the acts of our narrating or ritualizing it. The Promiserealm does not exist because we perform the ritual; rather we perform the ritual in order to access the Promiserealm. Rituals summon only horizoned, or limited, pieces of the Promiserealm. We are not blasted with the full reality of that realm but rather given only constrained whiffs of it as we go. Ritual is a window or a keyhole we can use to peek through into the world of faith and the unseen.

What our bodies do has a lot of influence over how we make contact with the Promiserealm. Perhaps this is the reason Screwtape, a senior devil, gives a novice devil this advice in C.S. Lewis’ Screwtape Letters: “At the very least, [humans] can be persuaded that the bodily position makes no difference to their prayers; for they constantly forget, what you must always remember, that they are animals and that whatever their bodies do affects their souls.”

In the Mormon worldview, even a poorly imagined or half-attentive foray into the Ritualworld can be transformed into a real invitation for God to exert influence over our tangible lives. Each reiteration of ritual can make the Promiserealm more real to us. If you bear your testimony, you gain a stronger testimony, which will make you want to bear it more, which will make it stronger. You get both the chicken and the egg.

But we are still deeply rooted in our bodies, and so we can’t transcend our Ritualworld completely. The baby will demand Cheerios during the sacrament, your eyebrow will itch during the endowment, you will fall asleep or get the giggles mid-prayer. But as with all things, the ritual act doesn’t have to be perfect to be worthwhile. Just as Storyrealm brings us into the Taleworld, spiritual and physical engagement in ritual can help us come closer to the Promiserealm than we could if we never ventured near the Ritualworld’s threshold. Through sheer repetition of the physical acts of worship, we can practice approaching the divine and improve our ability to imaginatively engage with God, like a blurry gray picture coming into colored clarity. And that is the point of ritual enactments: to bring our world into overlap with the Promiserealm—God’s reality.

In Young’s model of narrative engagement, the Storyrealm creates the Taleworld, and the Taleworld cannot intrude upon the Storyrealm without invitation. In other words, in spite of nightmares and horror flicks, a ghost will not actually jump out from under the bed or ooze out of the TV screen. We must tell the story to make it a part of the world we’re in. We can turn off the tap, so to speak, of narrative engagement with the Taleworld. If the Taily-Po is too scary, we can shout “Ridiculous!” and make him innocuous and polite and send him on his way. The Storyrealm is in charge of the Taleworld and can send it packing.

But how much control do we have over the Promiserealm? Are we as able to stop and revise the gospel story we’re telling when it becomes uncomfortable? Or when our engagement becomes too real and frightening, can we disengage from it? In the Mormon worldview, the beyond is capable of reaching out and grabbing us even when we’re not invoking it: “the still small voice” gently suggesting a different route to work, or insisting we check on the baby once more, guiding us through frightening near-misses, even if we don’t deserve or even resent the help.

Through our lifelong experience with the Ritualworld (praying, taking the sacrament, going on missions, going to the temple) and the Promiserealm (the unseen and the Spirit, the experience of faith), our engagement with the Promiserealm becomes more and more real. And soon the enactments of ritual become less tiresome, less ”acted.” And the Promiserealm becomes less an Other place and more a concrete reality. Praying, wrangling the choir into tune, scrambling to get to church and sit in your favorite pew; doing visiting teaching—we perform these rituals with varying degrees of willingness and success.

But the point is not perfection; the point is imagination. A tiny, delicate, open-eyed, in-your-heart prayer does more to reify God’s influence in your life than sleeping through an endowment session. Our weak imaginations are bolstered as our knowledge is shaped by divine realities. It takes less work of faith to happily engage with God. Through ritual enactments, we develop faith, which strengthens the connection between the Here and the There. It is not the nature of the ritual that makes it more or less godlike but the nature of our investment in it.

NOTES


THE UNEXPECTED

Redbird blooming in winter woodbine—a scarlet shock on sepia vine—plucks the breath of passersby.

—NANCY COMPTON WILLIAMS
Possibly No Institution is More Preoccupied with Family than is the LDS Church. In 1995 Church leaders issued the document “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” That document does what others have found difficult: it defined marriage and family, as well as specifying the responsibilities of father (provider) and mother (nurturer). The proclamation warns “that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.” And it calls upon citizens and governments to “maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of government.”

Alas, the family is in trouble. In the April 2008 General Conference, Elder Russell M. Nelson reminded his listeners, “Throughout the world, the family is increasingly under attack.”

The phrase family “under attack” did not originate with him; it has been embedded in Church leaders’ sermons and Church publications for at least a quarter century. For example, back in 1981, Elder Hartman Rector, Jr., was convinced that not since the days of Noah have families been “under a more serious attack.” President Howard W. Hunter in his Bountiful Utah Temple dedication reminded the Lord that the “family unit is under attack.” This is an age, Elder Arthur R. Bassett noted, “when family values often come under attack.” When asked why “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” was written, the late President Gordon B. Hinckley said, “Because the family is under attack. All across the world, families are falling apart.”

But what do the Brethren mean by “under attack?” Do they mean a physical attack meant to destroy, as when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor? Or do they mean a verbal attack, with the intent to demean the family? Who is attacking and what weapons are they using? Are all families under attack, or just certain families? And what is the intended outcome of these attacks on the family?

Church leaders aver that it is Satan attacking the family. “We know, without question, Lucifer is the enemy of the family,” says Elder M. Russell Ballard. Satan is masterminding what Elder Ballard calls a relentless assault on the family. Satan is smart enough to realize “that the surest and most effective way to disrupt the Lord’s work is to diminish the effectiveness of the family and the sanctity of the home.” Satan does this by producing discord between parents, who then neglect family home evening and proper gospel instruction of their children. Family prayer slides, as does temple attendance, along with family scripture study. “That’s all it takes,” says Elder Ballard, to retard the Lord’s work.

Elder L. Tom Perry says that Satan is masterminding the “decay” of the family and that Satan is out to “destroy” the family. Elder Perry’s take is that Satan’s target is the father. He says, “Satan, in his carefully devised plan to destroy the family, seeks to diminish the role of fathers.” Elder Russell M. Nelson, on the other hand, sees mothers as Satan’s target. “Because mothers are essential to God’s great plan of happiness, their sacred work is opposed by Satan, who would destroy the family and demean the worth of women.”

This then is the picture preached from the LDS pulpit. The family is under attack by Satan who wishes to “destroy” or, to use the language of the Proclamation, “disintegrate” the family. What I am hearing is that Satan wishes to eliminate...
families—not some families, but all families. One of the ways he is doing this, according to Elder Ballard, is by redefining family in ways contrary to God's eternal plan for the happiness of his children.10

Other “proofs” of Satan's attack on family, according to an article in the Liahona, include: “Adultery, divorce, cohabitation, child and spouse abuse, homosexuality, abortion, teen pregnancies, pornography, disobedient children, economic struggles, [and] an increasing unwillingness among married couples to bear and rear children.”11

Elder Nelson's April 2008 General Conference sermon further cautioned, “If families fail, many of our political, economic, and social systems will also fail.”12

My first response was that it would be good if some of these systems failed. But then my superb Brigham Young University training kicked in, and I realized that often families fail as a result of inadequate and corrupt political and economic policies and systems.

As for social systems, families are a social system embedded in the larger social system. In short, the failure of families, like the failure of a building in an earthquake, is often the result of political and economic decisions that impinge upon the social system, or the communities in which families exist. For example, if the Church, which itself is a social system, places extraordinarily high expectations on individuals, that pressure in turn will reverberate within the family. In a Saturday evening session of stake conference that I attended, the visiting General Authority told us of a couple to whom he was related who divorced. He was convinced, he said, that they had had too many children too fast, trying to live up to what they perceived as Church expectations.

The Proclamation states, “Further, we warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.” It seems to me that the Church would regard anything that results in the disintegration of a family as a calamity. And, in fact, calamities, be they social, economic, or physical—whether a hurricane or a bomb—do bring about the disintegration of many families.

Is the family actually under attack? Is there an organized campaign with the goal of destroying or disintegrating the family?

When Church leaders lament that the family is under attack, they often mean that their concept of marriage is under attack. The conflating of marriage and family can easily be seen in the Church’s resistance to same-sex marriage. In the eyes of the Brethren, allowing same-sex couples to have a ceremony pronouncing them “married” will somehow contribute to the weakening, or disintegration, or destruction of “the family.”

In the current LDS worldview, a family comes into existence when a man and a woman marry under the mandate to multiply and replenish the earth. That is the default version of family, the one ordained of God, “to be perpetuated beyond the grave.”

Let me step into the abyss and say that it isn’t at all clear to me that God has ordained a particular family type. As far as I can tell, God didn’t define family in the Old Testament, New Testament, or Book of Mormon. And the type he sort of defined in modern revelation to Joseph Smith isn’t the type the Church endorses today.

What Jesus does say about family is this: “There came then his brethren and his mother, standing without, sent unto him, calling him. And the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee. And he answered them, saying, Who is my mother, or my brethren? And he looked round about on them which sat about him, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother” (Mark 3: 31–35).

That’s an awfully wide definition of family Jesus casts. Instead of dwelling on the nuclear, the polygamous, single-parent, or even dysfunctional family, Jesus’ definition emphasizes the relationship between individuals, families, communities, and God. It seems to me that this new definition is more applicable now than ever. For one thing, it invites individuals into the family.

Even though the Proclamation calls the family the fundamental unit of society, the individual is actually the basic unit of society. Families are not some aberration of Siamese twins where everyone is physiologically connected and every member of the family looks alike and thinks alike. The family is the unit where individual talents are developed and where the individual is not only allowed but encouraged to explore his or her individuality.

In 1971, the First Presidency, with Joseph Fielding Smith as President, issued a statement explaining the relationship between family and the individual. “The forces of evil attack the individual by tearing away at his family roots . . . . There may possibly be a few very strong individuals, who can survive without the support of a family, but more of us need the love, teaching, and acceptance that comes from those who care very deeply.”13 As that era’s First Presidency acknowledged, the family’s role is to support and strengthen the individual, and while the family, as a social system, is vulnerable, it is how the stress on the family affects the individual that is of equal concern.
HERE IS AN eddy of madness encircling our world. That madness, like a creeping viper, wounds us. Those wounds affect the nature of all our interpersonal relationships, within the family and between families.

Speaking of family relationships, have you considered your relationship to the frog family? When we were children we sang, “Froggy went a courtin’ and he did ride.” These days Froggy is riding right off into the dark night of oblivion. It appears that a third to half of frog species have become extinct or are on the verge of extinction. Scientists are alarmed at this devastation occurring in the frog families of the world. However, not one of them, as far as I can determine, has blamed it on Satan. Instead they say such things as: “Amphibians are severely affected by habitat loss, climate change, pollution, and pesticides, introduced species, and over-collection for food and pets.”

Many of the factors that are stressing frogs—frog by frog, and frog family by frog family—leading to their extinction, are affecting humans too—person by person, family by family, community by community. Satan indeed may be the culprit, but we will do better if we can identify his agents and the sources of stress on the family.

It appears to me that Satan, like the Lord, speaks and works through men and women. Just as we often do the Lord’s work, fulfilling his purposes unawares (consider Joseph sold into Egypt), we can also aid Satan unawares. That is, the Lord’s work is not always done by good people, and Satan’s by evil people. For example, Jesus commended Peter on many occasions, but on one occasion he condemned Peter, even calling him Satan (see Matthew 16).

I BELIEVE THAT the viper is seen most clearly in economic practices. Every time a family business closes due to the unfair competition of megacorporations, a family is endangered. Every time a family farm is lost to agribusiness, families suffer. As the nation becomes more urban and directed by monolithic corporations, small towns and communities suffer, businesses close, and towns dwindle. As they suffer, so do the families of those communities. The face of America changes and values shift as our lives are controlled by big business and government’s preferential treatment of megacorporations. Those are forces that pull first at individuals, affecting their relationships with others, eventually stretching many families to the breaking point.

“Families are either supported or destroyed by the social and natural environments around them,” writes Susan Griffin in an *Orion* review of the documentary *Darwin’s Nightmare.*
The film “shows how the destruction of Lake Victoria’s ecology by the experimental introduction of predator perch, which proceeded to eat all the other fish, has resulted in the dissolution of the lives of those who have lived around the lake for generations. As fishermen are dying or abandoning their families in great numbers, women turn to prostitution to feed their children, and as these women die of AIDS in great numbers, the gangs of homeless orphans living around the lake grow.”

Continuing, Griffin says, “The film gives us a harrowing glimpse into what superpower technocracies are doing to places and people all over the world. At Lake Victoria, the connection to militarism is not abstract. Following a common trend, the perch from the lake are not eaten locally. Instead, they are processed, frozen, and then flown to the Ukraine. But the plot thickens. The planes that take the food away do not arrive empty. They are filled with weapons that will be used in other regions in Africa, where bloody conflicts, including genocide, are occurring on an incomprehensible scale.”

Since I haven’t seen the documentary *Darwin’s Nightmare*, I can’t attest to Griffin’s summary, nor do I know that the documentary is balanced and fair in regards to what is happening at Lake Victoria. Even if it isn’t, Griffin is on target when she calls our attention to “what superpower technocracies are doing to places and people all over the world.” What they are doing to individuals, they are also doing to the individuals family relationships.

If you wish to observe the literal disintegration of families, focus on war. Haifa Zangana reports in her book *City of Widows* that in Iraq, ninety or more women daily become widows. “The Ministry of Women’s Affairs says that there are at least three hundred thousand widows in Baghdad alone, and a further one million throughout the country, and that the numbers are rising daily as men continue to disappear. Families are left without support. Widows have few resources at their disposal.” That is only one aspect of the war that lays families to waste.

But let’s not talk about war and how it squeezes the life out of families; let’s talk about something sweeter, like bananas. Why do you suppose those wonderful yellow bananas, shipped from Central America and elsewhere (so useful for making banana nut bread to share with non-member neighbors) generally cost less than locally grown apples? In the tale of what has become America’s favorite fruit, you can be certain the plot contains greed and exploitation. Here is one small chapter in the story.

In 1993, the European Union implemented a quota system
giving preference to small banana farmers in the Caribbean, attempting to provide economic support to the communities and islands so that they could emerge from poverty. In other words, a policy designed to strengthen families. Chiquita found its European sales slipping, so its officers went directly to the Clinton administration, which, sympathizing, protested to the E.U. that the “European regulations were both unfair and illegal under World Trade Organization rules, a case of government policy mandating preferential treatment to specific companies in what was supposed to be an open market.”

Raising bananas is the primary source of income for the small farmers of the islands. Even though Chiquita controlled some fifty percent of the banana market in Europe and the small farmers eight percent, Chiquita essentially wanted to eliminate them from the market. “I really do not see why it is in the interest of the United States that poor countries in the Caribbean and elsewhere, which are not able to do anything other than grow bananas, should be driven into more dangerous economic activity such as drug trafficking,” commented E.U. Trade Commissioner Sir Leon Brittan.

The E.U. made concessions in favor of Chiquita, and finally, in 2001, the Bush administration lifted the 191 million dollars worth of trade sanctions the United States had imposed on the European Union. Who suffered from all of this? Not U.S. farmers, not U.S. merchants who sell bananas, and not U.S. consumers of bananas, and certainly not Chiquita’s CEO whose compensation package was nearly five million dollars. The victims were the small farmers and their families in the Caribbean.

That is only one small chapter in the banana story. The other chapters include the exploitation of people and lands in Central America, with the U.S. government heavily involved in making sure American-owned fruit companies got their way, at the expense of the local people.

At this point I am wondering if the Proclamation includes the families of Lake Victoria, the Caribbean, and Central America as “families under attack.” When the Proclamation calls for governments to support families, does it have in mind the question Rebecca Solnit asks: “What [economic] model explains the hundred-foot yachts and fifth homes U.S. captains of industry accumulate while hunger, homelessness, lack of access to medical care, and general precariousness overtake more and more of the population?”

Church leaders thought it important that members study and use the Proclamation. Consequently a series of guides was published for that purpose. The following statement appears in one of those guides. “The family, the most fundamental institution of society, is under attack from all sides. Adultery, divorce, cohabitation, child and spouse abuse, homosexuality, abortion, teen pregnancies, pornography, disobedient children, economic struggles, an increasing unwillingness among married couples to bear and rear children—all these and more are proof that the adversary understands very well the central role the family plays in the destiny of God’s children.”

Rather than being simply one “proof” among many that families are under attack, “economic struggles” can in fact fuel nearly everything else in the list above: divorce, cohabitation, abuse, abortion, and so on. At times I have the sense that in the Church, “economic struggles” is code for irresponsible management of personal finances. But there is literally a world full of people whose “economic struggles” have nothing to do with imprudent spending on credit and everything to do with exploitation and injustice, leaving desperate individuals and disintegrating families in their wake.

Warner Woodworth, professor of organizational behavior at Brigham Young University, states on his website that the First Presidency of the LDS Church is concerned with “growing inequality between rich and poor, exorbitant corporate profit, unethical executives, and, as President Spencer W. Kimball put it, the need for business owners to not pay as little as they can get away with, but to ‘pay top dollar’ to one’s employees.”

I have somehow missed the talks wherein the Brethren expressed these concerns. I wish they expressed them more frequently and with the same intensity and forthrightness as Professor Woodworth does. “In spite of our professed religious and ethical values,” he says, “BYU is about the last university in the country to hold [a globalization symposium] for raising awareness of multinational corporation abuses, exploitation of Third World workers, unsafe working conditions, child abuse, etc.”

Woodworth speaks openly and publicly about the tyranny multinational corporations wield through their excessive power. He speaks out against the sweat shops, the exploitation of labor, third world debt, and unequal societies. He speaks about the increase in poverty, which he correlates with growing globalization, where billions of people live on less than two dollars a day. Those are the very practices—evils, let’s call them—which contribute to disintegration of families.

If the Church is going to call on governments to support and maintain families, maybe it should also be bold enough to point out the things governments do that weaken families. Aren’t we embarrassed to say that in the last fifty years there have been only two political issues with moral consequences that the Church felt the need to speak out against? As Marcus Borg has said in his book The Heart of Christianity, “We are all called to be political in the broad sense of being aware of the impact of systems on people’s lives and God’s passion for those who are disadvantaged and victimized by systems.”

E. MORMONS HAVE proclaimed to the world how important the family is. Now, are we prepared to listen to the Catholic who says: “Okay, you’re for the family, what do you do about it? If we have a whole bunch of young men who’ve grown up in broken families, in violent neighborhoods, and end up in prison, how is that going to help strengthen the family? There is a moral basis for a healthy family, but there’s also an economic basis for the healthy family.”

And then the Reverend Jim Wallis: “When will we understand that goals such as universal health care, affordable
housing, and living-wage incomes are pro-marriage and family programs?  

I also add the voice of novelist, poet, professor, and farmer Wendell Berry: “The most forceful context of every habitat now is the industrial economy that is doing damage to all habitats. We can’t preserve neighborhood or charity or peaceability or an ecological consciousness, or anything else worth preserving, at the same time that we maintain an earth-destroying economy. Nothing ultimately flourishes in our present economy but selfish aims, and these are often mutually contradictory. We have to have a sort of pity for... those who are sure that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ but who forget that it takes a local culture and a local economy to raise a village.”  

Tracy Kidder, in his powerful biography of the medical doctor Paul Farmer, who has spent much of his life in Haiti establishing and running a medical clinic, writes the following. “Now the United States was leading a concerted effort to block aid to Haiti’s government—not just American aid but also grants and loans from other sources, including loans from an international agency that would have financed an increase in the supplies of potable water and improvements in roads, education, and the public health system. The stated reasons probably included long-standing institutional fear and distrust of Aristide, a hope that Haitians might blame him for the country’s continuing decline, and general weariness with Haiti’s problems. Farmer wrote to me, about the blocked loans: ‘I think, sometimes, that I’m going nuts, and that perhaps there is something good about blocking clean water for those who have none, making sure that illiterate children remain so, and preventing the resuscitation of the public health sector in the country most in need of it.’”  

Who will tell the truth about those systems that are tearing families apart? Who will speak for justice? We have to have a sort of pity for... those who are sure that ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ but who forget that it takes a local culture and a local economy to raise a village.”  

Instead of family, perhaps we should proclaim community. On the other hand, it seems more important to proclaim people—person by person. But then that proclamation already exists, doesn’t it?

And Jesus said: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised” (Luke 4:18).  

NOTES  

1. Google “family definition” or one of its permutations and you will get thousands of hits reflecting the various definition of family. A legal definition of family differs from a medical definition. A religious right definition of family will differ from a Mormon Nauvoo era definition of family. Stephanie Coontz says, “Almost every marital and sexual arrangement we have seen in recent years, however, startling it may appear, has been tried somewhere else.” (“The New Fragility of Marriage, for Better or for Worse,” The Chronicle Review, 6 May 2005.) With that, she is also implying family configurations as well. And for those who maintain that “traditional marriage” is the ideal model, the one endorsed by God, should read Coontz’s book The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap (New York: Basic Books, 2000).  


16. Ibid.  


23. Ibid.  


27. Wendell Berry, The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays (Berkeley: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005), 76.  


NECTARINE

The nectarine—

pale purple-pink
with springtime sheen—

seems to wink

its blossom-eyes

while carefree larks

assert the lie

of winter’s dark

—MICHAEL R. COLLINGS
In Part One of this framing article, published in the October 2008 issue of Sunstone, I provided an overview of the history, the arguments, and the positions that constitute the ongoing Book of Mormon historicity debates. Intelligent people have reached a variety of conclusions around this question, with credentialed scholars arguing both for and against the Book of Mormon's being an authentic ancient record. In this second part of the article, I take up the question: How can people arrive at opposing conclusions about historicity? Why do arguments that apologists find overwhelming strike skeptics as negligible, and vice-versa?

To answer those questions requires a theoretical discussion about the nature of knowing. But there is much more at stake in this discussion than theory. For someone who is trying to decide what to believe about Book of Mormon historicity—for someone, that is, who is rethinking his or her faith—understanding how other people faced with the same arguments can reach vastly different conclusions is not merely a theoretical concern. For someone in that situation, the question “How can people reach such different conclusions from all these arguments?” becomes the same as asking, “How am I supposed to decide what to conclude from all these arguments?” Thus a theoretical question—“How do people know?”—leads us to the human dimension of the historicity debates.

My discussion of this question draws on theories developed within the field of sociology of knowledge. Sociology of knowledge is an effort to identify the social processes by which groups and individuals develop, maintain, or alter their beliefs. Applying sociological theories to the Book of Mormon historicity debates reveals that the debates follow typical, even predictable, patterns. A sociological perspective expands our field of vision beyond the arguments themselves, highlighting the social and cultural influences that shape individuals’ thinking about historicity. A sociological perspective also draws our attention to the consequences of these arguments: the ways the arguments work to challenge or reinforce social relationships, boundaries, and identities. In other words, the sociology of knowledge shows us how our beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity affect and are affected by our relationships with others.

A fundamental premise of the sociology of knowledge is the notion that reality is socially constructed. This notion has affinities to philosopher Thomas Kuhn’s concept of “paradigm shifts” in science. Because Kuhn’s ideas have been invoked in debates about Book of Mormon historicity, they offer a useful starting point for understanding the social construction of reality. Kuhn (1970) argues that science, contrary to what its
practitioners claim, is never simply a question of assessing how well theories account for the known facts, since more than one theory can always be applied to a given set of data. Which theory will prove more persuasive to the scientific community depends on the paradigm—the underlying assumptions, beliefs, values, and methodological preferences—that prevails in the community at a given moment in history. And paradigms, Kuhn maintains, are embraced or rejected for non-scientific reasons ranging from personal idiosyncrasies to social influences such as reputation or national prestige. Some LDS apologists have invoked Kuhn's concept of paradigms to relativize criticisms of historicity that claim the authority of science. That is, apologists cite Kuhn to argue that scientific "truth" is neither immutable nor value-neutral because it depends on non-scientific assumptions and biases (Nibley 1986, pp. 119–20; Christensen 1995; for a skeptic's response, see Vogel 2005).

My sociological discussion of the historicity debates makes a similar argument: that people's theories, or beliefs, about historicity rest on non-scientific, or non-intellectual, considerations. However, in the discussion that follows, I will rely not on Kuhn (a physicist and philosopher) but on two classics from the sociology of knowledge: Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's The Social Construction of Reality (1967) and James Boiker and Richard Curtis's A Sociology of Belief (1975). I will also draw on work by literary theorist Stanley Fish (1980) and semiotician Umberto Eco (1990) to show how socially constructed norms of interpretation shape the ways that apologists and skeptics decide what counts as plausible evidence for or against Book of Mormon historicity.

The message of this part of the article is that beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity are fundamentally social, not intellectual, in their origin. Your beliefs about historicity are a function of your relationships with other people, in and out of the Church. This means that conclusions about historicity are not reached simply by weighing the arguments, though it probably seems to people who are working through doubts that this is what they are doing. Rather deciding what to believe about historicity is fundamentally a matter of deciding where one stands most comfortably in relation to LDS and non-LDS communities. It means deciding which relationships and affiliations are most important to you. To what extent this sociological perspective is actually useful for someone grappling with the historicity question is debatable, but it certainly has a relativizing effect that tends to weaken the force of some arguments about historicity.

SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

KEY CONCEPTS

Socialization and the politics of truth-making. Central to the sociology of knowledge is the idea that reality is socially constructed. The world we inhabit is the world as we understand it, and that understanding is neither a simple reflection of things as they are nor a product of purely individual perception. Rather, our understanding of reality arises from our relationships with others. What we think of as reality is a human invention—or, to put it differently, a social convention: conventional ways of seeing and thinking which take on the appearance of nature to those who have internalized them. This is not to deny that there is a real world "out there" independent of the understandings we have constructed; but this does mean that the methods we use to ascertain the nature of the world "out there" are themselves a matter of social convention. Scientific methods, for example, are not self-evident techniques for discerning the nature of the world but rather are the reality-constructing techniques preferred by particular groups. In modern societies, groups that favor the scientific worldview have become highly influential, but other groups, at other times or places or occupying more marginal positions on the modern social landscape, have different preferences (certain religious fundamentalists, for example).

As social constructions, beliefs are a dimension of culture, and we internalize them in the same way we internalize culture. To adopt a particular set of beliefs is to be socialized in a particular way—that is, to be incorporated into particular social relationships. For example, being taught to believe in evolution also means being taught to submit to the authority that evolutionary scientists claim for determining what counts as truth in modern societies. If you are a Latter-day Saint who believes in evolution, then that belief implies setting yourself apart from Saints who believe that the scriptures rule out evolution.
historically specific reasons—including their having marshaled scientific evidence that proved persuasive to people who were in a position to make a difference—have gained and retained the support of elite truth-making institutions such as academia, the courts, and the public schools (though the schools remain a site of perennial contest). If evolution’s critics were ever able to oust it from its position of privilege, this victory would be the result of their own political and rhetorical successes.

Plausibility structures. A person fully socialized into a given belief would find it unthinkable that someone could believe otherwise. However, socialization is never total, especially in a pluralistic society where we frequently interact with people who hold beliefs different from ours. Socialization is especially problematic for groups whose beliefs put them in a minority and who are therefore at a social disadvantage. Consequently, “every viable society” or subgroup “must develop procedures of reality-maintenance” (Berger and Luckmann 1967, p. 147). The most important of these, according to Berger and Luckmann, is “continual and consistent” conversation with others who share your beliefs (p. 154). Such conversation builds up around you a universe of discourse where these beliefs are affirmed as sensible and normal.

The relationships within which this conversation occurs are called a “plausibility structure” because these relationships provide a social base that reinforces group members’ sense of the plausibility of the group’s construction of reality. As long as this social base is the site of your primary relationships, you can readily sustain commitment to the group’s beliefs despite having secondary relationships with nonbelievers. For example, if those closest to you (your family and friends) believe in Book of Mormon historicity, that belief is likely to remain plausible to you even if you know that most of the people you interact with (non-LDS teachers, co-workers, acquaintances)
find the belief incredible. However, if your connection to the plausibility structure is weakened—that is, if relationships with nonbelievers start to compete for primacy—then your commitment to the group’s beliefs is likely to be weakened as well. You will tend to believe what the people closest to you believe, and the more time you spend conversing with other people about their beliefs, the more plausible their beliefs will become to you.

These principles are supported by sociological studies of religious conversion and defection. Studies show that converts establish strong interpersonal ties with members of a religious group before they come to espouse the group’s beliefs. (This is certainly not news to the LDS Missionary Department; hence the Church’s emphases on member-missionary work and fellowshipping investigators.) Conversely, members who defect and disavow the group’s beliefs usually do so after something else happens that leads them to become less active in the group or to feel less solidarity with other members (Snow and Machalek 1984; Bromley 2004). A set of LDS sociologists (Albrecht, Cornwall, and Cunningham 1988) made this observation in connection with a study of inactive and former Mormons. The “vast majority” of disaffiliated Mormons, the LDS sociologists found, “had always been somewhat marginal in the church” (p. 73). The sociologists concluded:

Difficulties with church doctrines do not play a major role in the process of disaffiliation. . . . It appeared that disaffiliated Mormons were rejecting the norms of Mormonism much more than the doctrines of Mormonism. . . . Doctrinal disagreements may very well become a useful tool for describing why one has problems with a particular church, but they are not particularly helpful in understanding the disaffiliation process. (pp. 76–77, 79)

It should be noted that we are dealing here with general principles and trends; these statements will not hold for every individual case. The general principle, however, is that sharing or rejecting a group’s beliefs is the outcome of the quality of a person’s relationships within the group.

Groups have adopted a variety of strategies to protect their plausibility structures and thus to prevent members from losing faith. Groups may employ some form of what Borhek and Curtis call “encapsulation,” minimizing members’ contact with people or information from outside the plausibility structure. Or groups may encourage “entanglement,” tying members’ identities and personal integrity to the group’s beliefs through practices such as bearing public testimony. Another way members can preserve beliefs in the face of outside challenges, according to Berger and Luckmann, is to compartmentalize, temporarily setting aside their primary reality to take up a secondary reality for strictly instrumental purposes in settings such as school or work.

In addition to challenges from outside the group, plausibility structures can also be destabilized from the inside. If some members of a group advocate a construction of reality that competes with the official construction, then institutions whose legitimacy depends on the official reality are likely to resort to “repressive procedures” to neutralize the heretics’ threat. On the other hand, because socialization is never total, there will always be “idiosyncratic variations in the way [group members] conceive of the universe,” which can be tolerated as long as they do not challenge the legitimacy of the reigning institutions (Berger and Luckmann, pp. 106–07).

Applications to Book of Mormon historicity

THES SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES imply that a person’s beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity are not decided by “a purely cerebral process” (Borhek and Curtis, p. 123). Indeed, given the sheer volume of arguments for and against historicity, it would strain credulity for someone to claim that their beliefs are purely the result of having considered all the relevant evidence. Besides, as discussed later, even the criteria by which a person weighs the evidence, or even a person’s perception of what counts as evidence to be weighed, is a product of prior socialization.

Instead, beliefs about historicity are a factor of social relationships—specifically the intensity of a person’s identification with the Church and its dominant culture as compared to identification with other social groups. Belief in Book of Mormon historicity is the product of socialization into orthodox LDS plausibility structures. That is, people believe in historicity because they are primarily committed to other people who believe in historicity. Conversely, a Latter-day Saint who comes to doubt historicity has moved his or her primary identifications away from the LDS Church, or at least away from the orthodox majority and the hierarchy, to other social groups whose construction of reality does not include Book of Mormon historicity. When apologists insinuate that revisionists have shifted their loyalties from the Church to the world (Bitton 1994; Gee 1994; Midgley 1994), they are, in one sense, correct.

Academic socialization and Book of Mormon apologetics. One form of socialization that pressures Latter-day Saints to shift their commitments away from Book of Mormon historicity is higher education. Apologists from B. H. Roberts (1985) to the present (Reynolds 1997) have expressed special concern for persuading young people of the credibility of the Book of Mormon’s historical claims. This concern makes sense in light of the concept of plausibility structures. Young Latter-day Saints going off to college are likely to attenuate their ties to family and their home wards at the same time they may forge new relationships with nonbelievers, including potentially influential student-teacher relationships. If that happens, their LDS beliefs will come to seem less plausible. Daniel Peterson (2000b) has described how his relationship with a Catholic teacher, while studying abroad in Cairo, gave him a “feeling of inferiority” and made LDS claims seem “improbable” (p. xxxi). Another apologist, Lance Starr (2001), describes how he felt attacked in his faith when he left home to go to college; Starr credits “a strong support system,” including his relationship with his institute teacher, with helping him retain his LDS beliefs.
Whether they are professional academics or lay intellectuals who have internalized academic constructions of reality through their education, Latter-day Saints who have been socialized into the academy can react in a number of ways to the pressure this socialization places on Book of Mormon historicity. Some who find participation in academic intellectual culture more rewarding than participation in LDS networks will leave the Church. Those who come to disbelieve historicity yet who remain committed to other aspects of LDS culture will seek ways to justify remaining active in the Church, such as reconceiving the Book of Mormon as nonhistorical scripture or championing Mormon social and ethical values. Others will seek to reconcile Book of Mormon historicity with academic constructions of reality; this is the approach that apologists take when they deploy scientific evidence or critical scholarship to support historicity. Some observers believe that Blake Ostler’s expansion theory is becoming increasingly attractive to LDS intellectuals (Givens 2002, pp. 173–74). If so, this is probably because the theory makes concessions to both believers’ and nonbelievers’ readings of the Book of Mormon—yes, there are parallels to antiquity; yes, there are also parallels to Smith’s environment—and thus seems to allow LDS intellectuals to operate both in the Church and in nonbelieving academic communities.

Apologists’ academic socialization is secondary to their LDS socialization; nevertheless, apologists are sensitive to how they are perceived by non-LDS academic colleagues. Hence orthodox scholars have been keen to participate in projects that imply recognition of their competence by outsiders, such as assisting the translation and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls. For the same reason, some orthodox scholars are encouraged when non-Mormon scholars occasionally show signs that they have been persuaded to take LDS claims about the Book of Mormon seriously (Reynolds 1999; Tvedtnes 2001; Underwood 2006). Simultaneously, though, orthodox scholars actively resist dominant modes of truth-making in their disciplines. We see this when John Sorenson champions diffusionism against the skepticism of those whom he derisively calls “Big Scholars” (1994, 2005) or when LDS apologists join evangelicals in denouncing the naturalistic assumptions that now dominate biblical studies (Robinson 1989; Millet 1993; Anderson 1994). Resisting dominant constructions of reality in this way is most feasible for scholars who are employed at BYU, where they enjoy both an orthodox plausibility structure and protection of their livelihood.

Still, even with that kind of plausibility structure in place, orthodox LDS intellectuals represent a marginalized view within the academic discourse communities into which they have been socialized. They must therefore work hard to maintain their belief in Book of Mormon historicity. The ceaseless output of apologists and other forms of orthodox scholarship serves this need. To use Berger and Luckmann’s term, orthodox intellectuals must engage in frequent “conversation” with other believers to maintain their sense of the plausibility of their beliefs. Today LDS intellectuals have many ways of keeping themselves immersed in a universe of discourse where Book of Mormon historicity is affirmed: conferences or fire-sides organized by FARMS and FAIR, online forums, the reading of orthodox Book of Mormon scholarship in a receptive frame of mind. In fact, one could argue—however counterintuitive it might seem—that the dramatic increase in books, periodicals, websites, and conferences supporting historicity over the past 20–25 years signals the extent to which many Latter-day Saints have been assimilated into non-LDS plausibility structures. Orthodox LDS intellectuals must work to surround themselves with discourse reaffirming Book of Mormon historicity precisely because they spend so much of their time engaged with other plausibility structures where historicity is not affirmed (such as the disciplinary communities into which they were socialized through their educations). If Mormons were more culturally isolated, they would not need to practice such vigorous reality maintenance.

Those who come to disbelieve Book of Mormon historicity must work to maintain their constructions of reality as well. Skeptics have their own forums for conversation—their own plausibility-reinforcing networks—ranging from the online forum Recovery from Mormonism to Jerold and Sandra Tanner’s Utah Lighthouse Ministry. Frequent conversation about “how we know the Book of Mormon is not historical” will be most important for skeptics who feel marginalized within or excluded from the Church but who simultaneously retain significant relationships to orthodox Latter-day Saints, such as close ties to LDS family or living in a predominantly LDS community. This is true for the same reason that the continual production of Book of Mormon apologetics is important to orthodox intellectuals who have been socialized into academia: in both cases, believers have to exert themselves to maintain their reality against the influence of competing plausibility structures. Thus the phenomenon of people who “leave the Church, but . . . cannot leave the Church alone” (Maxwell 1996, p. 68) belongs to the same genus as “apoloholics” who stay up late into the night writing extended, vigorous critiques of the latest challenge to Book of Mormon historicity (Ash 2001).

There is, however, a crucial asymmetry in play. Although skeptics of Book of Mormon historicity suffer the disadvantages of being a minority within LDS communities, orthodox believers are a minority in the larger society. Consequently, there are many, many more plausibility structures that support skeptics than there are that support the orthodox. This fact offers a sociological explanation for why apologists invest more energy in responding to skeptics than skeptics do in responding to apologists. Skeptics enjoy much greater social support for their beliefs than apologists do, especially when the debate is pursued according to conventions of academic argument, since apologists have the disadvantage of being a minority in the academy. Simply put, apologists are on the defensive. Skeptics, by contrast, can feel that they have adequately responded to the apologists with relatively little effort because they can more easily imagine non-LDS audiences nodding along with them in agreement. The cards of public
opinion are stacked in the skeptics’ favor, at least outside LDS church settings.

_Empirical evidence and the social validation of belief._ In their analysis of the social processes by which beliefs are validated, Borhek and Curtis identify “empirical relevance” as one factor that makes a belief system vulnerable to disconfirmation. That is, a belief system which makes claims about the observable world is liable to be undercut by evidence drawn from that world, while a belief system focused on unseen or intangible realities does not suffer this liability because its claims are not subject to empirical testing.

In the modern era, Borhek and Curtis observe, some churches have tried to avoid conflicts with the truth-making authority of science by retreating from the empirical relevance of their beliefs—for instance, when some liberal Christians speak of Christ’s resurrection as a spiritual or mystical reality rather than an empirical one. Another strategy for reducing a belief system’s vulnerability to disconfirmation is “retreating to abstraction.” The hypothetical example of this strategy that Borhek and Curtis give is: “Our leaders do seem to have been swindlers, but their basic ideas were valid anyway” (p. 118). That line recalls some revisionist understandings of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Apologists eschew such strategies, insisting instead that Smith’s claims about the book’s origin pertain to the empirical world—there really were Nephites, there really were golden plates. This in turn means that Smith’s claims could be empirically corroborated, which apologists proceed to do in various ways: archaeological and geographical correspondences, textual evidence of an ancient Old World provenance, etc.

However, by Borhek and Curtis’s criteria, Book of Mormon historicity is not, in fact, an empirically relevant (testable) claim. If the claim were restricted to asserting only that a group of Israelites colonized ancient Mesoamerica, that would be empirically relevant because it is a claim of which Mormons and non-Mormons alike could be persuaded given appropriate evidence. Even if the claim were limited to asserting that the Book of Mormon is an ancient Hebrew text—without asserting the reality of prophets, or visits from the resurrected Christ, or the angel Moroni, or Joseph Smith’s miraculous translation of golden plates—that claim, too, would be empirically relevant. For example, if apologist Brian Stubbs (1996) were to submit his claims about Hebrew influence on the Uto-Aztecan languages to non-Mormon linguists for peer review, scholars could, potentially, be persuaded that his claims are
3 Ways to Maintain your Plausibility Structure:

#1 ENCAPSULATION
NO ONE MAY ENTER OUR SANCTUARY!

#2 ENTANGLEMENT
NOW YOU'RE ONE OF US!!

#3 COMPARTMENTALIZATION

empirically valid. That would not, though, be the same as showing that the Book of Mormon is historical, since, as Stubbs acknowledges, there are scenarios that might account for the Hebrew influence other than the explanation offered by the Book of Mormon. Similarly, non-LDS scholars could potentially be persuaded that internal textual evidence indicates an ancient Hebrew origin for the Book of Mormon; FARMS scholar John Tvedtines (2001) claims, in fact, to have met non-LDS scholars who are persuaded of this. It is not clear from Tvedtines account, however, if these scholars realize what a Hebrew origin for the Book of Mormon implies about Joseph Smith’s claim to have translated the book by the power of God—and here we encounter the problem.

Claims about Hebrew influence on Uto-Aztecan, or about textual elements in the Book of Mormon suggestive of a Hebrew origin, are empirically relevant. But apologists employ those empirically relevant claims to lend credibility to an empirically nonrelevant thesis. The claim that the Book of Mormon is an ancient record is not really subject to empirical validation because that claim cannot be extracted from Joseph Smith’s charismatic authority—his claim to be a prophet who conversed with angels and translated the book through miraculous means. Apologists recognize as much when they grant that ultimately only a testimony can prove the Book of Mormon’s authenticity. The empirical nonrelevance of Book of Mormon historicity is also evident in the fact that the Church does not wait for scientists to verify the Book of Mormon’s ancient origins before declaring the book to be authentic. An empirically relevant claim would require scientific evidence to validate it; Book of Mormon historicity is not subject to that requirement because it is not that kind of claim. Instead, belief in historicity “can be expected to survive or fail largely on the basis of the charisma of the prophet” (Borhek and Curtis, p. 119). We see this when apologists insist that accepting or denying the historicity of the Book of Mormon is equivalent to accepting or denying Joseph’s Smith prophetic authority. Belief in historicity is also preserved by what Borhek and Curtis call “the maintenance of consensus through institutional means” (p. 119), such as disciplining members or eliminating CES instructors who disbelieve historicity.

Despite its empirical nonrelevance, belief in Book of Mormon historicity and the evidences offered to support it play important social functions for orthodox Latter-day Saints. Belief in historicity has become, in Borhek and Curtis’ words, an “affirmation of group membership,” in other words, the way to distinguish a so-called faithful LDS scholar or intellectual from, by implication, an unfaithful one. As Borhek and Curtis explain, “The social response to a statement about such a belief has more to do with the status of the speaker in relation to the group than it does with the content of the statement. Is he an outsider? . . . A brother? A renegade?” (p. 125). Furthermore, the presentation of empirical evidence lends a convincing, scientific air to the empirically nonrelevant claim. This is especially true when audiences provide “a sufficiently receptive context” (p. 130) and when the presentation’s physical setting evokes a sense of credibility. This was the case, for instance, when scholars gave presentations supporting Book of Mormon historicity to a largely LDS audience during a 2005 symposium held at the Library of Congress. (A revisionist presentation delivered in a hotel ballroom or at a college campus as part of a lively debate at a Sunstone Symposium likewise draws credibility from its setting.)

Borhek and Curtis identify other strategies for validating empirically nonrelevant beliefs that are evident in Book of Mormon apologetics. One strategy is to link the issue with a recognized enemy, one of Borhek and Curtis’s examples of this is civic groups who attack fluoridation as “Communist” (p. 131). Apologists make the same kind of move when they equate revisionists with Korihor the Antichrist or cast them as allies of anti-Mormon countercultists (Robinson 1991; Bitton 1994). Another strategy is to deny the existence of any middle ground, thus making “social identification . . . the dominating criterion of validity” (Borhek and Curtis, p. 133). Thus, by insisting that the Book of Mormon is historical or a fraud, proponents of the orthodox dilemma try to force skeptical, undecided, or indifferent members to make a choice: either you’re with us, or you’re against us.

Identifying these strategies reiterates that validation of belief is a social process, a process of creating (or imposing) consensus within a group. Empirical evidences can prove useful in that process as tools or weapons, but the process is fundamentally one of drawing and enforcing social boundaries: between insiders and outsiders, between compatriots and enemies, between people who should be taken seriously and people who should be ignored.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

At this point, some readers may be thinking that while these sociological perspectives describe how people often form their beliefs in practice, people ought to draw conclusions about Book of Mormon historicity from an impartial, rational consideration of the evidence, independent of what we may have been socialized to believe. However, social constructionist understandings of knowledge rule out that possibility because the canons of rationality are themselves socially constructed. Not only does socialization produce our sense of what counts as a logical conclusion from the evidence or as a plausible explanation for the facts—the claim is more radical than that. Even the evidence, what we take to be the “facts,” is the product of a discourse community’s conventional ways of knowing.

Applied to the historicity debates, a social constructionist perspective undercuts arguments based on parallels and similar kinds of internal textual evidence, whether they be the parallels apologists draw to antiquity or those that skeptics draw to Smith’s environment. These arguments derive their persuasive force from the assumption that the parallels are objectively there: evidence pointing to a conclusion. However, theories of textual interpretation developed under the influence of social constructionism provide a very different account of what apol-
ogists and skeptics are doing. These theories suggest that when apologists and skeptics draw parallels between the Book of Mormon and an ancient or nineteenth-century setting, they are inventing, not discovering, evidence for what they already assume (or at least hypothesize) to be the book's origins. In short, an interpreter's ability to find convincing parallels to a particular setting has nothing, necessarily, to do with the book's origins. Rather, this ability is due to the interpreter, together with convinced readers, belonging to a discourse community whose conventions make it possible for the interpreter to draw parallels that readers will perceive as meaningful, not as mere coincidence or parallelomania.

How we interpret: The construction of meaning and evidence

TO ILLUSTRATE THE principle that evidence is invented, not found, I will use examples from the essays of American literary theorist Stanley Fish and from the novel Foucault's Pendulum, by Italian semiotician Umberto Eco. Fish and Eco are prominent figures in their disciplines, which specialize in the study of meaning.

Fish describes an informal experiment in which he told students in a course on seventeenth-century religious poetry that a list of linguists' names on the chalkboard, left over from a previous class, was in fact a poem. (Figure 1.) Asked to interpret the poem, the students quickly began to identify its various Christian allegorical elements. The poem, they observed, was in the shape of an altar or tree; they eventually came to favor a tree because that could represent the Virgin Mary, whose symbol is a rose tree, also referred to in the name "Rosenbaum." "Thorne," the students decided, referred to Jesus' crown of thorns; "Levin" recalled Levi and the unleavened bread of the Passover, both types of Christ. The shift from Jewish to Gentile names in the course of the poem was interpreted as representing the shift from the Old to the New Testament. One student even discovered that the three most frequently used letters in the poem were S, O, and N, which students took as a reference to the Son of God.

Fish maintains that the list of names was entirely the result of a previous lecture; that is, he did not manipulate the list to mislead the students into seeing Christian allegory. The fact that the students were able to identify—or rather, to invent—allegorical elements in a text where none were intended indicates that readers do not recognize the meaning of a text, or even the kind of text it is, because of “distinguishing characteristics” that are objectively there. Fish’s students didn’t conclude that the list was a Christian allegory because of their ability to read it as such. Rather, they “recognized” the poem as a Christian allegory before they started to read it. “They knew in advance that they were dealing with a poem—and the distinguishing characteristics followed” (Fish 1980, p. 326). Meaning does not reside in a text, ready-made, waiting for readers to come and extract it. Rather, readers construct meanings for texts—or, we could say, they impose meanings on texts—using the norms they have learned from their interpre-

cative communities. In Fish’s words: “Skilled reading is usually thought to be a matter of discerning what is there, but . . . it is a matter of knowing how to produce what can thereafter be said to be there” (p. 327).

In Foucault's Pendulum, Umberto Eco (1990) uses fiction to make a similar point. The narrator, Casaubon, who works at a publishing firm, meets Ardenti, a would-be author who claims to have deciphered a fragmentary parchment containing a coded message from the secret society of Knights Templar. In Ardenti’s interpretation of the parchment, the Templars outline a series of secret meetings to be held over a period of centuries, which will culminate in the revelation of the Holy Grail. This interpretation of the parchment is based on elaborate associations to lore about the Templars, hermetic magic, and conspiracy theories of history. At first, Casaubon is amused; but as he becomes gradually obsessed with Ardenti’s vision of a secret Plan, Casaubon’s skeptical wife, Lia, does some research of her own. Linking the parchment’s fragmentary references to place names in the city where it was found, Lia concludes that it is nothing more than a florist’s delivery list.

Eco’s understanding of postmodern theories about knowledge and meaning-making is evident in the story he tells. His point is not that Ardenti’s interpretation of the parchment is obviously absurd while Lia’s is just as obviously the true interpretation. Both interpretations involve inductive leaps: possible parallels, conjectures leading to further conjectures, assertions for which the other side could spin an alternative explanation. In each case, the interpretation becomes compelling because of the way the interpreter piles up evidence, triumphantly brandishing pieces that fit, dismissing unresolved puzzles. And each interpretation yields different results.
principally because each is elaborated according to different ground rules, different logics, different norms about where to look for explanations and what kinds of explanation are plausible. It makes sense to Ardenti to interpret the parchment in light of hermetic lore because he already moves through occultist networks where such lore is taken seriously. However, Lia, a hard-headed rationalist, is convinced even before she begins to analyze the fragmentary message that a more pedestrian interpretation must be possible. To return to Fish’s language: both interpreters knew in advance what they were looking at—a coded Templar message or something more mundane—and their recognition of “distinguishing characteristics” that supported their divergent readings followed their respective presuppositions. Each inevitably found—or rather, invented—evidence to support the reading to which he or she was committed. And this, Eco is saying, is simply how interpretation works.

Inventing evidence for Book of Mormon origins

APPLYING THESE THEORIES of interpretation to the Book of Mormon historicity debates, we would conclude that when apologists find internal evidence pointing to an ancient origin, the evidence follows, not precedes, their knowledge that the text is ancient. Just as Fish’s students “knew in advance that they were dealing with a poem—and the distinguishing characteristics followed” (p. 326), so apologists know in advance that they are dealing with an ancient Hebrew text—and the distinguishing characteristics follow. To serve as an argument for historicity, chiasms or parallels to Old World customs must be regarded as simply there in the text, waiting to be discovered. But to repeat Fish’s language: although it seems to orthodox interpreters that they are “discerning what is there” in the text, they are in fact, like Fish’s students, “producing what can thereafter be said to be there” (p. 327). Apologists are inventing, not discovering, the parallels they cite as evidence for ancient origins. Fish’s students were able to “find” elaborate Christian allegories where none were objectively present; by the same token, apologists’ ability to find numerous, complicated correspondences to antiquity in the Book of Mormon does not necessarily mean that the book has an ancient origin.

This same principle holds true, however, for the parallels that skeptics see between the Book of Mormon and Smith’s nineteenth-century environment. Those parallels, too, are invented, not discovered. Skeptics know in advance (or at least hypothesize) that they are dealing with a nineteenth-century composition—and the distinguishing characteristics follow. Although they believe they are discerning what is simply there in the text, they are in fact producing what they believe is there. The same is true for even more idiosyncratic interpretations of the Book of Mormon, whether as a lost history of the African nation Eritrea (Melekin 2000) or as a coded message to nineteenth-century Masons about how to build up a new order of Knights Templar (Forsberg 2004). In every case, interpreters believe they have identified the truth that the Book of Mormon text reveals about itself. But in reality, interpreters construct for themselves an ancient Book of Mormon, or a nineteenth-century Book of Mormon, or a modern expansion of an ancient text, or a work of fictional scripture, etc. And other interpreters find these constructions of the Book of Mormon more or less plausible depending on the shared knowledge they already take as “givens.”

When an apologist such as Daniel Peterson (2000a) boasts that “persons who choose to dismiss the Book of Mormon” must somehow account for “the mounting evidence for its authenticity” (p. 22), a social constructionist perspective would judge this assertion to be, if not naive, then a rhetorical flourish, a show of bravura intended to boost the morale of insiders. The sterner reality is that despite the volumes of internal evidence for historicity they have produced, orthodox scholars lack the social leverage that would be required to press readers outside orthodox LDS discourse communities to engage with their work. (Apologists take some solace from knowing that this literature has won begrudging respect among evangelical apologists; see Mosser and Owen 1998.) Returning to Peterson’s challenge, skeptics have, in fact, accounted for the “mounting evidence” created by the never-ending stream of orthodox scholarship: namely, by dismissing it as pseudo-scholarship, evidence marshaled after the fact to support predetermined conclusions. And in a sense they are right, given the socially constructed nature of evidence—but with the crucial caveat that skeptics’ arguments for a nineteenth-century origin merit the same description in the same sense.

This is because what apologists call “evidence” pointing to historicity would be more accurately described as “readings” premised on historicity. Apologists have developed elaborate readings of the Book of Mormon: reading Alma 36 as a chiasm, reading King Benjamin’s address as an ancient Near Eastern coronation, reading the Book of Mormon’s internal geography onto the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. But like all readings, apologists’ readings carry persuasive force only for discourse communities who share the conventions by which the readings were produced. Granted, orthodox scholars develop their readings of the Book of Mormon using methods conventional for their disciplines: history, anthropology, classics, biblical studies. But the plausibility of these readings ultimately rests on orthodox scholarship’s defining unconventional premise: that the Book of Mormon was delivered by an angel to a farmboy called to be a prophet. Outsiders who dismiss that premise will also dismiss the readings that follow from it, no matter how extensive or sophisticated those readings may be. As Terryl Givens has remarked, “The Book of Mormon’s insistent claims to supernatural provenance do not bode well for any change soon in the general scholarly neglect” of orthodox scholarship (2002, pp. 149-50).

Likewise, what skeptics call “evidence” pointing to a nineteenth-century origin would be more accurately described as “readings” premised on a nineteenth-century origin. These readings too can be elaborate, especially readings of a psychoanalytic bent. But like all readings, skeptics’ readings carry persuasive force only for discourse communities who share the
The crucial difference from orthodox readings is that there are many more discourse communities that take the Book of Mormon to be a nineteenth-century composition than there are that take it to be ancient. The result is a powerful public bias in favor of skeptical readings of the Book of Mormon. That bias is so powerful that some skeptical readings have been judged plausible by prominent discourse communities (e.g., academic communities) even when strong arguments could be made against those readings by those same communities' standards. This was the case with John Brooke's *The Refiner's Fire* (1994) and Clyde Forsberg's *Equal Rites* (2004), both published by university presses, the former to considerable scholarly acclaim, despite significant weaknesses in their application of scholarly methods (Duffy 2006).

The message here is that when a reading is judged to be "plausible" this means that the reading is consistent with the conventional wisdom of the discourse community passing that judgment. Whether or not a reading seems plausible to readers has nothing to do with whether or not that reading corresponds to objective reality. The fact that apologists can read the Book of Mormon as an ancient text does not necessarily mean it is an ancient text, and the fact that skeptics can read it as a nineteenth-century text does not necessarily mean it is a nineteenth-century text—just as Fish's students could read the list of linguists as a Christian allegory without it actually being a Christian allegory.

Apologists have insinuated that the parallels and other internal evidences they have found for historicity far exceed what could be attributed to mere coincidence (Madsen 1982; Nibley 1988; J. E. Clark 2006). But their claim has no more persuasive force than if Fish's students had protested that the Christian allegorical elements they identified could not be mere coincidence. That is to say, the claim can have force only within a discourse community that already regards readers' assumptions about the text as plausible—namely, a community that believes the Book of Mormon is ancient. But the claim can exercise no persuasive force for readers who are firmly embedded in discourse communities whose conventional wisdom rules that imagining the Book of Mormon to be an ancient text translated by supernatural means lies beyond the limits of the credible. Again, the problem is not only that the communities disagree about how to interpret or weigh the evidence; the problem is also that they disagree on what constitutes evidence, or fact, in the first place.

**A NEW APPROACH TO THE HISTORICITY QUESTION?**

When applied to the Book of Mormon historicity debates, sociological perspectives on knowledge suggest the following.

- Belief in historicity results from socialization into orthodox LDS networks; conversely, Latter-day Saints who doubt historicity do so as a result of weakened identification with such networks—for instance, as a result of socialization into academic communities and their ways of knowing.
• To sustain their beliefs about historicity, orthodox Saints and skeptics alike must keep themselves immersed in a universe of discourse where those beliefs are affirmed as sensible; this task is more difficult for the orthodox, because theirs is a minority view in the larger society, but the continual production of apologetic literature helps meet this need.

• Although Book of Mormon historicity is tied to Joseph Smith’s prophetic authority and is therefore not an empirically testable claim, apologists’ marshalling of empirical evidence serves important social functions such as evoking a sense of credibility and marking boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

• The internal evidences that apologists and skeptics offer to support their respective views on historicity are produced by divergent readings of the text, built on divergent premises; the ability to construct such readings does not necessarily shed light on the book’s origins, and a given reading will be persuasive only within discourse communities that share its underlying premises.

If we accept these perspectives, what should we conclude about the Book of Mormon historicity debates? Are beliefs about historicity purely relative, and is discussion therefore pointless? What, if anything, do social constructionist perspectives imply about how a person should decide what to believe about historicity?

Is it all just relative?

IT MIGHT SEEM that a social constructionist perspective requires us to throw up our hands and declare: Readers will see whatever they want in the Book of Mormon; there’s no way to know whose reading is right, so there’s no point in arguing about it. While social constructionism is undeniably relativistic, there are nevertheless two reasons not to conclude that interpretation is purely, hopelessly relative.

First, interpretations of the Book of Mormon can never be purely idiosyncratic because the interpretive process is not purely individual. Rather, interpretations are created through the application of norms shared by some group. As Fish explains, “Interpretive communities . . . are responsible both for the shape of a reader’s activities and for the texts those activities produce” (p. 322). Even interpretations of Book of Mormon origins that seem to have a single proponent—such as Embaye Melekin’s Afrocentric appropriation of the Book of Mormon as a lost history of Eritrea, or Clyde Forsberg’s reading of the book as a coded Masonic manifesto—reproduce ways of reading that are conventional for their discourse communities (in these cases, Afrocentrists or hermeticists). The communal nature of interpretation means that interpreters have to persuade readers within a given discourse community that their particular interpretation measures up to the community’s norms. For example, not every argument offered on behalf of Book of Mormon historicity will be judged plausible or well supported by editors at FARMS.

When it comes to arbitrating between interpretations of the Book of Mormon offered by different discourse communities, such as apologists versus revisionists, one is likely to encounter situations where the parties draw incommensurable conclusions from incommensurable premises. At that point one may feel compelled to resort to relativism: “Each side will see what they want; we can’t resolve the debate, so what does it matter?” But the second reason not to settle on this conclusion is that beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity can have tangible consequences in people’s lives, for good or for ill, which means that what people believe matters very much. A loss of faith in Book of Mormon historicity can be traumatic for individuals and families. Revisionist David Wright lost his job at BYU because of his disbelief in historicity and, like some other revisionists, was later expelled from the Church. On the other hand, believing in historicity might be a professional liability for an LDS academic outside BYU. Dennis Potter (2005) and John Williams (2005) have argued that beliefs related to historicity—namely, beliefs about Lamanites—can have real world consequences such as influencing whether Mormons participate in oppressing or liberating Native Americans.

An analogy which demonstrates how much can be at stake in what people believe about a text’s origins is the Mark Hofmann forgeries (Sillitoe and Roberts 1989; Turley 1992). People died over the question of whether Hofmann’s finds were what he claimed they were. We could analyze the Hofmann case in the same constructionist terms I have used to discuss Stanley Fish’s students or the Book of Mormon historicity debates. We could speak of prosecutors and their witnesses “inventing” the evidence that supported their reading of the Hofmann documents as forgeries. We could identify social reasons that the prosecution’s interpretation of the documents has come to wield the authority of undisputed truth: first, because that interpretation was endorsed by a powerful truth-making institution, the courts; second, because Hofmann has not attracted a cadre of devoted apologists who relentlessly pick apart the prosecution’s arguments and churn out counter-evidence to support the authenticity of Hofmann’s finds; and third, because Hofmann himself acquiesced in the prosecution’s construction of events. From a social constructionist perspective, all this would be an accurate account of how the truth about Mark Hofmann’s forgeries was produced. But the fact that this truth was socially constructed certainly does not make it inconsequential. In a less dramatic way, beliefs about Book of Mormon historicity also have social consequences that make people’s conclusions about this question matter.

A social constructionist perspective does not suggest that Latter-day Saints should dispense with trying to draw conclusions about Book of Mormon historicity, individually or collectively. On the contrary, people can, and do, reach conclusions about historicity all the time. They must: Fish’s theory implies that the ability to make any sense of the Book of Mormon at all depends on readers having some working beliefs, however
vague or provisional, about what this text is and where it came from. What a social constructionist perspective does suggest is that we cannot arbitrate between competing discourse communities' claims about historicity from a position that is not itself already embedded in prior assumptions about what is plausible. No such position exists. In other words, we cannot suspend all belief until after we have examined the evidence; we cannot approach the historicity question with a wide open mind; we cannot be objective as that term is often understood. We cannot do these things because our sense of what counts as evidence—what is well reasoned, what is plausible, what merits any consideration at all—depends on prior beliefs, beliefs we derive from the discursive communities with which we are affiliated. We are back, in other words, to plausibility structures: the social bases that produce our beliefs.

**Social constructionism in LDS apologetics**

THE IDEA THAT we cannot be objective in assessing the historicity question is not new. Some revisionists resist the idea; Edward Ashment, Brent Metcalfe, Dan Vogel, and David Wright have all insisted on the possibility of arriving at objective truth through properly applied method, free of bias. By contrast, a number of orthodox writers—from Richard Bushman to Louis Midgley to Kevin Christensen—have argued with varying degrees of sophistication for the impossibility of objective knowledge. As one observer notes: orthodox scholars, “having embraced postmodernist attitudes on the social construction of truth,” maintain that a person's assessment of arguments around Book of Mormon historicity is never neutral or free of presuppositions (Introvigne 1996, p. 10).

Apologist Noel Reynolds (1997) draws close to a social constructionist understanding when he recognizes that the persuasive force of evidence depends on a discourse community's prior understandings of what is plausible. “There is no point,” Reynolds remarks, “in discussing the evidence or arguments prior understandings of what is plausible. “There is no point,” Reynolds remarks, “in discussing the evidence or arguments for or against the Joseph Smith account of the Book of Mormon” unless the discussants at least accept the possibility of its truth.” Only then, he says, can “reasonable discussion focus on the merits of the evidence” (p. 97). Similarly, John Sorenson (1985) grants that no number of parallels can prove anything about historicity, since readers “who are already inclined to accept will conclude that the parallels constitute overwhelming evidence while more skeptical minds will chalk up the same parallels to faulty data, or to a series of misinterpretations on my part, or to mere coincidence” (p. xviii).

Incidentally, the willingness of orthodox scholars to grant that knowledge is constructed, and revisionists' tendency to resist that view, can be explained in sociological terms. It stands to reason that apologists, as a disadvantaged minority in the academy, would argue for the political, supposition-laden nature of what currently counts as “science” or “critical scholarship.” It is advantageous for apologists to argue thus because the argument relativizes and thus undermines the authority of the naturalistic assumptions dominating academia—assumptions which exclude Book of Mormon historicity as a credible position. It is likewise understandable that revisionists would be reluctant to acknowledge that the norms of rationality on which they base their arguments are socially constructed. Acknowledging that would relativize the authority of those norms—which is hardly what revisionists want to do, since they are relying on the authority of rationality or science as a counterweight to the authority of LDS orthodoxy.

**Does social construction make a difference?**

IF WE ACCEPT a social constructionist perspective—if we accept that our judgments about historicity are the result of socialization and that those judgments therefore prove nothing about objective reality—how then should we proceed in adopting a position on Book of Mormon historicity? One might argue that a social constructionist perspective ultimately makes no difference in how we assess arguments and arrive at beliefs. Since we could not function in the world if we constantly relativized every idea, there comes a point at which, even if we know our beliefs are socially constructed, we have to treat them as simply true. Debate and analysis therefore proceed as they did before social constructionism. Knowing that I find certain beliefs plausible because of my socialization does not, or need not, change the fact that I find those beliefs plausible.

However, buying into social constructionism does mean that certain kinds of arguments made around historicity will become less persuasive. Apologists and skeptics alike argue that they have piled up too many parallels, either to antiquity or to the nineteenth century, to be mere coincidence. As we have seen, however, such arguments are naïve from a social constructionist perspective since, according to that perspective, the parallels are the invention of interpreters and therefore do not necessarily tell us anything about the text's actual origins. Some Book of Mormon skeptics accuse apologists of exercising “strategically-placed attention and inattention to evidence” based on conclusions that the apologists have arrived at in advance (Metcalfe 1993, pp. 156–58). But such accusations lose their force if one concurs with social constructionists that all interpretation operates in this way, including the skeptics' own interpretations of the Book of Mormon. Thomas Murphy has faulted John Sorenson's limited geography because instead of being “based . . . on scientific evidence,” it “serves social functions,” such as preserving the plausibility of the Book of Mormon in the face of potential challenges or demarcating certain avenues of scholarly inquiry as acceptable for orthodox scholars (2003, pp. 129–31). This criticism, too, loses much of its force if one regards all knowledge as serving social functions.

On the other side, when apologist William Hamblin proposes that readers compare the work of apologists and revisionists to decide “whose arguments are superior” (1995, p. 87), he glosses over a host of complications that social constructionism raises regarding how readers would recognize an argument as superior, particularly when the arguments being
compared are built from such divergent premises. Because the conversation occurs between different discourse communities, the Book of Mormon historicity debates are not as simple as seeing who has the best evidence and analysis, contrary to what Hamblin implies. Shifting to a different claim: Daniel Peterson protests against skeptics’ “a priori attitude of total dismissal” toward orthodox scholarship, an attitude which leads skeptics to “declare themselves the winners of a race from which competitors have effectively been banned” (1993, 13). This statement loses force from a social constructionist perspective if it is meant to imply that a priori dismissal is illegitimate as a rule, since every discourse community practices a priori dismissals of some kind. (It is a different matter if Peterson’s intention is to argue that skeptics should not dismiss orthodox scholarship in particular, or if he means to say that skeptics cannot credibly claim to have rebutted what they have in fact only dismissed.)

Weigh relationships, not arguments

IN ADDITION TO problematizing the lines of argument discussed above, social constructionism could potentially make an even more dramatic difference in a person’s approach to the historicity question. If you accept that your sense of the plausibility of a certain argument about historicity is a product of your commitment to certain social groups (plausibility structures, discourse communities), then that knowledge might prompt you to spend less time examining the arguments and more time examining your social commitments. Apologists and skeptics tend to approach their task as if deciding what to believe about historicity is a process of weighing the arguments for and against to determine which are most sound. Alternatively, you might approach the process as one of deciding which social affiliations are most important to you—since those social affiliations, and the beliefs they sustain, will lead you to conclude that certain arguments are the most sound.

Are you willing to be a person who subscribes to what most people in your society view as peculiar, if not bizarre, claims about an angel and golden plates? Are you willing to accept the marginalization that implies? Are you willing, for example, to dissent from dominant constructions of reality in some of the academic disciplines? On the other hand, are you willing to have your relationships within the Church complicated, perhaps strained or broken? How significant is your LDS membership to you, and why? People decide these questions, whether or not they are conscious of doing so, whenever they adopt a position on historicity. Would it be helpful, then, to think through such questions explicitly?

We have seen that sociological perspectives on knowledge indicate that beliefs are produced and sustained by affiliation with communities who share those beliefs. Once you have committed to such a community, whatever it is, you may be assured of finding corroborating evidence for the community’s beliefs, whatever they are. Conversation with others who share your beliefs will reinforce your sense of those beliefs’ plausibility, despite outsiders’ skepticism, and it will let you feel justified in ignoring or minimizing counterarguments. What is really at question, then, is: Which interpretive community are you going to belong to? Which affiliations with other people do you find most rewarding? Whom do you want to be able to claim as “your people”? Whom do you prefer to keep at a cau-
tious arm’s length? With whom would you rather have nothing to do at all? And which position on historicity will allow you to maintain the relationships you desire?

I confess to being uncertain how helpful these sociological perspectives on the Book of Mormon historicity debates will prove for readers who are trying to find their way to a position. An argument can be made that social constructionism yields little practical guidance for people working out their beliefs “on the ground,” however convincing it may be as a theoretical account “from the air” of what those people are doing.

But on the chance that this perspective may prove illuminating and useful for some readers, I reiterate: According to a social constructionist perspective, you do not arrive at a position on Book of Mormon historicity by sitting alone somewhere, reading and weighing the arguments in your head, even though it might look and feel like that is what you are doing. Rather, you arrive at a position by negotiating relationships—relationships to the Church, to academic discourse communities, and to other groups in the mainstream or on the margins of modern society, such as evangelical Christians or secular humanists. More concretely, deciding what to believe means deciding what kinds of relationships to have with specific people in your life: family, church members, colleagues, neighbors. And from a theological perspective, it means deciding what kind of relationship, if any, to have with God.

CONCLUSION

I CONCLUDE THIS two-part framing article by reiterating a point I made at the beginning of Part One: from an LDS perspective, faith in the Book of Mormon must rest, first and finally, on testimony—on spiritual experiences sought through pondering, praying, and experimenting on the word (Moroni 10:3–5; Alma 32:26–43). A conviction that is based merely on rational arguments or empirical evidence will be perpetually unstable, having to be reevaluated every time a new argument or new evidence comes along. Even a firm disbelief in the Book of Mormon will be based on bedrock assumptions that resemble a testimony inasmuch as they arise from forceful intuitions about reality or compelling life experiences.

Deciding whether or not you think the Book of Mormon is an ancient document miraculously translated by Joseph Smith is not a question on the same order of deciding, for instance, whether or not you think William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon actually wrote the plays attributed to him, a question that has attracted some controversy in recent years. The Shakespeare authorship question is an example of an empirically relevant question, and one’s views on a question of that nature ought always to be open in theory to the possibility of revision based on new empirical arguments. But as an empirically nonrelevant question, Book of Mormon historicity must be resolved differently: by conversion to some variety of religious faith (or a self-conscious rejection of religious faith). All the empirical arguments that apologists and skeptics offer for or against Book of Mormon historicity serve only to reinforce, or at most to modulate, convictions that are necessarily reached by means other than empirical argument.

From a perspective grounded in the sociology of knowledge, the Book of Mormon historicity question is at core a question of relationships. How should Latter-day Saints relate to other social groups and their ways of knowing—for example, academic discourse communities? And how should Latter-day Saints who disagree about historicity relate to one another? That last question can be posed in various directions: How should orthodox Saints relate to revisionists who want to remain in the Church? How should revisionists relate to apologists? How should both relate to more hostile Book of Mormon critics?

But given how power is presently distributed in the Church, the question’s most urgent form is this: How should the orthodox majority treat the minority of skeptics in the Church? As fellow Saints in good standing, without reservation? As members not entirely sound in doctrine yet tolerable? As struggling individuals in need of fellowship? As apostates who need to be disciplined to prevent their leading others astray? As traitors who seek to destroy God’s church? As harmlessly idiosyncratic? A valued alternative perspective? An enemy to be fought? How Latter-day Saints should treat people with differing views on Book of Mormon historicity is one of the most fundamental questions facing the Saints because it is bound up in other fundamental questions—questions about what it means to be members of a community called to be one in heart and mind, faithful to God’s word, seekers and witnesses of truth, and, above all, practitioners of Christlike love.

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BASQUE CARVING

Halfway up the Sierras west of Reno towards timberline, names sounding strange to us alphabetize the trees. Carved fifty years before in the whale white bark of aspen, they have healed themselves black in deep cut grooves, age peeling the skin back in clusters. Wind-played, leaves quake like chimes sounding vespers in the sheep-grazed meadow grass. In 1933, a shepherd, border collie at heel, signed his name to these trees, imagined abstract wolves and art deco dressed women, inlaid pictures drawn around the slender trunks, dated for us and others to see. We come here years later, high valley lit by the growing night sky; new witnesses to old art. We lie down to sleep with his women in this cutback clearing, counting wolves like those he saw, wondering what he didn’t carve.

—GARLAND STROTHEN
“Wow, what an interesting, thought-provoking article!”
“But if it’s correct, then what meaning does my life have?”

These two reactions inevitably spilled from our lips as we edited the second part of John-Charles Duffy’s Book of Mormon historicity article, “Perspectives from the Sociology of Knowledge.”

Are our deepest beliefs really rooted in which circle of friends we like to hang out with best? Does rationality really play so small a role in our search for truth?

Not wanting to plunge our readers into an existential abyss without at least a penlight, SUNSTONE has asked four smart people to offer insights they have gained from their interactions with the social constructionist viewpoint.

The Orthodoxy of Uncertainty
by Stephen C. Taysom

STEPHEN C. TAYSOM holds a B.A. from BYU in history and Ph.D. in the history of religion from Indiana University, with specializations in American religious history and ritual studies. He is an assistant professor of religious studies at Cleveland State University.

THINKERS FROM GALILEO TO FREUD AND FROM Jesus to Joseph Smith have discovered time and again that people do not usually take kindly to the notion that reality is much more complex, subtle, and apparently irrational than we are likely to believe. Similarly, John-Charles Duffy’s thoughtful essay overlaying Book of Mormon historicity debates with social constructionist theory might lead some readers to feel a bit disoriented, put off, or even angry. I happen to see a great deal of value in the ideas Duffy presents, so it would be unfortunate indeed if some thoughtful readers tuned him out because of the intellectual discomfort that often accompanies the exploration of new ideas.

In my own teaching, I have found that using a few simple analogies to introduce these theories to undergraduates are helpful. My favorite is the football analogy. The basic idea behind social constructionist theory is that persons decide how to weigh, evaluate, countenance, or dismiss “evidence” for some proposition, idea, or event, because of deep, sometimes subconscious, community allegiances. So when a flag is thrown during a football game, the coach of the team that is penalized almost always displays an opposite reaction to the coach of the team that is not. Both coaches see the same event, both watch the replays on the jumbotron at the same time. But everyone, from the coach to the fan in the nosebleed seats, reacts to the flag, not based on the intrinsic evidence but on community allegiance.

To be sure, the debates that Duffy examines are a good deal more sophisticated than the simple football analogy. Nevertheless, it is hard to argue with the basic premise that something other than “rationality” is at work here. And this is what many readers will find troubling. What we are dealing with here is not the possibility that some newfound bit of evidence could be discovered which would establish something like a general consensus among believers and non-believers about the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. The fear that one’s worldview may be upended by new evidence is bad enough, but discovering that one’s own perceptions of “evidence” are based on something other than rationality is profoundly upsetting.

Duffy’s article is powerful because it places a metaphorical “bridge out” sign over the epistemological river of rationality. There must be an objective answer somewhere on the other side of that river, but no one is ever going to get there. Or, more precisely, they have no way of proving that they are there, even to themselves. It is the gut-wrenching realization of such epistemological uncertainty that leads some simply to amplify their own arguments in the belief that, if such arguments are loud and cocky enough, if they carry a sufficient dose of swagger, they may eventually convince even the speaker him- or herself.

Duffy ought to be commended for spelling out in theoretical terms what many sense instinctively, if impressionistically, already—that when it comes to evidence, particularly in the case of the Book of Mormon historicity debates, most parties are looking for confirmation.

WHAT IS MOST fascinating to me is that Duffy has traditional LDS epistemological and revelatory opinion firmly on his side. Two famous instances
drawn from LDS scriptural texts illustrate this point. The first is from a revelation that is now Section 5 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Received in early 1829, this revelation is in part a response to Joseph Smith’s desire to “convince” others of the reality of his visionary experiences by showing them physical artifacts, particularly the plates from which the Book of Mormon were translated. The revelation stipulates, however, that the only evidence to be presented is God’s “word” carried by missionaries commissioned by Joseph Smith. If people fail to believe the words brought by those messengers, the document declares, then “they would not believe...if it were possible that you should show them all these things which I have committed unto you.” According to the God of Joseph Smith, prior allegiance to an idea or a community dictates the power of any apparently empirical evidence.

This is precisely the point made in the second textual example, this time from the thirty-second chapter of Alma in the Book of Mormon. Alma holds that the very first step in obtaining spiritual knowledge is the desire to believe. Such desire, it seems fair to argue, must necessarily stem from an a priori emotional connection to some kind of communally enacted belief or value system. Even in what is perhaps Mormonism’s most famous case of epistemological instruction, known as “Moroni’s promise,” it is the esteem in which the sociological actor holds this community, rather than the sheer force of its empirical reality, that leads first to feelings of desire for confirmation, which is followed by experimentation, and which concludes with spiritual confirmation.

If nothing else, a conscious engagement with social constructionist theory ought to lead to a sharper definition among apologists and readers of apologetics about the aims of the historicity debates themselves. However, the debates that Duffy cites are not the only apologetics that need reimagining if the theories he presents hold true. It seems to me that those “Liahona” Mormons who spend time attempting to defend Mormonism’s virtues to their intellectual audiences by downplaying the supernatural claims and foregrounding the cultural elements of the faith could also learn something about their arguments.

And what if, by some strange twist of fate, it turns out that those writing for FARMS and FAIR and those writing for Dialogue and SUNSTONE are doing their respective work out of allegiance to the same community? I daresay that this is very possible and would prove a simultaneously deeply disconcerting and profoundly joyful discovery.

My Book Club with God
by Janet Garrard-Willis

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DRAWING PART TWO OF JOHN-CHARLES DUFFY’S “Mapping Book of Mormon Historicity” plunked me right back down in the middle of my sophomore year at BYU, the year all centers failed and I had to lose my faith in order to find it.

The first lecture I heard on social constructionism spurred me to chase down the professor and barrage him with frantic questions: “What about the author’s intent? What about what the book really means? How can I ever write anything that will do any good in the world if my intentions and the genesis of my work are irrelevant? What about the Book of Mormon? The Bible? How do I know I understand them? Answers to prayers?”

Slight pause.

“I’m confused and angry.”

The professor kindly listened to my babble and then informed me that I should be angry and should be confused. This, he intimated, was good for me.

It didn’t feel good for me. Iron rods gone wobbly, Liahonas pointing every which way, the notion that my explication of God’s will might have nary a thing to do with the actual wishes of my Creator. Certainly Duffy’s article might similarly unmoor its readers. Still, like a small-town kid hitting the collegiate wall of theory, losing our footing can be quite good for us. Not comfortable, certainly, but good.

The messy reality of a Mormon ward probably doesn’t divide neatly into the pur extremes of apologist/revisionist scales, though repeatedly superimposing that paradigm onto our wards can make it more so. Most wards contain people who deftly toggle between epistemologies at work and at church, suspending different sorts of disbelief in order to build different communities. Some never notice that they’re doing this; others (like me) quite enjoy such fluidity.

I imagine that if we drew a Venn diagram mapping the belief systems of any ward, we wouldn’t find a bunch of people in two different circles that didn’t touch, but rather multiple circles with overlapping arcs: anthropologists who understand that the temple ceremony is not unique but who believe it is uniquely situated in a priesthood-bearing church; neurologists that the temple ceremony is not unique but who believe it is uniquely situated in a priesthood-bearing church; neurologists who can parse the way a human brain creates “paranormal” experience but who also believe such experiences serve as conduits between God and humans as well as between misfiring neurons; blue-collar workers who read widely from numerous fields or navigate their worlds via different sorts of intuition. Some might “choose a position” of formally announcing preference for one epistemology over others, but those folks will probably continue to employ other systems anyway.

In these schemata, each individual’s circle may very likely intersect with those of other ward members at one point or another. When brought to our attention, those spaces of intersection will probably cause some spiritual dissonance—and that space is where we can choose to focus on positive or negative
communal growth. In the terminology of anthropologist Victor Turner, such overlap and tension places us in “liminal” space, where paradox looms large and where introspection, coupled with ritual, can lead to transformative change.

According to Turner, true community forms in such space. Imagine a ward where a number of members realize that what is useful (and even “true”) in one setting ceases to be useful (and possibly true) in another. Now imagine those same people actively working to map the overlap between truth-building endeavors. While the individuals would come to different conclusions regarding the degree to which their belief systems could be compartmentalized, peacefully coalesced, or even brought into constructive paradox, all would have to either consciously consider or consciously ignore the needs and faith of the others. Reaching identical conclusions is less important than the active process of looking at self and group and then deciding how to treat one another.

We can choose humility and utility. We can also choose pride, hierarchy, and stagnation. Do we choose to condemn someone with split epistemological loyalties, or recognize the utility in his or her honesty? Do we allow that honesty to further augment our own, to inspire the sort of reflection urged in the fifth chapter of Alma? Knowing that the word “true” holds different meanings in similarly sincere testimonies regarding the gospel, do we choose to count only the sincerity of those whose definitions match our own, or do we actively work to engage different meanings meaningfully in our ward families?

REMEMBER STANLEY FISH’S students, the ones who built meaning out of a random chalkboard list? We can take social constructionism and argue that the students rendered themselves fools, wasting all that time on a text which wasn’t. But such a cynical reading misses a different possibility: that a text never took primacy in their activity in the first place. Rather, shared knowledge of things such as cultural commonplaces, investigative process, and metaphor facilitated the cohesion of certain social bonds. The social constructionist view of their endeavor places more responsibility on the students than would a view in which they simply unclouded vision. A Church-wide embrace of social constructionism—and let’s be clear, I don’t think such a thing is going to happen—won’t render the truth claims of our Church unimportant. What it could do, though, is lend us not just relativism, but a relative perspective into other’s hearts. Having witnessed another’s tussle in the transition space of liminality could free us from the belief that integrity allows only one approach to truth. If we accept that Truth (capital “T”) might be out there but that we only build approximations (lowercase “t”), we’d also have to consider that our architecture might not work for someone else. We also might consider that alternate architectures aid others in contributing to the community of faith, something they wouldn’t be able to do if pressured toward ultimatums.

I’m quite glad my introduction to social constructionism didn’t involve an ultimatum: I don’t know what I’d have chosen. But had I rejected rather than waded through my overlapping belief systems, I’d have either lost my faith or found it in equally useless suspension. Instead, I wrestled with my own angels and alphabets.

VIVIDLY RECALL WATCHING Wilfred Griggs write “Myth = A True Story” across the chalkboard in my history of civilization course and feeling my world shift once again. Suddenly the definition of “truth” begged not one but multiple definitions for multiple contexts. Such a notion excited me immensely; I wrote my first paper for Dr. Griggs about Pandora and Eve and avoided invoking historicity to elevate one tale over the other. To the extent that I could employ both stories in a quest to invent myself as a mother of creation, both functioned equally well. Instead of thinking I had to prove myself and my community allows me to more fully love my brothers and sisters, helping them in our shared helplessness and strength.

Whether or not Joseph Smith received an ancient record at angelic behest will still matter, of course, just as it matters whether or not we can work within our differences and our overlapping spaces of angst to help each other load a U-haul or weather an ongoing crisis of faith.

According to Turner, such overlap and tension places us in “liminal” space, where paradox looms large and where introspection, coupled with ritual, can lead to transformative change.
My faith was neither saved nor entirely constructed during my sophomore year. Rather, I learned that the process matters. It has as much to do with happiness as with any final telos, and so I’m uninterested in completing myself and then hanging around in some glorious boredom for a few dull decades. No, I’m interested in trying out new ideas, both to comprehend ephemera and to better understand, and thus help, the people around me. Maybe I’ll “live” myself into perfection the same way the poet Rainer Maria Rilke said “living questions” could result in finding oneself already amidst the answers: too much focus on the end precludes becoming the person worthy of winding up there.

In Harper Lee’s To Kill A Mockingbird, Miss Maudie announces her chagrin at the ability of some folks to spend so much time worrying about the next life that they never learn to live in this one. That rings “true” for me. Navigating this life demands different approaches to different questions.

That’s not compromise; that’s creativity. I choose to believe the Creator approves.

Richer Than Yea or Nay
By Dan Wotherspoon

DAN WOTHERSPOOL is director of operations for the Foundation for Interreligious Diplomacy. He is a former editor of SUNSTONE.

AS DUFFY NOTES IN PART I OF HIS ARTICLE, I’M ON record as having chosen a deliberate strategy of remaining open to the question of Book of Mormon historicity (SUNSTONE, October 2008, 53).

As I’ve tried through the years to deconstruct why I made and continue to make this choice, I’ve mostly emphasized the role the Book of Mormon has played in my own faith journey. The Book of Mormon has been the catalyst for many life-changing experiences whose reality and importance I cannot and do not want to diminish. So whenever I encounter something in the Book of Mormon that feels small or exaggerated or in some other way obviously human (whether the humanness of Joseph Smith as author/translator or the humanness of Mormon or Nephri), I deliberately try to recall passages that have opened the heavens for me. This act calls me back into Mormonism and its rich vocabulary for talking about human potential and expansively embracing every truth wherever it is found, I remain a Mormon and active in the Church. I don’t believe in Mormon exclusivisms any more than I believe in any exclusivisms. My fellow members and Church leaders don’t always understand or accept me, but it is within the Mormon community that I still feel called to live, work, learn, and teach. This doesn’t mean, however, that I don’t also seek fellowship with other communities both inside and outside Mormonism that express plausibility structures that allow for more complex views of scripture and human journeying.

SLOWLY, OVER the years, I have discovered that there really is a community whose ways of knowing and valuing offer me a peace that matches my sense that life is far more remarkable than what can be described by language or captured by human intellect. However, it’s a community that is not easy to spot. It is found among many different people and places. So I’m always on the lookout, seeking out this community through reading and conversing with wise people and through deep contemplation, for its fellowship demands that we pay attention to and align our inner lives and outer actions.

My first explicit recognition that I had begun to discover the existence of this community for myself came eleven years ago as I connected deeply with James Fowler’s descriptions of those people within every tradition who have pushed beyond simply accepting the orthodoxies of either religion or secularism. They are people who honor the contributions both offer but live in wonder more than certainty. Most often these people remain embedded within the traditions that nurtured them, but at the same time they transcend the particularities of their Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Mormonism, or Scientism and live lives that are grounded in what is the deepest, richest, and truly universal. I had recog-
nized and been drawn to these kinds of people before, but I hadn’t been able to articulate exactly what it was about them that was different, what secrets they possessed that allowed them to move forward optimistically even in the midst of so much shallowness.

Now that I have been alerted to this community, however, I find descriptions of them everywhere. They are people who, as Rachel Naomi Remen writes, recognize that “life is a process whose every event is connected to the moment that just went by,” that we are all on a sacred journey and that “an unanswered question is a fine traveling companion. It sharpens [our] eye for the road.” They are those whom E.M. Forster calls “the sensitive, the considerate, the plucky” whose “members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages” and whose “temple, as one of them remarked, is the holiness of the Heart’s affections, and their kingdom, though they never possess it, is the wide-open world.” Krista Tippetts describes them as people who are able to honor “both poetry and physics, scripture and science, allelujah and analysis.” As I continue my journey with the Book of Mormon, these are the companions I seek.

**Entanglement**

*By E. George Goold*

E. GEORGE GOOLD has worked as a journalist in many different areas of the United States. Currently he is single, apprenticed to an artisan beer brewer, writing the great Mormon novel, and trying to get up the guts to go to church.

Is Rockwell a paradox? There is a simple explanation: He was a Mormon—and any attempt to analyze the man must be predicated upon that statement . . . He was a Mormon. He was a good Mormon. —HUGH NIBLEY

LIKE ME, ORRIN PORTER ROCKWELL HAD LONG hair for a man. Long flowing locks. Rockwell’s resplendent mane was a matter of prophetic decree, as a matter of fact. Joseph Smith once blessed him, “Orrin Porter Rockwell, cut not thine hair nor bullet nor blade shall hurt thee, no harm shall come upon thee nor enemies have power over thee.”

Rockwell was basically the Secret Service for Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. A bodyguard. A tough. A killer nicknamed the Destroying Angel. A man who did the necessary dirty work during dark and bloody times. As one anonymous journal entry recorded, “When the fear of God has left a man’s heart, that is when you send men like Porter Rockwell to drive the fear back in again.”

We can safely assume, I think, that Rockwell would have no opinion regarding the historicity of the Book of Mormon. He was semi-literate. He could barely read the book at all. Perhaps he felt, as I do, that one doesn’t really have to read it to know it’s true.

Like me, Porter Rockwell moved West and opened a brewery. His was in Utah near Point of the Mountain, on land that now boasts a state prison. Mine is in the North Fork Valley on the western slope of the Colorado Rockies. Rockwell provided high-grade whiskey and stout brews at his saloon while I am an apprentice craft brewer. His drinking didn’t impact his steady and devoted Church service, nor was he considered a sinner. My drinking does impact my Church service, and people will say I’m a sinner.

“Your beliefs about historicity are a function of your relationships with other people, in and out of the Church,” says John-Charles Duffy. Porter Rockwell is an important member of my network, as is Terrence McKenna.

McKenna was born in Paonia, Colorado, where I live. A writer, philosopher, ethnobotanist, and student of shamanism, I doubt he had an opinion regarding the historicity of the Book of Mormon. But he is a member of my network because of his theories about time. “McKenna theorized that the linear structure of time could be a temporary illusion,” writes Daniel Pinchbeck in his noteworthy study of contemporary shamanism, *Breaking Open the Head*, “and that time might actually be a wave form, fractal, or spiral… He speculated that in the last years leading up to the crest and collapse of this wave, we might see a speeded-up replay of all of human history as a cartoon farce.”

A replay of all of human history, then, might find the Tower of Babel on the same wavelength as the 9/11 bombings of the Twin Towers. The United States’ global military campaign might fit on the same frequency with the expansion of the Roman Empire and the Crusades. And the path of Porter Rockwell, who defended the prophets, drank heavily, and swore like a sailor while serving his fellow Saints, might resonate with my own frequency as I brew beer in the mountains and dream about a time when Mormons like me are still needed. Or even wanted.

My network is full of heroes who bolster my belief in the historicity of the Book of Mormon, whether they’re members of the Church or not. Whether they’re alive or not. I don’t even care if they’re fictional characters.

Bill Henrickson, the polygamist hero on HBO’s *Big Love*, certainly has an interesting take on the subject. We see Bill baptize his children. We see him confer the priesthood upon his oldest son. We see him fast and pray in times of need. We see him build upon a testimony forged in a life spent not only believing in the historicity of Mormon scripture, but living it. So much so that he actually believes that small part in Doctrine and Covenants 132 about having multiple wives. I admire the fictional Bill, because at least he walks his talk. His belief drives his action, and personal revelation determines his choices. We should all be so lucky.

If I adopt McKenna’s approach to time, I can reach into the past and pull people like Rockwell into my network. Perhaps I can even reach into my television and give Henrickson a tap. Then, as Duffy says, it is my interaction with them and the entanglement of my own identity with theirs—the sins and the passions we share—that builds the foundation of my belief.
EXCHANGED THE following messages (edited for brevity and clarity) with Brad (not his real name), a forty-something professional living in the Northwest who now finds himself in the Borderlands.

JEFF: What precipitated your recent experiences?

BRAD: During the summer and fall of 2005, my wife lost her faith in Mormonism, Christianity, and organized religion in general. While this was a liberating experience for her, my world fell apart. I was forced to question most of what I had held sacred—things like how a husband and wife should make their spiritual journey together, the divinity of the Church, and the mission of Joseph Smith. Things I had once taken for granted had become a subject for debate, which was hard because I was very comfortable with the path I was on. I thought I had received spiritual confirmations to my religious questions.

At the time, I was the priest quorum’s advisor. In a lesson I gave immediately after the bombshell struck, I told the young men to imagine that President Hinckley dissolved the Church and we were all left to fend for ourselves. What parts of our religion would we continue with? What things would we continue doing, not just because we have a checklist to follow, but because it is the right thing to do? Would we continue to pay 10 percent to worthy organizations? Obey the Word of Wisdom? Read the scriptures? Obviously, my feelings on the subject were close to the surface, and I broke down in tears in front of the class.

JEFF: Before you go on, how would you describe your upbringing in the Church?

BRAD: My father was a bishop, and we were one of the stalwart families in the ward, always serving when and where needed. I served a successful mission in Colombia, graduated from BYU, and married a nearly-perfect woman in the temple. Meanwhile, my mother subscribed to SUNSTONE, Dialogue and Exponent II. From time to time I picked up a SUNSTONE, but I found the tone a bit too “in your face” and felt that it was almost mocking the faithful members of the Church. It seemed to smack of intellectual superiority. Even though I was aware of and sympathetic to many views regarding LDS “problem areas,” I made a conscious decision to spend my limited time reading mainstream Church publications.

JEFF: So what did you do about your bombshell dilemma?

BRAD: After my wife made her announcement, I understood that if I were to leave her, many ward members would support that decision. But my family is more important to me than anything—even more important to me than the Church. So I knew had to come front the issues my wife had raised and make peace with them and with her. For the next year, I worked on doing that. Ironically, SUNSTONE and Mormon Stories podcasts were a great help to me during this journey.

Of course, I approached my quest from a background of belief, starting with my lifetime assumption of the divinity of the Church. Thousands of years of evolution have taught kids to believe what their parents teach. So I have always believed in the Book of Mormon and all things that follow. I know that I will never be able to change that part of myself, but sometimes I wish I could have done my search with a clean slate and a truly objective point of view. Because of that, I particularly enjoy the viewpoints of converts to the Church—people who have found the Church on their own. I especially enjoy the viewpoints of converts who are also members of the Sunstone community. These are members of the Church who have seen its faults and follies and continue to participate. They have a perspective that I will never have, and I draw from their strength.

JEFF: What is your current status in the Church? What about your wife?

BRAD: I am still very active in the church. I hold a temple recommend and serve in the elders quorum. I was recently released from two great years teaching the monster-boys in Primary. I don’t usually attend “bureaucratic” meetings, e.g. priesthood leadership meeting, mostly because my wife bristles when I leave the family to do administrative church stuff. She is much more understanding when I leave to actually help people. I realize that I will probably never have a “significant” church calling again. But I spend more time with my family than anyone I know. We are good at having fun because we practice a lot! Despite her deep concerns, my wife attends church regularly—mostly sacrament meetings—and she has a calling as an organist and pianist.

JEFF: How open and honest are you with others about your situation?

BRAD: We keep it quiet because we don’t want my wife or me to become the ward project, apostate, or outcast. There is much suspicion toward those who do not toe the party line in the Church, and we don’t need that. She is more comfortable with her spirituality than ever before and doesn’t feel the need to explain it. Our wonderful bishop knows the situation. My parents, one very good friend, and one missionary companion are also

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D. JEFF BURTON is an author and a former member of the Sunstone Board of Directors.
aware. But that is it. The only reason those people know is because I needed help dealing with the issues, not because my wife needs help. She has kept it completely to herself. As our children get older, they will have their suspicions. Our 13-year-old is fairly astute and must know that something is up. Their mom doesn’t pray or take the sacrament (unless she is in front of the congregation at the organ—she doesn’t need the whole ward wondering about her worthiness) and they notice that.

JEFF: Why haven’t your kids been more curious about the whole experience, especially with your wife not taking the sacrament?

BRAD: I don’t know. They know that she is a bit of a non-conformist, so they probably chalk it up to that. Six months ago, in the middle of the sacrament, my youngest daughter asked me in the middle of the sacrament why girls don’t participate in the blessing and passing. I whispered to her that men and women have different responsibilities. She literally rolled her eyes and in the most sarcastic tone she could muster, said, “Yeah, right!” My wife smiled and said, “From the mouths of babes!”

JEFF: When the kids do ask, what do you plan to tell them?

BRAD: I will leave it to my wife to explain her own situation. For my part, I will be straight and tell them that there are things about the Church that Mom does not accept but Dad does. The key will be to let them make their own decisions. Our kids are 13, 10 and 7, and even now I have a fairly good idea where they will land when that time comes.

JEFF: How has your current situation affected you?

BRAD: I feel very comfortable in church. I don’t always agree with what is said or what is going on, but that would be true in any large organization. I have ancestors from several lines that were in Nauvoo, so this is my church and these are my people, warts and all. I have always been a bit of a rebel, not interested at all in conformity, so my views (for better or for worse) fit nicely with my personality. I love to feel the Spirit and look forward more than ever to these special and, most often, unexpected moments.

For example, six months ago I reading a lot from Bushman, Brodie, Palmer, and others about Joseph Smith. My ward had a sacrament meeting where members of the congregation told a personal story about one of the hymns, and then we would sing it as a congregation. One member requested “Praise to the Man.” I don’t even remember the story that went with the hymn, but as soon as we got to the first chorus, I was completely overcome with the spirit that told me that Joseph Smith really was a prophet, in spite of all of the things I was in the middle of studying. I had tears running down my face and couldn’t finish the hymn. That was a very unexpected moment to feel the Spirit. It was very well timed.

JEFF: What coping mechanisms do you find helpful?

BRAD: As a liberal Democrat, I spend a lot of time rolling my eyes at what goes on in church. I take comfort in the fact that everybody wants what they think is best; they just have different ways of going about it. I try to be tolerant of ignorance and stupidity and try to be humble at the same time! (Not always easy.) More than ever I realize that there are many shades of gray and that every person has to deal with issues on a personal level. I am much more tolerant than I used to be.

JEFF: What would it take for you to be honest and open with those who don’t know about your situation?

BRAD: I would not have a problem sharing my own views with anyone who asked. I am open in some ways already. For example, when we studied the Book of Mormon in Primary this year, the first lesson was on the importance of the book to our Church. I told the class members that as they get older, they will hear some unexpected things about Joseph Smith and that some of those things are even true! My point was not to start them on the road to apostasy (although some would accuse me of that) but to prepare them for the inevitable day when they have to face those issues. I want them to know that I have faced those same issues and still have faith in the mission of the Church. I would rather they hear it from me than someone with questionable motives.

JEFF: How is your wife coping with her experiences?

BRAD: My wife spends a lot of time reading spiritual books. She has taken a special interest in Buddhism. We talk about what she finds significant. However, I am very careful when I draw parallels with what she is reading and what is taught in the Church. Occasionally I become a punching bag for all she finds distasteful about the Church and am subjected to a bit of a rant. (I always agree with her when that happens!) My wife is ex-
JEFF: What does your personal religion look like now?

BRAD: I find that my religious observance is more meaningful than ever before. I do things because I feel they will be of value to me and my family, not merely because I am supposed to. Even though I have always been tolerant of the beliefs of others, I am now able to truly appreciate beliefs that are different from my own. I have, on occasion, been stricken with twinges of Catholic envy, something I never would have thought possible during my two years in South America. I feel a true affinity with those in the Unitarian Fellowship who are much more closely aligned with me politically and socially than are most of my Mormon friends. I feel at home in their places of worship.

My wife talks about breaking free from the Mormon box and partaking of all that is good, even those things outside of the box. I feel like I too have broken free of that box. The difference between us is that my feet remain firmly planted in that box even as the rest of my body is able to experience things on the outside.

An a-ha moment came for me recently when I realized that participating in any religion is like playing a game. Within the context of that game, the rules are everything. If you choose to participate, you choose to make yourself subject to a certain set of rules and practices. I have chosen to participate in Mormonism (although since I was born in the Church, some may argue that point).

JEFF: You mentioned Unitarian Fellowship. What do you do with that group?

BRAD: For the past year, my daughter’s violin recitals have been at the local Unitarian Fellowship sanctuary. We arrived at the last recital early, and as I wandered around, I came across the bulletin board. It was full of announcements of causes I feel strongly about: peace vigils, discussions on the evils of imperialism and unrestrained capitalism, anti-war speeches, fundraisers for the women’s care shelter and men’s homeless shelter. I feel like I would have a sense of brotherhood in this congregation that is completely different from the brotherhood I feel at church.

My wife picked up an information card that mentions the Universalist tenet of accepting all beliefs. The card also specifically states that they are not interested in conformity. She was much impressed. It hit me that they would accept a believing Mormon as a member of their congregation! From a strictly social view, my wife and I would fit in much better there with our granola tendencies, our Subaru, and our garage-sale wardrobe than we do in the white bread, consumerism culture of Mormonism.

JEFF: So what do you see in the future for you and your family?

BRAD: I don’t know where we will be in ten years. I do know that even though I was dragged kicking and screaming into the Borderlands, it is a good place to be and I am glad for the journey!

I don’t know where we will be in ten years. I do know that even though I was dragged kicking and screaming into the Borderlands, it is a good place to be and I am glad for the journey!

JEFF: What would you like the Church to do about the things that brought you into the Borderlands?

BRAD: The Church is in a very tough position. On the one hand, it can’t appear to be suppressing information, but it has no duty to share information that may undermine its claims. I think we all have embarrassing things in our pasts that we would like to have left alone. On the other hand, I love the fact that the Church publishes View of the Hebrews and that is is working on the Joseph Smith Papers Project. I think the leadership beginning to realize that providing accurate and full information is more helpful to the cause than suppressing information is.

NOTES

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

2. For a free download of my book For Those Who Wonder and previous Borderland columns, see FORTHOSEWHOWONDER.COM.


Please send me your experiences from life in the Borderlands.

D. Jeff Burton, jeff@eburton.com
CARLUCCI, THIBODEAUX, AND HENDERSON,” Miranda cooed into the phone for the twentieth time that day. She’d been working as the receptionist for the law firm for three years and had learned to make those three names blend together so that they sounded like parts of a whole entity. She was proud of her lilting “phone voice,” and hardly a week went by that someone didn’t compliment her on it, but she couldn’t worry about that any more. People used to tell her she was pretty, too, but she hadn’t heard that for a while now, after the thirty pounds she’d gained this past year. The worst part was that Keith was the one who criticized her most for the weight, and he was the one who’d caused it.

Miranda transferred the call and hung up her receiver. Then she picked up the book she’d been reading, Viking Princess, and found her place. This one was much better than the last one she’d read, Apache Maiden. She’d have to look for more by this author.

The phone rang again. “Carlucci, Thibodeaux, and Henderson,” she said.

“May I please speak with Miranda Ryan?”

Miranda frowned. Her friends often called her at work, but this was a voice she didn’t recognize. Had Keith hired someone to check up on her? Maybe it was Keith’s ex-wife. Maybe it was Eric’s wife.

“This is Miranda,” she answered.

“I’m from Home Search, and I’d like to ask you a few questions about your application to be a nanny.”

“Oops. There’s the phone. Hold on.” Oh, Lord, she thought as she dealt with the other call. What a stupid way to put her on hold. She’d never pass that interview now. Keith would be glad, though. He didn’t want her to leave, anyway, even though he kept saying he didn’t want to marry her, either.

“Hello?” asked Miranda, punching back to her own call.

“First, I’d like to verify some information. You’re 27, adopted at birth, have lived in New Orleans all your life, graduated from a public high school, and took two courses at a community college. You worked three months in day care and as a receptionist for three years. Is that correct?”

“Oh!” Miranda closed her book and grasped the phone tightly. This was it. This was her chance to move to California and meet a rich, handsome, single Mormon man. This was her chance to finally start living, even if she was already twenty-seven, almost too old now to find a husband. She looked down quickly at her stomach stretching against her dress, and she shoved her thick thighs further under the desk.

She’d had to buy a whole new wardrobe over the past year, using thousands out of her inheritance money. But she had to look good, didn’t she? How else could she attract the right man? Now these clothes were getting a little snug, too. And she was already $100 over her limit at Macy’s. She’d have to wait until her next paycheck before she could go shopping again.

“Do you have time to answer some questions?” asked the woman.

“Yes, ma’am, though I may have to put you on hold a few times if I get another call.”

“I understand. What I’d—”

Johnny Townsend is a Katrina refugee, moving to Seattle from New Orleans after the hurricane. He has published in Dialogue, the anthology In Our Lovely Deseret: Mormon Fictions, and in Newsday, The Washington Post, and The Los Angeles Times. He has stories coming out shortly in Glimmer Train and The Massachusetts Review.
That jerk Eric! She had to get the job. She had to get away from him, too.

“Hello?”

“Yes. Now for those questions, Miss Ryan. Have you ever been pregnant?”

“What? Um, uh, um, no.” Oh, gosh, that woman could tell. Miranda was sure of it. Now if she didn’t get that job, it would be Eric’s fault. If he’d just married her in the first place four years ago when he’d gotten her pregnant, she wouldn’t even have to be going through this now. But he’d dumped her, not even going to see her in the hospital when she miscarried and almost died from hemorrhaging. And when he’d been in the hospital not four months earlier for an appendicitis attack, she’d brought a card, balloons, ribbons, and streamers to hang up all over his room to cheer him up, even though he’d only been there for a day.

But Eric had married someone else from their congregation shortly after Miranda had gotten out of the hospital, and three years later he’d had the nerve to call her again. She was sure that time she could make him marry her, but after three months of dating, well, sex really, his wife had found out and Eric had disappeared from her life again. Men, Miranda thought furiously. They were all the same!

“Do you smoke or drink?” asked the woman.

“No, ma’am.” Surely a glass of wine every two weeks when Keith came over didn’t count. How else could she handle listening to him cry every time after they had sex, moaning about going to hell? She hadn’t told her bishop about the wine, so there was no one else who could contradict her story.

“Do you use drugs?”

“Oh, no. Oops, hang on.” At least that was one question she could answer honestly. But did that woman have a machine on the other end of the line that could analyze her voice? Could she tell when Miranda was lying? And what if she called all the references Miranda had given? Would they all tell the same story?

Miranda took another message, reassuring herself that she’d told the same stories to all the people she’d listed as references. It wasn’t that she wanted to lie, of course. Keith was making her do it. He said he didn’t want to be excommunicated and told her if she ever told anyone about their relationship, he’d never talk to her again.

Men always lied. Like the time Eric had told everyone that the reason he hadn’t married her was because she’d had an abortion. He never admitted saying that to Miranda, but she knew. Who else would have started such a rumor?

“Hello?”

“Have you ever been physically abused, Miss Ryan?”

Miranda was silent a moment. “Well, no,” she said.

“Not by my parents.” Her father had criticized her every day of her life, but that wasn’t physical abuse, was it? Of course, he had thrown chairs at her a few times when she was already an adult and still living at home, but she’d thrown them right back.

“Have you been physically abused by anyone else?”

Why was she asking that? It must be important, so Miranda figured she’d better lie again. “Oh, no, not by anyone,” she replied. Surely, the woman on the phone meant being raped, anyway, didn’t she? The woman didn’t need to hear about that time three years ago, right before she moved away from home, when a man had smashed through her living room window in the middle of the night completely naked. Miranda had run to get her father’s gun while her father went to see what caused the crash. She had fired the gun to scare the man away, but the report had instead brought both her father and the man running into the bedroom.

The man had grabbed the gun, pushed Miranda to the floor, and put the gun to her head. He was growling so loudly that the neighbors two houses down could hear him, when Miranda’s father grabbed the gun back and shot the man, who then fell dead on top of her, blood pouring from his chest onto hers. Twice when Keith had fallen asleep on top of her, she’d experienced the scene all over again and beaten and clawed at Keith’s back until he woke up. Both times, he’d yelled at her and left, but she could never bear to tell him why she did it. Why did all these weird things have to happen to her?

“Are you sure there’s been no physical abuse?” the woman asked. “We need to know your full background.”

“No, ma’am.”

There was a pause. Then the woman asked, “Have you ever been mentally abused?”
Not as much as this interview is doing, thought Miranda, but she again replied, “No.” She knew she wouldn’t get the job if she told the truth about her father, and she’d be damned if she’d let him ruin her life any more than he’d already done. What would that woman think if Miranda told her about the time her father had announced to all the relatives that Miranda had killed her mother, who had actually died of cancer? Or about the time after she’d joined the Mormon Church as a teenager and he’d thrown all her clothes on the sidewalk and told her to leave? Or the times after she’d moved back when he would turn off the water to the house so she couldn’t bathe or put on make-up and would be late for work? Or the time—

“Oops. Hang on.” Oh, why were so many calls today? The woman was going to feel like a yo-yo.

“Miranda?”

“Keith?” she asked in return. He almost never called her at work. He said he was afraid she’d be able to tape the conversation and use it against him as evidence in a church court.

“What is it? I’ve got the nanny person on the other line.”

“You’re not telling her about me, are you?”

“Are you crazy? Of course not. What do you want?”

“I want you to stay here and go to nursing school. You know that. I—”

“I’ve got to go. I’ll call you later.”

Keith said she didn’t make enough money.

Surely a glass of wine every two weeks when Keith came over didn’t count. How else could she handle listening to him cry?

She knew he wanted her to be able to support him. Men! And he said she needed to be a nurse, of all things. He didn’t seem to care that Miranda could hardly go out to do her laundry for fear she’d see a lizard, or that she couldn’t bear to associate with anyone bald, or fat, or handicapped, or ugly, or like anyone she’d surely see in an emergency room. For goodness’ sake, she’d get pale watching a Visine commercial. She wasn’t about to go sticking needles in people. “Oh, you’ll get desensitized to all that,” Keith had told her.

Like hell, she thought. She was going to be a nanny in a rich family in California and take care of children. And some good-looking man rich enough to be friends with the family would see how well she worked with children and see how well dressed she was and want to marry her.

She looked down again at her overweight stomach and bit her lip. She brushed at her eyes quickly and then smoothed down her dress. If that jerk Keith hadn’t kept her so depressed all the time, she wouldn’t be eating so much in the first place. She’d still be pretty. But once she was away from him, she could lose the weight. She was sure of it.

“Hello?”

“Yes, Miss Ryan. Sorry to keep disturbing you at work. Just one more question, and we’ll be through.”

“All right.”

“Why do you want this job?”

Well, wasn’t that obvious, thought Miranda. She remembered the day care center, when she’d read stories to the children or had them make up stories to tell her. She’d encourage them with their drawings, promising to hang them up in her apartment, and she loved seeing her Monet print on one wall and “her” children’s drawings on another. She would sometimes bake cookies or brownies to bring to work, and she’d taken pictures of all the children she’d worked with during those three months.

One little girl in particular had always seemed depressed, and Miranda had eventually decided to give the girl one of her favorite dolls she’d been meaning to save for her own daughter. She’d tried to coax the girl into telling her why she was always so sad, but the girl’s parents had taken her out of the day care before Miranda could find out. But if she could get this job in California, she’d have a whole year with the same children. And she could get married and have her own children that no one could ever take away.

“I want this job because I love children and I love taking care of them.” Miranda sighed in relief but then frowned. What if the woman didn’t believe her? Had her answer sounded like one of those phony Miss America answers? What if—

“Thank you for your time, Miss Ryan,” said the woman.
“Oh.”
“But I’ll give you a call tomorrow or the next day.”
“All right.”
“Talk to you later.”

Miranda hung up and looked at her watch. Still an hour before lunch. She stared at her desk a moment and then picked up Viking Princess again. Surely, she’d get the job, she thought. She’d show Keith. She’d show everybody. She smiled and opened the book, but her eyes were still focused on the desk top in front of her, and after a moment, her smile slowly faded away.

THE BEST OF PREDATORS

You won’t shine them out of swamps.
Or paralyze them in your headlights,
crush them under your whining tires.

Such hunters know how to crouch
In high grass, lie utterly still in culverts
or behind steel barricades with red reflectors.

They may prowl company corridors
like the shadows of big lean pike,
lie back from open water
alert in the weeds.
Mosey among lily pads.
Cruise the sand bar margins.
Prowling.
Waiting.

They inhale without a sound,
hold their breath
then strike like a gecko’s tongue,
tongues that form the human whispers:
“You won’t hear us. Or see us coming.”

—JERRY HAUSER
DVD REVIEW

FINDING ITS LEGS

BEST OF LDS FILM FESTIVAL 2007

Compiled by Christian Vuissa

2008
90 Minutes, $12.00

Reviewed by Mark Brown

As the Festival and new filmmakers continue, hopefully we will see fewer ten-mile stretches of bad road and feel more often the pleasant sensation of the tops of our heads coming clean off.

SHORT FILMS ARE the poetry of cinema: compact, often lyrical, and meant more to evoke than to elaborate. Like a good poem, a quality short film can make a viewer feel, in Emily Dickinson’s words, “as if the top of (your) head were taken off” with a sense of wonder, curiosity, sadness, or passion. On the other hand, a poorly executed short can make ten minutes feel like ten miles of bad road in a snowstorm, uphill both ways, with the twin wolves of frustration and boredom snapping at your heels. The range between the sublime and the sub-par is inherent to the form because, of all cinematic undertakings, shorts are the most democratic. They’re comparatively cheap, narrow in scope, and anyone with a half-decent video camera and basic editing software can make one.

 Though Mormon films of one form or another have been around since the advent of moviemaking, our contemporary incarnation is still developing and finding its legs. The shorts featured on the Best of LDS Film Festival 2007 DVD encapsulate some of the primary impulses in 21st century Mormon filmmaking. Some are theological, serious, even ponderous while others verge on the utterly inconsequential. Many are visually beautiful with burnished lighting and strong shot composition, but at the same time, several feature stilted dialogue and hamhoke, didactic, Mormon-after-school-special narratives. As much as the Mormon film world is a mixed bag, the LDS Film Festival offerings are as well.

COMPETITION SHORT FILMS

INTERESTINGLY, the two strongest pieces on the DVD are both animated and both without discernable dialogue. Brent Leavitt’s Peach Baby represents the best of what LDS cinema can and should be. It doesn’t look or sound like any other cartoon you’ve seen, but it isn’t odd for the sake of oddness. The animation is simple and basic, rather than seeming crude, it fits the fable/parable-like tone exactly right.

The narrative, even compared to other shorts, is thin. All four minutes are dedicated to a young child trying to eat one of his (her?) father’s peaches. The child struggles as the father looks on, and eventually, thanks to the dad, he succeeds in getting something to eat. It’s not War and Peace, but that is its strength. Instead of trying to be a large film squeezed into a small space, it embraces its simplicity and allows the images, the sound design, and the spare narrative to be significant on a variety of levels. A child can thoroughly enjoy the physical comedy and the very funny sound design while an adult can find pleasure in picking out various potential interpretations of the story. Originality that can entertain and enlighten without treacly didacticism is rare and certainly what LDS artists ought to be shooting for.

Theory Toward the Evolution of the Turkey by Brandon Arnold is the other (partially) animated offering on the DVD and also the other strongest short in the competition. Narratively, it offers a very straightforward “be yourself, don’t-let-The-Man-get-you-down” sort of story, and in that sense, it’s no great shakes. But the charm of Jason Fredericks’ animation, the jazzy score, and the easy, natural performances (particularly by the young actress Eva Stilson) more than carry the day and make it worth repeat viewing.

Going from one extreme to another, we leave the comfortable, charming accessibility of the animated offerings and move to Randy Astle’s obscure, somewhat challenging By Water, and Blood, and the Spirit.

Three minutes from beginning to end and shot on what appears to be Super 8 film, it depicts a traditional, LDS baptism. However, rather than the glowing light and enraptured faces that usually accompany institutional portrayals of the ordinance, the visuals of the film are quite unattractive. The film stock and the flat, pallid lighting make the short look dated and worn, like a badly misguided proselyting film from 1973. But the film’s continuity and sound editing suggest there is something more going on than just a straightforward depiction.

With two key exceptions, the off-center shot compositions keep the actors’ faces obscured and, instead, focus on hands—a hand held to the square, the convert’s hands holding the arm of the man baptizing her, her hand grasping the glossy, white banister leading out of the font. These choices make the action universal rather than specific. Instead of one person’s entrance into the water, it is possibly meant to stand for the act of baptism itself.

The sound design also enhances the symbolic quality of the action. Even when neither the convert nor the priesthood holder are moving, there are occasionally the sounds of splashing and movement—as though...
there is a second, invisible world co-existing with the one the viewer sees. Also, once both actors leave the font, the sound of splashing water echoes and intensifies until it becomes a roar, as if to suggest the power and far-reaching nature of what has just taken place. It’s not an entertaining film per se, but it certainly stayed with me and provoked thought long after I watched it.

Speaking Through Glass by Lauren Moss and Eric Anderson does a workman-like job of showcasing the stained glass art of Tom Holdman. The film addresses the idea of finding language through art. Holdman, a successful artist who produces stained glass for LDS temples and other patrons, has a speech impediment, and the film shows how his verbal eloquence waxes and wanes but how his creative expression says things he cannot.

X-Mas Change, while nicely filmed, seems much more like a poor Saturday Night Live skit that never made it to air. It’s a one-joke film, and, unfortunately, the joke isn’t funny.

The inclusion of Nathan Jones’ Peter: Mormon Filmmaker is curious to say the least. It’s a distillation of the much longer The Work and the Story, which was released theatrically in 2003. Apparently, Jones heard and responded to the numerous critics who pointed out that the characters and humor were far outstripped by the film’s 77-minute length. Pared down to 17 minutes, the short does away with the silly but entertaining plotline of the missing “Godfather of Mormon Cinema,” Richard Dutcher, and instead focuses on the eminently untalented and unaware Peter’s attempts to make and release his opus, Celestial Match.

The short version maintains the two funniest moments of the original feature: former Joseph Smith actor Richard Moll as a film critic who proclaims “Many independent film shorts suck, so it only follows logic that a Mormon independent film would painfully suck,” and the final battle of The Book of Mormon depicted entirely with hardboiled eggs. While these moments are inspired and genuinely funny, they are brief and not much relief against the other 16 self-involved, in-joke ridden minutes of the film.

7-PAGE SCRIPT FILMS

The LDS Film Festival sponsors a collaborative project in which writers submit 7-page scripts. Directors selected by Festival organizers choose from among the scripts and are given $500 to make a film from it. The difficulty created by this noble-minded project is that the resultante films, at least in this case, feel much more like the Cliff Notes version of longer movies, as though there is a decent ninety minute feature hidden within a 10-minute shell.

Dave Skousen and Cindy Newell’s Repressed Melodies best balances length with content as it tells the speculative story of a future in which music is outlawed. The film owes a debt to works such as Orson Scott Card’s Unaccompanied Sonata and Margaret Atwood’s A Handmaid’s Tale, but its skillful handling of the black and white sequences as well as some inventive editing show real talent at work.

Murray Triplett and Cherie Juleran’s Lightning Bugs obviously yearns to be a much longer film. It wants to tell us about the cancer afflicting the younger brother, wants us to understand his inexplicable obsession with lightning bugs, wants to follow the two brothers on their misguided trip to Oklahoma. Unfortunately, it’s only eleven minutes long, so none of the implied questions are answered.

It raises the question of whether the 7-page scripts are meant to be whole works unto themselves or if they are simply the first bit of something much longer. Lightning Bugs definitely suggests the latter as it leaves the viewer hanging without any sense of even temporary resolution. The short does feature some nice, washed-out cinematography that’s appropriate for its bleak, melancholy tone.

Wrinkles by Christopher Clark, Patrick Parker, and Scott Taylor is unfortunately didactic. It feels much the same as the institutionally-produced On the Way Home, which was an expansion and elaboration on several Church commercials from the 1980s. Wrinkles also feels like a 60-second idea fleshed out to a 12-minute sermon. While the message of embracing age and living life instead of being obsessed with youth and beauty is certainly an admirable one, the delivery lacks subtlety and sophistication.

24-HOUR MARATHON FILMS

The 24-Hour films are basically the filmic equivalent of party games. According to the official description, teams of no more than five people have 24 hours to write, shoot, and edit a 3-minute short film that implements a theme, a specific object, and a dialogue line. In 2007, the theme was ‘Transformation,’ the object a mirror, and the dialogue line “Look at me.” I doubt anyone expects great art to come from this exercise, but certainly viewers can enjoy the shorts produced by teams that understand the limitations of the form.

Most successful among this group are Juice and A Transformation. Juice embraces the narrowness of its scope and makes the most of its three minutes by squeezing comedy out of confusion between the words “juice” and “Jews.” A Transformation hinges on an absurd gag at the end but also features a light, funny performance by Mark Madsen and sly cuts from one moment to the next that are entertaining.

The other two 24-hour films are decidedly less successful. Santa Vaca strives for Jared Hess-like quirkiness but only really succeeds in showcasing the writer/director team’s very cute toddler daughter. Escape features some nice wintertime Utah scenery, but that is the extent of its virtues.

THE TRAILERS

The DVD also features a collection of trailers for feature length films. Some show promise such as The Sasquatch Gang, Outlaw Trail, and Intellectual Property while others such as American Grace and Familiar Spirits look as though they had been filmed on stock made from pure Velveeta. The encouraging thing is the number of films available. One would hope that after a certain number of films have been produced, a critical mass would come about and the overall consistency and quality levels would, by necessity, rise.

The LDS Film Festival DVD highlights the fact that many nascent Mormon filmmakers are still finding their way through the technical and thematic woods. The artistic cultural heritage of the Church still shows in directors’ skill with creating beautiful, glowing images but lack of finesse with dialogue, character development, and thematic or subject complexity. As a filmmaking church, we have been very strong in iconic imagery but often weak in presenting much else.

However, the Festival offerings of 2007 also show there are bright, creative, and very talented individuals who are already generating entertaining, thought-provoking work and who will likely (hopefully) go on to make more. As the Festival and new filmmakers continue, hopefully we will see fewer ten-mile stretches of bad road and feel more often the pleasant sensation of the tops of our heads coming clean off.

The 2009 LDS Film Festival will be held 21–24 January at the Scera Center in Orem, Utah.
PROPOSITION 8 PASSES, TRIGGERS MASSIVE PROTESTS AGAINST LDS CHURCH

MERE DAYS AFTER PASSAGE of California’s Proposition 8, for which Latter-day Saints had campaigned assiduously, the LDS Church confronted massive demonstrations of opposition, with thousands of protesters picketing outside temples across the United States. Proposition 8, a constitutional amendment that bans same-sex marriage in California, was passed by 52 percent of voters after Latter-day Saints contributed upwards of $20 million to the “Yes on 8” campaign. Latter-day Saints also contributed $3 million to a similar campaign that succeeded in Arizona.

Mormons became the most visible and best-organized members of a conservative coalition supporting Proposition 8 after the First Presidency sent a letter to California Mormons urging them to “do all you can” to overturn a recent decision by the California Supreme Court allowing same-sex marriage. Other Proposition 8–related acts targeting the Church, include the mailing of white powder to the Los Angeles Temple, the Salt Lake Temple, and an LDS seminary building in Syracuse, Utah. The glass doors of several LDS meetinghouses in Utah’s Davis and Weber counties were shattered with a BB gun. At a Farmington, Utah, meetinghouse, someone sprayed the message “Nobody is born a biggot” [sic] on a concrete wall. Police did not characterize these incidents as hate crimes because of a lack of direct evidence regarding intent.

Meridian Magazine, an LDS–related website that posted several articles in support of Proposition 8, was hacked the day after Proposition 8 passed. According to Meridian Magazine founder Scott Proctor, the homepage was replaced with “horrible, explicit lesbian films.” The website was down for half a day as engineers removed the offensive material. “We feel like this was a very specific targeting,” said Meridian cofounder Maurine Proctor. Every time we post something [about same-sex marriage], we get a few dozen letters with the same tone, similar wording, and the most horrible language.”

PROTESTS AT TEMPLE SITES

IN CALIFORNIA, SOME 3,000 protesters, many gay and lesbian, marched to the Los Angeles Temple in Westwood to protest LDS support for Proposition 8, blocking the busy Santa Monica Boulevard and forcing the temple to close its doors. Some signs the protesters carried, “Stop the Mormons,” “Mormon Cult,” and “Joseph Smith Prophet Polygamist Pedophile.” The protest resulted in two arrests and other minor incidents.

In Oakland, 400 people assembled outside the LDS Temple, forcing highway patrol officers to close two freeway ramps to protect the marchers. Signs read “Separate Church and Hate,” “1 Mormon 7 Wives?” and “Yes 2 Love, No 2 Hate.” LDS services usually held in the adjacent stake center were moved to nearby chapels.

In San Diego, a smaller group protested near the temple there. “Mormon Love, Sacred?” read one sign depicting a man with seven wives. Stephen Murdock, one demonstrator, complained that “the Mormon Church is a small percentage in California, and yet they raised the largest percentage of funds against the gay population, and I totally disagree with it.”

IN ARIZONA, demonstrators held a peaceful vigil across the street during the lighting of the Christmas displays at the Mesa Temple. “It’s time to get the Church out of politics and out of our bedrooms,” said protestor Tom Kach. “Their God doesn’t rule my world; my God loves and accepts everyone for who they are.”

One of the largest protests took place at the Manhattan Temple, where thousands congregated on 12 November. Signs asked, “Should We Sit in the Back of the Bus, Too?” and “Can I Vote on Your Marriage?” Oscar–winning actress Whoopi Goldberg joined the demonstration with a sign that read, “For My Friends, Equal Rights.” Adam Abernathy, a gay man from Westchester County, carried a sign reading, “I (Heart) My Gay Mormon Husband!”

Asked why the protesters were targeting the LDS temple when other religious groups had campaigned for Proposition 8 as well, organizer Corey Johnson explained that that “the Mormon Church distinguished itself from all other anti-gay groups by getting their congregations to contribute more than $20 million in their campaign of homophobia.”

“The anger [of the protesters] is not towards Mormons,” Johnson added, “but rather towards the leaders of the Mormon Church, who purposely spread lies about gays and lesbians to create an atmosphere of fear and hatred.”

RALLY AND MARCH IN SALT LAKE CITY

IN SALT LAKE City, approximately 3,500 people, including Mormons and former Mormons, gathered for a rally and march around Temple Square. Crowd members held signs that read, “Separate Church and State,” “Gay Rights Are Civil Rights,” and “Keep Your Doctrine out of My Covenants.”

The event was organized by Jacob Whipple, a former
Mormon who served a mission in Argentina. Whipple was planning to marry his fiancé Drew Cloud, from Orange County, California, on April 2009. He says they will go ahead with the ceremony anyway “whether it’s recognized or not.”

“Gays are people too,” Whipple said. “We’re your neighbors, your friends … We deserve every right everyone else has.”

Former Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson was one of the speakers at the City Creek Park gathering. Drawing a comparison with the ban that once prevented interracial couples from marrying, Anderson called Mormon support of Proposition 8 “a repeat of a tragic, a deplorable history.”

“Let us all call for a greater love, better understanding, dignity and respect toward all,” Anderson said, “regardless of race, regardless of faith or lack of faith, and regardless of sexual orientation.”

In Temple Square, protesters encountered a group of counterprotesters, many of them non-LDS. “The people voted,” some shouted at the protesters; “you are intolerant!” Others shouted, “Marriage is between a man and a woman! You’ll never be a man and a woman!”

At the north entrance to Temple Square, five Church members gathered to sing hymns and peacefully discuss their beliefs with the protesters.

**BOYCOTT**

SOME OPPONENTS OF Proposition 8 have called for boycotts of Mormon-related businesses or business and events in Utah. Among the targets are Marriott hotels, Cinemark theaters, and the Sundance Film Festival.

In Los Angeles, 200 gays and lesbians mounted a noisy protest in front of El Coyote Cafe on Beverly Boulevard, a restaurant with a strong gay and lesbian clientele. Activists complained that Marjorie Christoffersen, a manager at the restaurant and the daughter of the owner, made a $100 donation to the Yes on 8. Christoffersen is LDS.

In Sacramento, Scott Eckern, the Mormon artistic director of the California Musical Theater, resigned after gay and lesbian artists threatened a boycott because of his monetary support of Proposition 8. Eckern, who spent 25 years with the company, contributed $1,000.

“I honestly had no idea that this would be the reaction,” Eckern said in a public statement. “I chose to act upon my belief that the traditional definition of marriage should be preserved. I was required by law to identify my employer and occupation at the time of my donation.”

Some in the gay community have also considered boycotting the enterprises of Alan Stock and Richard Raddon, two Mormons who contributed to the Yes on 8 campaign and who work with the movie industry. Cinemark chief executive Alan Stock donated almost $10,000 to the Yes on 8 campaign. One of Stock’s Cinemark theaters is a venue for the Sundance Film Festival held every winter in Park City Director of the Los Angeles Film Festival, Richard Raddon, also a Latter-day Saint, donated $1,500 to Yes on 8.

In response to plans for a boycott of the Marriott hotel chain, chairman and CEO Bill Marriott, who is LDS, posted a message to his blog distancing himself from Proposition 8.

“Some might conclude given my family’s membership in the Mormon Church that our company supported the recent ballot initiative to ban same-sex marriage in California,” Marriott wrote. “This is simply untrue. Marriott International is a public company headquartered in Bethesda, Maryland, and is not controlled by any one individual or family. Neither I, nor the company, contributed to the campaign to pass Proposition 8.”

“The Bible that I love teaches people to love with honesty, integrity and unconditional love for all people,” Marriott added. “But beyond that, I am very careful about separating my personal faith and beliefs from how we run our business.”

**CALIFORNIANS AGAINST HATE FILE COMPLAINT**

CALIFORNIANS FAIR POLITICAL Practices, a state bi-partisan commission, said it will investigate allegations that the LDS Church failed to report nonmonetary contributions to the Yes on 8 campaign. Complainant Fred Krager, who heads the anti-Proposition 8 organization Californians Against Hate, alleges that the Church failed to report money invested to organize phone banks, send out direct mailers, provide transportation to California, mobilize a speakers bureau, send out satellite simulcasts, develop websites, and help produce commercial and video broadcasts.

In response, the Church stated that Krager’s complaint has “many errors and misstatements,” and that the Church has “fully complied with the reporting requirements of the California Political Reform Act.”

**MORMONS ON THE OTHER SIDE**

DESPITE THE FORMIDABLE LDS support of Proposition 8 during the campaign, a number of Mormons voiced their support for same-sex marriage. Among these were members of Affirmation: Gay & Lesbian Mormons and several grassroots groups that organized largely via the Internet.

Barbara Young, wife of former San Francisco 49ers’ Hall of Fame quarterback Steve Young, posted two official No on 8 signs in the windows of their home in Palo Alto and three Halloween-themed signs urging people to reject the gay marriage ban. Barbara Young also donated approximately $50,000 to the No on 8 campaign. “We believe all families matter, and we do not believe in discrimination,” she wrote in an e-mail to a local TV station. “Therefore, our family will vote against Proposition 8.”

According to a story posted at www.affirmation.org, several members who publicly expressed opposition to Proposition 8 were disciplined or threatened with discipline in California, Georgia, Hawaii, Nebraska, and Utah. Andrew Callahan, from Hastings, Nebraska, was summoned by his stake president for a disciplinary council, but the court was postponed after Callahan went public with his story.

“We have decided to defer
your disciplinary council to a later date given this politically charged election season,” wrote stake president Weldon Slieght in an e-mail to Callahan. “We feel that a more measured and considered discussion can be held at a date sometime in November.”

On 17 October, Andrew Callahan, along with some 50 Mormons belonging to the group Signing for Something, gathered at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City to deliver 300 letters and a petition opposing LDS campaigning for Proposition 8. The marchers included Peter Danzig, a former member of the Orchestra at Temple Square who was suspended from the orchestra because of his letter to the Salt Lake Tribune opposing Proposition 8. Danzig later resigned his Church membership.

“We . . . have diverse views about the issue of same-gender marriages but we stand united in the belief that each individual should have the civil right to marry the spouse of their choice and to have that union recognized by civil authorities,” the petition from Signing for Something reads. “We ask that the leaders of the [LDS Church] cease their political organizing efforts and financial support of attempts to use the government to restrict the secular and religious rights of gay and lesbian individuals and publicly retract their request that members of the LDS Church support such measures.”

Kim Farah, of LDS Public Affairs, received the letters and petition outside the entrance to the Church Office Building and made a statement to the media. “[The Church] understands that this issue affects people in very private, individual ways,” she said. “However, the Church does have a moral obligation to speak out on issues that affect the moral fabric of society as it has in this case.”

After 4 November, Signing for Something began inviting Mormons to resign their membership from the LDS Church. Signing for Something is asking members to state in their letters to Church authorities that their resignation is motivated by the Church’s stance against marriage equality. Callahan says the site has been contacted by 500 people announcing their resignation from the Church.

Mormons for Marriage, a coalition of Latter-day Saints who opposed the Mormon stance on Proposition 8, posted to their website a number of video clips in which several straight Latter-day Saints expressed their support of same-sex marriage. Some of the clips were removed after the individuals who made them had been threatened with ecclesiastical discipline.

“We named this site ‘Mormons for Marriage’ because we believe that monogamy and marriage are among the highest, and most sacred institutions in this life,” reads a webpage at MormonsForMarriage.com. “Marriage increases levels of commitment, health and happiness among homosexuals, just as it does for heterosexuals, while decreasing the risks of disease and death not just for them, but for the population as a whole. Committed, quality marriages have a stabilizing effect on society. It just makes no sense to deny these benefits to homosexuals wishing to step up to the responsibilities inherent in a committed relationship.”

[The site also reads, “Just as progressive LDS Church members in the 1960s and 1970s had an opportunity to speak out on the denial of priesthood to blacks —this is our chance, in our day, to express our thoughts and feelings (respectfully) in support of gays within the LDS Church, and of gay marriage within the U.S. (and abroad).”]

Shortly before the vote on Proposition 8, LDS and non-LDS families gathered for a vigil in Salt Lake City in support of their gay children. Similar vigils were held in Provo and St. George.

The Salt Lake City event was organized by a group of Mormon mothers. Millie Watts, who is LDS and has two gay children, was one of the speakers at the Salt Lake City vigil held by the city’s public library.

“I am so touched that you would be here,” Watts said in tears to the 600 people gathered. “This is what happens when people in California say mean things about our gay kids. The mothers come out of the closet.”

Shortly after Election Day, the executive committee of Affirmation: Gay & Lesbian Mormons issued a statement expressing disappointment over the involvement of the LDS Church. “Affirmation is . . . saddened by the role that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints played in this process, and the harm that the Church has done to itself in California, across the United States, and around the world,” executive director Olin Thomas wrote. “That the leaders of the Church seem to not understand the damage that has been done, the depth and breadth of emotion that has been unleashed, or the hurt that has been inflicted is tragic.”

VICTIMS TURNED INTO AGGRESSORS?

SEVERAL OBSERVERS NOTED the irony that the LDS Church, which was once persecuted for practicing polygamy, now wants to ban another nontraditional definition of marriage.

“You might think that an organization that for most of the first of its not yet two centuries of existence was the world’s most notorious proponent of startlingly unconventional forms of wedded bliss would be a little reticent about issuing orders to the rest of humanity specifying exactly who should be legally entitled to marry whom,” wrote Hendrick Hertzberg in The New Yorker. “But no. The Mormon Church . . . does not count recrimination among the cardinal virtues. Nor does its own history ofrimonial excess bring a blush to its cheek.”

Along similar lines, Salt Lake Tribune columnist Rebecca Walsh wrote that “the victims seem to have turned into the aggressors—and over, of all things, an alternative definition [sic] of marriage.”

“More than 150 years ago, Mormon settlers were driven from their homes and their prophet was killed, in part, because of their polygamous definition of marriage,” she wrote. “Now, Mormons are using the same words that were used against their ancestors.”

OFFICIAL RESPONSES

PERHAPS ANTICIPATING THE outcry that would follow, Whitney Clayton of the Presidency of the Seventy held a press conference on 6 November,
two days after the election, asking for “civility and respect.” “We respect the rights of people who have different points of view,” said Clayton. “We hope they’ll respect ours.”

“The Church’s opposition to same-sex marriage neither constitutes nor condones any kind of hostility toward gays and lesbians,” Clayton added. “Even more, the Church does not object to rights for same-sex couples regarding hospitalization and medical care, fair housing and employment rights, or probate rights, so long as these do not infringe on the integrity of the traditional family or of the constitutional rights of churches.”

On 10 November, Equality Utah, a gay rights group, held a press conference in Salt Lake City to announce the drafting of five bills they will introduce to the 2009 Utah State legislature. The bills, which include proposals for statewide domestic partnerships, echo the language used by Elder Clayton.

“Throughout the campaign, while the LDS Church stated its support of [Proposition 8], it also made repeated comments that the Church ‘does not object to rights for same-sex couples regarding hospitalization and medical care, fair housing and employment rights, or probate rights,’” explained Equality Utah chair Stephanie Pappas.

“Just last week, Elder L. Whitney Clayton stated the LDS Church does not oppose ‘civil union or domestic partnerships,’” Pappas added. “We are taking the LDS Church at its word.”

The LDS Church has not yet responded to the invitation to back the bills.

On 7 November, a day after the Los Angeles Temple protests, the LDS Church issued a statement. “It is disturbing that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is being singled out for speaking up as part of its democratic right in a free election,” the statement read. “Members of the Church in California and millions of others from every faith, ethnicity, and political affiliation who voted for Proposition 8 exercised the most sacred and individual rights in the United States—that of free expression and voting.”

“While those who disagree with our position on Proposition 8 have the right to make their feelings known,” the statement continued, “it is wrong to target the Church and its sacred places of worship for being part of the democratic process.”

On 11 November, the newsroom of LDS.ORG issued statements by two Catholic bishops in solidarity with the Church. “Catholics stand in solidarity with our Mormon brothers and sisters in support of traditional marriage—the union of one man and one woman—that has been the major building block of Western Civilization for millennia,” wrote Bishop William Weigand, head of the Diocese of Sacramento.

“Bigoted attacks on Mormons for the part they played in our coalition are shameful and ignore the reality that Mormon voters were only a small part of the groundswell that supported Proposition 8,” Weigand added. “I personally decry the bigotry recently exhibited towards the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—coming from the opponents of Proposition 8, who ironically, have called those of us supporting traditional marriage intolerant.”

Not all Mormons find the backlash against the Church ironic. “For months, these sacred houses of worship were the precinct offices, members were called to be campaign workers, and ward lists were turned into voter rosters,” Nadine Hansen told the Associated Press. Hansen helped track LDS contributions to the Yes on 8 campaign through her website MormonsFor8.com. “Basically, if the Church wants to know why Mormon sacred places are targeted, look in the mirror,” she added.

GRASSROOTS RESPONSES

SEVERAL LATTER-DAY SAINTS who supported Proposition 8 wrote articles and blog entries comparing the protests against LDS temples to the persecution the Church suffered in the 19th century. “We are shocked by all this because, for the most part, this generation of Saints has not lived through this type of persecution,” wrote Los Angeles Police Department veteran Paul Bishop for Meridian Magazine.

In an email widely circulated over the Internet, Patricia H. Arnazzi, a Los Angeles Temple worker, paraphrased a speech given by a Sister Martz, an assistant matron in the Temple. As paraphrased by Arnazzi, Martz said that “these past few weeks when mobs have combined and armies have gathered against the Saints, the Lord had protected His house.”

“AFTER Proposition 8 passed, the Temple began receiving threatening calls and mail from those opposing it,” Arnazzi wrote. “They were warned that more than 5,000 people would come to the Temple and burn it to the ground, and stop its work.”

According to Arnazzi’s email, the temple was closed twice—first, on 6 November, during the protest, and then again on 13 November when the temple received an envelope containing white powder. “A brother serving as a recorder that day is a Microbiologist [sic] by profession and used to deal with hazardous substances every day,” Arnazzi wrote. “He was the first to say the white powder in the envelope was only talc, and put every one at ease.”

Gary Lawrence, the California LDS Grassroots Director for Proposition 8, wrote a column for Meridian Magazine comparing the battle over same-sex marriage to the war in heaven. “[The] battlefield is now California, and the parallels between that pre-mortal conflict and the battle over the definition of marriage are striking,” wrote Lawrence. “If the arguments used in the war in heaven were persuasive enough to draw billions of God’s spirit children away from Him, why should we not expect them to be used on the present battlefield? The same minions cast out from the Father’s presence still remember what worked up there.”

Lawrence’s son Matthew, who is gay, responded to his father in a story posted at the website of Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons. Matthew stated he was particularly hurt when “my father said that opponents of Prop. 8 are akin to Lucifer’s followers in the pre-existence.”

“We can all agree to disagree and respect each other’s informed opinions and decisions,” said Matthew, “but don’t put me and Satan in the same sentence please.”

Meridian Magazine columnist Paul Bishop specifically rejected equating gay activists and Satan’s minions. “Those who oppose us in this controversy are not evil. They are the same spirits who stood shoulder to shoulder with us, and with Christ, our elder Brother, during the war in heaven,” Bishop wrote.

“The Adversary and his minions do not now, nor will they ever, possess a mortal body of their own,” Bishop added. “Their demonic spirits may flit around the edges of the mob attempting to exert evil influences, but they are not numbered among those brothers and sisters in Christ whose current petulance springs from emotional pain, frustration, and misunderstanding.”

Bishop’s column asked members not to judge, and reaffirmed that “[the LDS Church] does not hate gays.” Still, Bishop wrote, “the bottom line remains—marriage is to be between a man and a woman. Secular arguments do not trump spiritual imperatives.”
ELDER JOSEPH B. WIRTHLIN OF THE QUORUM OF THE Twelve passed away 1 December, at age 91, of causes incident to age.

Born and raised in Salt Lake City, Elder Wirthlin obtained a degree in business management from the University of Utah, where he also excelled as an athlete, playing halfback for the football team. He served in the German-Austrian and the Swiss-Austrian missions from 1937-39.

Elder Wirthlin served over 16 years in the bishopric of the Bonneville Ward, then 7 years as a counselor to Elder Russell M. Nelson in the Bonneville Stake presidency in Salt Lake City. He also served approximately four years as first counselor to Nelson in the Sunday School general presidency before being called as an Assistant to the Twelve in April 1975. He was called to the First Quorum of the Seventy in October 1976 and to the Quorum of the Twelve in October 1986, at age 69.

His wife of 65 years, Elisa Young Rogers Wirthlin, died in 2006. The couple had 7 children, 59 grandchildren, and over 80 great-grandchildren.

Elder Wirthlin is remembered for his humility, his self-deprecating humor, and his love for family, friends, and football. “Some of the happiest people I know have none of the things the world insists are necessary for satisfaction and joy,” Elder Wirthlin said once. “My life has been filled with adventure, spiritual experiences, and joy that surpasses understanding.”

People

Surrendered to Texas Authorities. Fundamentalist LDS Church members FREDRICK MERRILL JESSOP, 72, WENDELL LOY NIELSEN, 68, and LEROY JOHNSON STEED, 42. Jessop is accused of having married his 12-year-old daughter to FLDS leader Warren Jeffs. Nielsen faces three charges of bigamy. Steed faces charges of assault of a child, bigamy, and tampering with physical evidence.

Back in the saddle again. President DIETER F. UCHTDORF, 68, twelve years after his retirement as a captain for the airline Lufthansa. While in the Provo area to speak at a Utah Valley University devotional, President Uchtdorf visited with the university's aviation students at the municipal airport and flew a four seat, twin-engine, propeller-driven airplane. Speaking inside the hangars, President Uchtdorf encouraged the students to use their aviation careers to help build bridges with people and cultures through the world.

Denied His BYU Degree. CHAD HARDY, 32, the creator of “Mormons Exposed,” a 2008 calendar featuring shirtless returned missionaries (see SUNSTONE, October 2007: 11). Hardy, who was recently excommunicated because of the calendar, plans to sue the LDS Church to get his degree, but fears the cost of the legal fight could cost as much as $30,000.

Convicted of First Degree Murder. JEREMIAS BINS, 33, who in 2006 killed his Mormon wife and an 11-year-old stepson allegedly because he was angered by how much time they spent with members of the Church. His wife, CARLA SOUZA, 37, attended a Portuguese-speaking branch in Massachusetts.

Arrested. JACOB JONES, 18, MATTHEW RADOS, 18, AND CHRISTOPHER PARKER, 18, members of the BYU swim team, in connection with the theft of a rental car. An affidavit states that the men found the car keys in an Orem Wal-Mart, located the Chevy Aveo in the parking lot, drove it for two weeks, and then abandoned it in Nephi.