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WORLD PREMIERE! First-ever Book of Mormon manga comic book inside!
WE HAVE RECEIVED NOTICE FROM SOME OF OUR READERS THAT THEIR copies of issue 152 (December 2008) arrived incomplete. If you have received an incomplete issue, please notify us at info@sunstonemagazine.com so we can immediately send you a complete copy. We appreciate Rocky Mountain Printing's professionalism in dealing with this issue.

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HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?

Though he has been in attendance at every Sunstone symposium since 2000, few people have seen the elusive and mysterious William Stanford, the wizard behind the symposium’s MP3s, huddled up as he had been in the equipment room.

We swear we didn’t chain him to his chair.

INTO THE SUNSET

During the August 2000 pre-Salt Lake symposium office uproar, a stylish gentleman came in the front door and most politely asked about applying for the business manager/publisher’s job. He volunteered at that symposium and was hired a month later.

A fifth-generation Austin-area resident and University of Texas graduate, William B. Stanford, as an owner of an accounting firm and as chief financial officer for several start-up and dot com companies, had acquired much experience in industry, non-profit organization, and public accounting.

William inherited aging systems and equipment (some of which may have met the Pioneers) along with piles of governmental applications and reports required of non-profit organizations. With help from then board of directors’ chair J. F. “Toby” Pingree, and a law firm he had enlisted, William joined in removing all liens and encumbrances inherited from the original Sunstone entity. He also helped guide the creation of today’s Sunstone Education Foundation, Inc.

In addition to managing supplies and equipment purchasing, William generated magazine and fundraising mailing lists along with letters, legal, receipts, forms, and permissions. For the symposium, he produced forms, signs, badges, labels and display cases, and (being tall) he also hung banners.

He organized truck rentals, packing, hauling, unloading, and site set-up— including the art auction. He also supervised sound system installation, recording, and duplicating. William’s artistic side is evidenced by the vertical Sunstone icon and name gracing the brick alongside the front door of our building.

He helped guide Sunstone into the burgeoning electronic world, leading the transfer of symposium and magazine content to the Web, an enormous task considering he had more than twenty-five years worth of material to process.

Space doesn’t permit heralding all this gentleman’s accomplishments, such as trying to increase income by recording events for other organizations and organizing a speakers’ bureau. This narrative simply and briefly acknowledges his enormous efforts for Sunstone and expresses our great appreciation. As William leaves to pursue other opportunities, we holler, “Ride proudly on, Texan!”
FROM THE EDITOR

THE AUTHOR BUNNY EXPOSED!

By Stephen Carter

DO YOU BELIEVE in Santa Claus? The Easter Bunny? The Tooth Fairy? How about the Author Bunny?

I believed in the Author Bunny for many years. Amazing novels and short stories conceived themselves inside her like eggs, perfect and smooth. Then she would find a worthy worshipper upon whom to bestow those stories (usually after midnight).

Oh, sure, the writer had to work to peel those stories and expose their beauty, but the story was already there. All the writer had to do was find the words to embody it.

How many days did I sit at my computer certain that the Author Bunny had left a little gift for me? How many drafts did I pump out? How many perfect stories did I present to how many critics who said, “Umm, yeah. Fine.”

Fine? Obviously you don’t grasp what I’m doing here. Don’t you see the nuances? Can’t you catch the symbolism? Isn’t the story’s soul blindingly apparent?

I spent many years trying to attract the Author Bunny. But it finally became depressingly evident that I had been tried and found unworthy.

No stories for you, you naughty boy.

But I’m a stubborn cuss. I wanted to be a writer anyway, so I enrolled in a creative writing MFA program where I learned something that made it possible for me to be a writer without the Author Bunny (sounds heretical, I know). That something is a single principle. I’m giving it to you free of charge—just because you’re you.

Just as there is a craft to engine design, architecture, and artificial sweetener formulation, there is a craft to storytelling.

I spent five years studying story craft, my main text being Robert McKee’s Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting. Focusing on a screenwriting book when one wants to learn story is a bit like going to the gym without weights. They may have lovely language, sympathetic characters, and interesting ideas, but they don’t go anywhere.

I’ve written a lot of critiques to fiction writers focusing on their story’s structure, and with almost no exception I receive this response, “What in the world are you talking about? This is how the story goes!”

That, gentle reader, is the voice of one who is in the thrall of the Author Bunny. It’s the voice of someone who believes that stories conceive themselves ex nihilo.

As Robert McKee writes:

The novice plunges ahead, counting solely on experience, thinking that that life he’s lived and the films he’s seen give him something to say and the way to say it [...]. What the novice mistakes for craft is simply his unconscious absorption of story elements from every novel, film, or play he’s ever encountered. As he writes, he matches his work by trial and error against a model built up from accumulated reading and watching. The unschooled writer calls this “instinct,” but it’s merely habit and it’s rigidly limiting. He either imitates his mental prototype or imagines himself in the avant-garde and rebels against it. But the haphazard groping toward or revolt against the sum of unconscious repetition is not, in any sense, technique, and leads to screenplays clogged with clichés of either the commercial or the art house variety.

Lack of story craft is the bane of Mormon fiction. In fact, I believe it is the main barrier that keeps Mormon writing from gaining the strength to compete in the national and international markets. Too many potential Mormon writers still believe in the Author Bunny. They put no work into story craft, convinced that it will be delivered to them by a furry anthropomorph. They spend their lives waiting for an egg that never arrives.

NOTES

UNCERTAIN FAITHS

Not many years ago, writings by and about Mormons were an irregular occasion in the popular and academic press. But these days, Mormons are everywhere, from the national media to literary journals to handmade ‘zines. This column gathers some interesting and overlooked items, Mormon and otherwise.

SO, WHO IS THE MORMON JESUS?


Jesus once asked, “Whom do people say I am?” This question seems simple enough (especially for a Sunday School class), but countless theologians are still attempting to stick a label on this Jesus guy. And the labels are endless: king, priest, rabbi, teacher, Messiah, healer, Son, master, prophet, magician, Lord, elder brother, and firstborn, for example. Broadly speaking, such labels fall under the study of Christology, exploring how people at various times and in different cultures come to understand the identity and person of Jesus. Noted Catholic scholar Raymond Brown has said, “A basic step in any serious discussion of Christology is to appreciate that Christian religious thought, since it involved the comprehension of Jesus by human beings, developed and changed, as does other human thought.”

Matthew Bowman’s exceptional work on Mormon Christology explores how the transition from a polygamous church in 1880 to a relatively mainstream church by 1930 was reflected in how Mormons wrote and taught about Jesus Christ. Bowman works from not only the LDS theologians’ perspective but also brings into the conversation non-LDS scholars such as H. Richard Niebuhr and Richard Fox in exploring Mormons’ perception of Christ. Following Niebuhr and Fox, Bowman argues that “the Christ of these Mormons can be seen as a microcosm of their transformation as a religious community, not only in theological developments but in a renewed understanding of themselves as individuals and a people. Specifically, their self-identity, conception of Christ, and their sense of place in American society evolved from sectarian towards denominational, and from countercultural towards identity with mainstream American and Christian identities.”

Whom can we thank for helping the church move through this crisis? None other than B. H. Roberts, James Talmage, and John A. Widtsoe, the proto-intellectuals of 20th century Mormonism. Bowman argues, “These earlier thinkers had shepherded Mormon theology through a crisis period. By reimagining the nature of their faith’s Christ, they had been able to confront the wracking dislocations of history, of society, and even of the human nature which the abandonment of polygamy and its related crises forced upon them.”

An exceptional piece of theological history, Bowman’s article lays the groundwork for further study in Mormon Christology. Also, as the author of the feature article in a well-respected academic journal, Bowman helps expand the venues where Mormon studies will flourish in the future.

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF LEAVING THE CHURCH

“The Refiner’s Fire” by Brian Evenson, Tin House, Fall 2008.

Should I choose a life dedicated to God and his church or leave it all behind for the freedom of art and the life of the mind?” This old dilemma brings to mind literary works such as Joyce’s novel Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man. We recently received a much shorter iteration of the same story in Brian Evenson’s personal essay for Tin House. But instead of Catholics, we have Mormons; and instead of walking the streets of Dublin, we stroll through Happy Valley.

Evenson, a one-time BYU professor and author of the tour-de-force Altman’s Tongue, describes his own anguished history thus: “If Mormons could be in the world and not of the world, I told myself, maybe I could be in the Mormon culture but not of Mormon culture, quietly making a space for myself within the larger culture where . . . I wouldn’t draw too many red flags . . . I told myself, be one person on Sundays or with my Church friends, and someone else when alone with a book or with my doubting friends.”

But as Evenson felt increasingly confined by what he calls a “fundamentalist culture,” he found himself wondering, “If I had to choose between my religion and my writing, which would I choose?” Clearly making the latter choice, he took the path of writing provocative fiction, eventually leaving the Church, teaching English at Brown University, living in...
Evenson and Bowman.

Wiman reflects on the issues I have noted in the work of Evenson and Bowman. Though Evenson's piece offers a provocative portrait of a once-young man and brief look into the mind of someone who has written some of the most memorable fiction about LDS culture in the last 20 years, regardless of this misstep, Evenson's piece offers a provocative portrait of a once-young man and brief look into the mind of someone who has written some of the most memorable fiction about LDS culture in the last 20 years. Evenson and Bowman.

THE POETICS OF BELIEF


Every once in a while I read such a beautiful work of prose, I want to grab every person I know, sit them all down, and read it to them. Such is Christian Wiman’s piece on his personal loss of, longing for, and return to belief in God. As the editor of Poetry Magazine, Wiman usually writes about the future of American poetics, but now he has blurred the borders between poetry and prose in an attempt to understand what he believes. Any attempt to summarize this provocative essay would do it a disservice, but I’m going to focus on two excerpts in which Wiman tries to redefine mainstream Mormonism as “fundamentalist.” Usually a term ascribed to Saints of a polygamous stripe, Evenson uses the words “fundamental,” “fundamentalist,” or “fundamentalism” fifteen times to describe the culture he “survived” and “escaped.” The most insidious form of “fundamentalism” he sees is the replacement of open thought with institutional thinking: “Members of the group spend much of their time channeling and ferreting out, almost subconsciously, the subterranean current of a community’s logic of thinking and modifying their own thoughts to fit.” But the specter of the word “fundamentalist” conjures up ideas beyond Evenson’s control. It lends the perception to the casual reader that mainstream Mormons are somehow one step away from polygamous pedophilia or suicide bombing. This pandering to prejudice would be infuriating if it wasn’t so categorically banal.

Regardless of this misstep, Evenson’s piece offers a provocative portrait of a once-young man and brief look into the mind of someone who has written some of the most memorable fiction about LDS culture in the last 20 years.

A place for every truth

THE WRITING OF

“The Father and the Son”

This regular Cornucopia column features incidents from and glimpses into the life and ministry of Elder James E. Talmage as compiled by James P. Harris, who is currently working on a full-length biography of this fascinating Mormon apostle. The column title is adopted from the statement inscribed on Elder Talmage’s tombstone: “Within the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is room and place for every truth thus far learned by man or yet to be made known.”

On 30 June 1916, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve issued the most lengthy doctrinal treatise in Church history. The document, titled “The Father and the Son, A Doctrinal Exposition,” was immediately published in the Deseret Evening News on 1 July 1916, followed by its publication in Church magazines such as the Improvement Era in August 1916.

In his masterwork, Messages of the First Presidency, James R. Clark gives a thorough overview of many reasons why the document was written (See Messages of the First Presidency 5:23–36). However, the overriding concern appears to be that members of the Church had questions about the makeup of the Godhead, in particular in light of the Adam-God theory articulated years before by Brigham Young (though in none of these documents is the Adam-God theory mentioned directly).

James E. Talmage’s involvement with the document is apparent with the prominent reference to his work Jesus the
Christ (published in 1915). Specifically, “The Father and The Son” makes reference to Chapter 4 of Jesus the Christ which is titled “The Antemortal Godship of Jesus Christ,” and provides a detailed overview of the roles of Jehovah and Elohim.

In his journals, Talmage would frequently mention work he was doing for the First Presidency, though he rarely offered details unless the work was published.

On Thursday, 29 June 1916, President Anthon H. Lund wrote the following in his journal: “We had a long Council meeting and [an] article by Bro. Talmage ‘The Father and the Son’ was read and commented upon by the brethren. It is a well-written article. Explains passages where Jesus is called the Father; also the fact that He was the Creator under the Father, and that God being called the Father of Heaven and Earth, but is distinctively the Father of our spirits” (see John P. Hatch, ed., Danish Apostle, The Diaries of Anthon H. Lund, 1890–1921, [Signature Books in Association with the Smith-Pettit Foundation, Salt Lake City, 2006], 613).

In his own journal entry of 1 July 1916, Talmage writes, “An article on which I have been engaged during part of the week now closing appeared in tonight’s issue of the Deseret News, as an official utterance of the First Presidency and The Twelve. It is entitled ‘The Father and the Son, A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and The Twelve.’ A clipping is incorporated herewith.”

When Talmage updated his work The Articles of Faith in 1924, he included the entire text of “The Father and the Son” (see The Articles of Faith, 1924 edition, pages 465–473).
Asia
THE CHINESE HAVE A SAYING: “AN INVISIBLE red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.”

My husband and I stood in a Communist Party municipal room. I had waited seven long years to be part of a scene that has played out thousands of times in the last fifteen years that the Chinese government has allowed foreign adoptions. I staked out a spot next to an outside window, hoping to catch the first glimpse of our new daughter when she arrived by car in the parking lot.

Many of my family and friends back home thought we had lost our minds. We were in our mid-40s with four biological children, the oldest already an adult. Why in the world were we starting all over again? I told them it’s because of a feeling. For seven years, my daughter’s red thread had been working its magic from the premortal world, securing a place in our family. First there was my desire for another daughter. Then it seemed that everywhere I looked, there were little Chinese girls. I knew my youngest daughter would be born not of my womb, but in my heart.

We had gone about our adoption differently than do most families. Typically an adopting family will complete paperwork and then wait eighteen months or more for Chinese government officials to select a baby. We, however, wanted to adopt a “waiting child,” a child who is older or has special needs. The process is much faster since the child’s files are ready, but often these children have spina bifida, a cleft palate or lip, hepatitis, or other conditions.

On the morning the waiting child list was released, I did not anticipate how unnatural the process of choosing a child would feel. After all, how often are parents allowed to choose their children? At precisely 10 a.m., I tried to log onto the adoption agency’s website, but for some reason, the server kept rejecting my attempts. After forty-five extremely frustrating minutes, I was finally able to access the “waiting child” page.

As soon as a child is matched with a prospective parent, the child’s file goes off active status; several children’s files were already being reviewed. With great trepidation, I frantically searched through twenty-five files, praying that if my child’s picture were on that page, I would recognize her and make the correct choice—though I also knew that the adoption agency and the People’s Republic of China would make the final decision.

Quickly I reviewed the pictures and read a brief description of each girl. My stomach was on a roller coaster ride as I quickly selected five girls who met our criteria. With each one, I wondered, “Is this my daughter?” When I viewed the picture of the youngest girl, my heart leapt. She was incredibly beautiful. I immediately chastised myself. It was not fair to want a child just because she was beautiful.

I submitted a form that said we would like to review the file of any one of the five older girls, secretly hoping for the beautiful little one. My selection process lasted less than five minutes. Realizing that I had just made a choice that could be eternal, my stomach headed into the biggest loop-de-loop of all. I ran to the bathroom and threw up.

Later that day, a social worker called to tell us that the agency felt Hong Mei would fit well with our family. You couldn’t wipe the smile off my face. She was the beautiful little girl! I like to say now that my mother spirit had recognized her baby.

The information the agency faxed over included a few
pictures of our beautiful new daughter dressed in traditional padded clothes with split pants. She looked up at the camera, passive and forlorn, but the report from her caretaker told us that she was “a handful.” I have no idea what criteria were used to match us with Hong Mei, but we were in love.

Because Hong Mei’s adoption was to be expedited, we had only a short amount of time to fill out an enormous amount of paperwork, which, along with adoption fees, took over our lives. Before we received final approval, my husband Mike, our oldest son, and I had to undergo extensive background checks. Mike even had to fess up that his mug shot and fingerprints were on file at a police station because of an expired driver’s license. We had to dig up copies of birth and marriage certificates and get physical examinations to show that everyone was legal and healthy. Then we had to get every page of the huge adoption packet notarized and certified by the county, state, federal, and Chinese governments. Not to mention the paperwork for travel visas and Hong Mei’s immigrant status.

But when the process threatened to overwhelm me, I just looked at the picture of Hong Mei taped to the refrigerator, and her dear little face was enough to remind me she was definitely worth all this trouble.

Finally, we were notified that we would pick up Hong Mei in China in exactly three weeks. Ecstatic, we careened into a whirlwind of preparation.

Mike and I flew to LA and then to Beijing via Guangzhou, where we joined the forty-four other families involved with our agency. The next day, even though we were all on pins and needles about our adoptions, our group went sightseeing in Beijing. Though I was suffering from jet lag, it was still breathtaking to see Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City where David O. McKay had dedicated China for the preaching of the gospel, and the Great Wall.

The following day, we met two other families to board a plane that took us to Hong Mei’s hometown. I had the same feeling just prior to giving birth to my older children: fear mingled with excitement.

Early the next morning, we boarded a van with two other couples and traveled a short distance to the government building. Our small group was the first of a stream of families who would pick up their new children that day. Inside we saw a line of caregivers called Nannies or Aunties sitting on chairs holding babies in their laps. Moments after entering the large conference room, the two other couples were presented with their new, two-year-old daughters.

For forty-five minutes, we watched as the room filled with people receiving their children and then emptied out briefly before the swell began again. Orphanage caretakers carried in babies and toddlers. Some of them wailed in confusion and fear; others were nonplussed by the strangers around them and showed no emotion. But several friendly little ones smiled at the first sight of their new parents.

The sacred joy in that room was overwhelming. The Spirit was more palpable than I have ever felt in any temple of the Lord or any other place. Surely the angels rejoiced that day as many of Heavenly Father’s precious children were given the gift of family.

Then a call came that Hong Mei was in the house. A group of people standing near the door parted as a small, confident little three-year-old girl sauntered in. Her hair was cut short and styled in tight pigtails; her eyes were big in her thin face. She wore a green Minnie Mouse outfit and carried a large red backpack. She looked just like a photo we had seen of her the previous summer. I would have recognized her face anywhere in China. She trotted up to us calling us Mama and Baba. I held out a doll we had brought to win her love. She took the doll and immediately began to undress it just like any good little Mama. I scooped her up in my arms; we signed a few forms and headed out the door to our new life.

Our little daughter was happy until we got to our hotel. But when we closed the door to our room, it was as if a door had closed on Hong Mei’s previous world. She burst into tears, calling for “Grandma,” her principal caretaker at the orphanage. We tried to cheer her up with food and toys, but her tears did not subside for the rest of the day. Her skin was dry and paper-thin. I took out the lotion I had packed and...
and babies are likely to be breast-fed. The sparse diet of the Chinese people is healthy, born babies are rarely exposed to alcohol, illegal drugs, or Chinese women usually do not smoke or drink, so their unborn, Chinese babies are often healthy in body and spirit.

They are involved in international adoptions. When they were spending very little time there. We were required to stay in Hong Mei's city for almost a week, waiting for her passport, so we had time to get familiar with the area, an industrial city of about two million people.

On one of our free days, we visited her orphanage. As a gift, we brought along sixty-five pairs of warm pajamas for older children. From the street, the building was attractive, but the living conditions inside were dismal. The orphanage had no heating or cooling. There was also a definite lack of seasonable clothes, food, toys, and attention. Forever seared into my mind are the images of babies with expressionless faces strapped into little brown chairs with openings for them to defecate through. Flies crawled on the babies' scabby faces and flew around their heads. Our guide translated for us, telling the nannies and the director how much we loved Hong Mei. Our visit was short because, as our guide explained, the director and a nanny were busy with a dying baby, debating if it would survive a drive to the hospital.

China has more than 2,000 orphanages spread throughout the provinces of China. Approximately 200 of them are involved in international adoptions. When they are born, Chinese babies are often healthy in body and spirit. Chinese women usually do not smoke or drink, so their unborn babies are rarely exposed to alcohol, illegal drugs, or nicotine. The sparse diet of the Chinese people is healthy, and babies are likely to be breast-fed.

"broken arm hidden in a sleeve." For this reason, I pray for Hong Mei's birth mother—that somehow the Holy Spirit will be able to comfort her and assure her that Hong Mei lives, is safe, and is dearly loved.

Doubtless a red thread also runs between Hong Mei's birth mother and me, though most likely we will not connect until we meet at the other side of the veil. When we do, I will tell her that I thought often of her courage in not aborting Hong Mei or allowing her to be killed at birth as so many unwanted girls are. I will thank her for enduring this burden of uncertainty.

However, I wasn't much of a mother in China. Having experienced over and over the loss of women in her life, Hong Mei was understandably reluctant to bond with me. During our entire stay (nearly two weeks), Hong Mei would go only to Mike (Baba). Mama was something akin to stinky cheese. My efforts to bond with her were met with biting, pinching and hitting. But I knew this might be part of the attachment process, so I tried to wait it out patiently. Bless Mike's heart, he packed that baby in his arms everywhere we went, fed her, dressed her, and got her to sleep.

While avoiding the hotel room, Hong Mei, verbal even for a three-year-old, would talk at length with anyone passing by. Usually her conversation partner would give me a funny look afterward. We didn't know what she was saying until someone who spoke Chinese and English explained to us that she was telling people, “This is Baba [pointing to Mike]. I love Baba, and Baba loves me. This is Mama [pointing to me]. I do not love Mama, and Mama does not love me.” Then she would launch into a litany of crimes that I had committed, such as dressing her in ugly clothes and not feeding or holding her.

Not until we arrived at the Marriott in Los Angeles did I finally win the trust and love of my little girl. While her beloved Baba was in the shower, I said to Hong Mei, “Mama ai ee (loves) Hong Mei. Hong Mei ai ee Mama?” She nodded her dear little head and threw her arms around my neck. Since that day, we have been best friends. Eighteen months later, as I reflect on our journey, mere words cannot adequately describe our China experience. It is a testimony to me that God in all His power and loving-kindness was able to bring our family together from across the world, overcoming barriers of culture, language, and even politics to bring our daughter Hong Mei into the loving arms of her forever family.

If you are thinking about adopting, try this: ask God where in the great big world your child is. Then open your heart and mind to the possibility that your child is not in the United States, not with LDS Social Services, not even your own color. Who knows, maybe an invisible red thread stretches between you and a child in China.
IN HSIN CHU

Stronger than gravity, the wind
is a constant gale, or so it seems
in late summer and early fall
when not only paper and leaves,
but street signs rattle and strain
against hot air, and small children
in light weight clothes
almost ascend into the sky
like stars blown free
from the city's bright web of lights.

What is invisible makes itself
manifest in miracles, letters from home
disappear only to surface again
plastered against the chain link fence
two towns away. Rain moves horizontally
as if writing itself into the wind,
a palimpsest of salt and storm,
the coding of factories and sweat.

What messages it brings,
I cannot read or comprehend.
My shirts yellowed with sun and iron water,
their own unraveling codex of love
and loss, and the secret names
of post office faces I can't recall from graves.

I lean back into it and bike slowly,
trying to travel in a straight line
as if I were light, or merely its memory,
passing through the dark.

—NEIL AITKEN

This poem first published in the
January 2007 issue of MiPOesias.
SISTER LI AND I PUSHED OUR BIKES DEEPER INTO the moonlit maze of narrow alleys, swatting the mosquitoes that buzzed below—and sometimes above—our regulation missionary hemlines. In Taiwan, nights as well as days are hot and humid, and our shirts clung to our shoulder blades as we made our way slowly from door to door. The tightly packed residences were all fronted by thick steel doors that looked especially imposing at the end of a long and mostly discouraging day.

Then we saw it. Stuck to the front of one of those forbidding steel doors was a blue, house-shaped sticker: “No Success Can Compensate for Failure in the Home.” Jubilation filled our hearts. We were among friends! Here, in the middle of the urban jungle in far-off Taiwan, lay a small outpost of Mormondom! A member’s home! We rang the doorbell eagerly. After some time and more mosquitoes, the door opened. Inside we saw the dark red glow of the light of an altar.

“Sorry, we’re Buddhist,” the man said, looking annoyed. “But your sticker?” we asked. “Oh, that,” he said, brightening. “Someone gave it to us. It’s great.” He smiled and shut the door.

During my mission, I learned that the “No Success Can Compensate for Failure in the Home” sticker is one of the hottest items in the Taiwan mission offices. Even families who decline the missionaries’ slim blue book ask for the little blue sticker. It can be spotted on doors, cars, and motor scooters all over Taiwan.

This encounter with a man who was a proper Buddhist but also a proper Confucian, as evidenced by the fact that he had a Mormon prophet’s famous saying stuck to his front door, is but one example of the many intersections between Mormonism and “Eastern” religions that I have encountered in my ten years as a student, missionary, and researcher in mainland China and Taiwan. As I have pursued the study of “Eastern” religious traditions such as Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Chinese Christianity, I can’t help but compare them to my Mormon faith. Like kids comparing brown bag lunches at school, I want to see what they’ve got.

Making these comparisons leads me to think that, despite its American and Western European historical context, Mormonism resembles an “Eastern” more than a “Western” religion. This idea was first suggested to me by John Lundquist, the chief librarian of the Asian and Middle Eastern collection at the New York Public Library, an expert on Theravada Buddhist temples, and a Latter-day Saint. Numerous teachings that set Latter-day Saints apart from mainstream Western Christianity set them in agreement with other religious and philosophical traditions such as Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. An additional irony I have stumbled upon is the existence of an indigenous Chinese church founded on a narrative that sounds exactly like the one I had recited for two years as a missionary in Taiwan.

In short, the worldview and assumptions of Mormonism often make more sense to people in Taiwan than to people in Tennessee. What follows is an attempt to describe a few Eastern religious traditions and to offer some comparisons in the spirit of Joseph Smith’s declaration that Mormons are interested in all truth, wherever it can be found.

POPULAR DAOISM

THE BIG PUNCHLINE of the First Vision narrative—the detail that sometimes makes Christians huff and puff with indignation—is that Joseph Smith saw God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son as two embodied beings: two people. When I told the story and delivered this punchline to a Daoist priestess in Taiwan, however, she...
nodded vigorously, tears filling her eyes, and said, “Absolutely, I absolutely believe it. I’ve seen God myself; it was amazing.”

In the religious tradition variously called popular Daoism or Chinese popular religion, thought to date to the beginnings of Chinese civilization thousands of years B.C.E., an entire pantheon of gods (in conjunction with the spirits of powerful ancestors) dispense aid to those humans who seek it through offerings and prayers. These gods can be figures from history and myth, or tutelary gods such as the god of the city. In many cases, these got their start as mortal human beings, and as gods retain a distinctly human appearance. Hundreds of Daoist miracle stories involve some sort of immortal being appearing to a mortal human and delivering help or instructions. From the priestess' point of view, it was entirely reasonable for the Father and the Son to appear to Joseph Smith in answer to his prayer; she herself would have hoped for no less. Similarly, while mainline Christians regard as blasphemous the statement “As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become,” it certainly applies to popular Daoism, in which the 3rd-century general named Guan Yu was deified within the next couple of centuries and in which ancestors become more and more powerful with each successive generation.

BUDDHISM

A

OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITION with which Mormonism has significant overlap, in terms of describing the cosmos and the world, is Buddhism. The fundamental and fairly well-known premise of Buddhist belief is that the world is full of suffering, that the source of all suffering is attachment or desire, and that the way to be free from suffering is to become free from attachment. This is the original teaching of the historical Buddha Siddhartha Gautama, traditionally held to have lived from 563–483 B.C.E.. But the most striking premise of the later Mahayana tradition, which evolved from this early Buddhism and spread into East Asia, is the teaching that every sentient being has the Buddha-nature and therefore every sentient being has the potential to become a Buddha. In other words, everyone can be a bodhisattva, a person who aspires to be-
come a Buddha. Thus, all practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism are bodhisattvas, just as all members of the Church are “saints.”

When Latter-day Saints discuss the “divine potential” of each person, they mean that every person can literally become a god or goddess and create worlds for spirit children. Similarly, Mahayana Buddhists believe that every person has the potential to become a Buddha, to create worlds, to populate them, and to teach sentient beings. According to Mahayana Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, had previously incarnated as an ordinary person before attaining his own Buddha nature.

Of course, along with this doctrine of many Buddhas come very polytheistic implications: The Buddhist cosmos is full of innumerable Buddha-worlds, all created and presided over by innumerable Buddhas. This reminds us of our own belief in worlds without number and the gods who create and maintain them. The Mormon doctrine of degrees of exaltation (celestial, terrestrial, telestial) and separation from God (spirit prison, outer darkness) also parallels Buddhist notions of multiple levels of heaven and multiple levels of hell.

Like Mormonism, which places a high degree of importance on the role of mortal experiences and learning from mistakes as part of one’s eternal spiritual development, Mahayana Buddhism embraces the function of the imperfections and temptations of the world as fertile soil for salvation (deliverance from attachment). For example, there is a class of bodhisattva consisting of enlightened beings whose freedom from attachment (desire, lust, or craving of any sort) gives them extraordinary powers. These are beings who could, if they wished, entirely withdraw from the ordinary world in order to practice severe asceticism and achieve nirvana. But instead, they choose to remain in the world, out of compassion, in order to help others find their way to enlightenment and liberation. In other words, saving only oneself is considered a sort of hollow victory. True salvation means being saved with everyone else too.

The similarities between the buildings we worship in are also worth noting. Like Mormons, Buddhists worship in temples that are built around richly symbolic images, spatial layouts, and ritual spaces. The farther into a temple the Buddhist worshipper walks, the more sacred the area. When individuals make a solemn ritual commitment to live according to the highest precepts of Buddhism, they receive a new name. Dietary restrictions are also an important measure of Buddhists’ commitment to spiritual truth, and they use fasting as a tool for conquering the illusory desires of the body and for focusing spiritual reality.

In Buddhism, as in Mormonism, gender roles are explicitly differentiated, and men occupy the top of a clear spiritual hierarchy. One of the things that makes a Buddha a Buddha is bearing thirty-two distinguishing marks, one of which is distinctly male in form and function. Therefore, before a woman can become a Buddha—no matter how faithful she is, no matter even if she is a goddess or some other heavenly being—she must be reborn as a man before being reborn as a Buddha.

It may be less complicated to be a female Buddhist than to be a female Mormon. To the female Buddhist, Buddha is male, and that’s simply how things are. It is somewhat more difficult for a Mormon woman to conceive of what it will be like to be a goddess after this mortal life when the only examples of deity that can be studied during this life are male.

The implications of this doctrine are manifest in actual practice. For example, in the Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra, one of the early texts of Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha gives instructions to four groups of people: male monks, female nuns, male lay practitioners, and female lay practitioners, in that order. Within this order, the male monks and the male lay practitioners are given the most thorough instructions on how to achieve exalted spirituality, while the female nuns and female lay practitioners are given signifi-
cantly fewer instructions, mostly day-to-day injunctions on obeying their religious teachers.

The disparate spiritual power of men and women in Buddhism is also depicted in the Vimalakirti Sutra, a text named for the Mahayana lay bodhisattva Vimalakirti and written in order to demonstrate the superiority of Mahayana Buddhism to Theravada Buddhism. In an encounter with Sariputra, a Theravada disciple of the Buddha, a mischie-

vous Mahayana goddess uses her superior powers to turn Sariputra into a woman. Not only does this transformation cause Sariputra great distress, it also shows that the spiritual power of even a female of the Mahayana tradition can confound a male of the Theravada school—"my grandma can lick your big brother." Along with others, this example illustrates the position of greater spiritual privilege and power given to men in Mahayana Buddhism. This is not to say, of course, that Buddhism has nothing to offer women. On the contrary, I have met with a good number of Buddhist nuns and female lay practitioners in China and have found them extremely devoted to their faith and grateful to be able to take refuge in the Buddha.

The devotion of female practitioners in what is essentially a patriarchal and conservative religious tradition brings to mind the situation of many Mormon women. Although Mormons believe that both men and women can achieve the highest degree of exaltation and become gods and goddesses in creative partnership, and that all are children of a Mother as well as a Father in Heaven, almost all Mormon teachings about, devotions to, and blessings from God occur in the name of a Heavenly Father only. Although a Mormon woman thinking of the afterlife and exaltation can think in terms of tandem-gender phrases such as gods and goddesses, priests and priestesses, kings and queens, whenever this vision is articulated, women express desires to become "like Heavenly Father," not "like Heavenly Mother," even though Heavenly Father is male and gender is supposed to be eternal. My sense is not so much that Mormon women really wish to become male in the next existence, but that they are largely uncomfortable with speaking of a Heavenly Mother because very few teachings on this subject exist and because the term "Heavenly Mother" has associations with other "dangerous" things such as feminism, liberalism, and excommunication.

In this sense, it may be less complicated to be a female Buddhist than to be a female Mormon. To the female Buddhist, Buddha is male and that's simply how things are. It is somewhat more difficult for a Mormon woman to conceive of what it will be like to be a goddess in the next life when the only examples of deity that can be studied during one's earthly life are male.

My personal experience as a Mormon woman with many Buddhist women friends and relatives leads me to believe that we have much in common. Our experiences as women are similar in that what is most important and precious about our religious belief is not the technical, formal, liturgical, and administrative ramifications of this or that doctrinal teaching about gender, but instead the practical, personal, and lived experience of our faith. It is in experiences such as reading the scriptures, praying, feeling the Spirit, taking the sacrament, visiting teaching, being kind to others, symbolically passing through the veil into the presence of God in the temple, and teaching my children to try to be like Jesus, that I anchor my ideas about what it means to be a Mormon woman. These experiences have always been a source of joy and an affirmation of my Latter-day Saint belief. The Buddhist women I know have expressed the same joy in obedience to the human demands of their faith: the command to separate themselves...
from the world, to be holy, to cultivate compassion for all sentient beings through good works and kind thoughts, and (in some traditions) to bring about a Pure Land (heaven) on this earth.

CONFUCIANISM

This ideal of compassionate relations between human beings so important to Buddhism is articulated most systematically in Confucianism. Confucianism is not a religion, but a humanist philosophical tradition concerned with teaching ethical behavior and achieving harmony in society. This tradition is anchored in a number of texts that are redacted between the 5th and 3rd centuries B.C.E., oftentimes centered on the figure of Confucius (traditional dates 551–479 B.C.E.) and his teachings, and also in a body of “neo-Confucian” interpretive texts dated to around the 11th–13th centuries C.E. These Confucian and neo-Confucian texts focus both on the importance of cohesive social institutions such as the family and the state and also on the importance of individual self-cultivation and moral integrity. The fabric of society, and of morality itself, is woven on the wool of what are called the Five Relationships: ruler to subject, father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, and friend to friend.

The first thing that we might note about these Five Relationships is that four out of five of these relationships are hierarchical, the latter being obligated to submit to the former. At the same time, the Confucian ideal emphasizes the mutual obligations within these hierarchical relationships. The ruler must protect his subjects. The father must teach his son. The elder brother must watch over the younger brother. The husband must provide for his wife. Of course, in the realm of everyday practice, such a hierarchical power structure is bound to be abused. This darker side of “Confucian values” was a cultural reality for many women in China for centuries B.C.E. and into the modern era. At the same time, women were also invested in the system, gaining more and more power as their sons married and as they assumed the role of matriarch over a large multi-generational family.

Although Confucianism is not a religion, strictly speaking, one could generalize that Confucian and Mormon traditions share the same values when it comes to thinking about the role that hierarchy plays in ensuring social harmony and stability, especially within the family unit. Both share the ideal of clear gender divisions of power and spheres of influence, with men heading the family and seeing to its economic livelihood, and women following men's leadership and taking care of the domestic duties. However, the repeated warnings in contemporary prophets' teachings against unrighteous dominion, domestic abuse, and inequality in married relationships certainly suggests that within the Latter-day Saint tradition, as with the Confucian tradition, the ideals of mutuality can be compromised by the imbalance of power inherent in hierarchy.

The second thing to consider about the Five Relationships is that three of them are family relationships. The Confucian emphasis on the family unit as the fundamental unit of society and as a microcosm of the true moral order converges nicely with Mormon beliefs about the importance of the family. In Taiwan, the Church's self-described role as a refuge for families against the divisive pressures of the world is a real attraction (hence the popularity of David O. McKay's maxim in Taiwan). The Latter-day Saint emphasis on family history coincides with the centuries-old Confucian tradition of reverencing ancestors by keeping detailed, impressive family genealogies that easily stretch back hundreds of years. This focus on maintaining the family line led to a widespread Confucian practice of taking multiple wives, a practice to which 19th century Mormons could certainly relate. Finally, Confucianism and contemporary Mormonism both claim a similar set of “traditional family values” such as obedience to parents, family-centered socializing, and close extended family ties.

Indeed, the Confucian concept of family values not only predates the Mormon idea but also takes it to a whole new (old) level. Within the Confucian tradition of filial piety and
self-sacrifice on behalf of the family, there are innumerable heroes and heroines: sons who cut off their flesh to feed their parents, children who kill themselves in order to spare the family shame, young widows who vow to never remarry in order to serve their mothers-in-law for the rest of their days.

Because Confucianism is more cultural inheritance than doctrinal profession, a person can be Confucian and Mormon at the same time. In my own Asian-American extended family of Chinese and Japanese descent, fathers wielded power and worked while mothers stayed at home and raised children. Was it because we were Mormon? Or Confucian? I’ll never know. In my study (still in progress) of an Asian-American Mormon women’s oral history collection at the LDS Church Archives, I found that many Asian women who joined the LDS church felt that despite the Church’s image as a family-oriented church, it was not family-oriented enough. Their native Asian cultures continued to supply the substance of their family structures and norms.

Sometimes the potent combination of Mormon and Confucian culture results in hyperconvergence—a mutual amplification of shared cultural tendencies. This is the phenomenon responsible for producing those large Asian-American Mormon families in which the children all have Biblical names, play an instrument, get straight A’s, meet and marry their first serious romantic partner at BYU, and are down-the-line orthodox, especially when it comes to respecting Church leaders, studying the scriptures, and not dating until age sixteen.

Despite these basic similarities in Confucian and Mormon perspectives on family, there are also points of divergence. For example, Mormon teachings on family emphasize the primacy of the nuclear family over the extended, multi-generational family. A recent Ensign article states that when sons and daughters marry and form their own families, “the hierarchy of supervision and control dissolves so that parents and their adult children are on equal footing,” and the conjugal relationship takes priority over the parent-child relationship. In contrast to this point of view, Confucian teachings focus on the primacy of the extended, multi-generational family, organized hierarchically. Once a father, always a father; once a son, always a son—not merely in terms of familial bonds of loving concern but more important in terms of the Five Relationships and the respective obligations they imply. Parents are responsible for raising and teaching children, and children are responsible for honoring their parents’ wishes and serving their parents throughout the course of their adult lives.

“Focus on the family” may not mean laying aside a lucrative career in order to spend more time in wholesome recreational activities with one’s children, as much as it means choosing a lucrative career and working long hours in order to better take care of one’s parents in their old age. “Nurturing children” may not mean making a financial sacrifice so that the mother can stay at home as much as it means both parents working to provide for the multi-generational family unit while the grandparents raise the young children. “Honoring your father and mother” may become the highest moral law. Many North American Mormon missionaries who are sent to Taiwan have difficulty understanding why many “golden” investigators who feel the Spirit and seek baptism suddenly discontinue the discussions because their parents or parents-in-law disapprove. The reason for this difficulty is that in the Confucian tradition, the two-way nature of the generational exchange is more explicit and culturally supported than it is in Mormonism.

What do these differences say about Confucian and Mormon concepts of the structure of spiritual power and influence within the family? Confucian philosophy has long coexisted with—and to a certain extent accepted—the concept in Chinese popular religion of the spiritual power of deceased ancestors to watch over their living descendants. Deceased members of the family are worshipped through offerings of food and incense and with memorial tablets kept in the home. What do these differences say about Confucian and Mormon concepts of the structure of spiritual power and influence within the family? Confucian popular reli-
gious belief holds that deceased ancestors wield spiritual power to watch over their living descendents. Deceased members of the family are worshipped through offerings of food and incense and with memorial tablets kept in the home. The fact that members of the previous generations have died does not diminish the significance of their relative positions of superiority in the family hierarchy. A father is always a father (who commands), and a son is always a son (who submits).

But do these generational hierarchies of influence apply to the Mormon chain of ancestors and descendents? One widespread Mormon teaching about the afterlife is that an exalted husband and wife will become gods, guiding their posterity eternally. What exactly is meant by “posterity?” Each nuclear family, formed in a temple marriage, has this outcome as the primary goal; the secondary goal is to raise children who will marry in the temple themselves and who will strive to become gods as well. In this sense, there is no “generational food chain.” Once exalted, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters are all in the same position, all autonomously holding the same degree of godly power; all guiding spiritual posterity eternally within their own husband-wife partnerships—at least, this is how Mormons most often apply existing doctrine. The alternative, in which exalted couples would exert their godly influence only within the context of their earthly parent-child relationships, would end up looking something like an all-powerful, all-knowing, and very long massage chain.

Hence, we might say that the cherished Mormon message, “Families Are Forever,” has more long-term validity within the Confucian paradigm, in which a father is always a father and a son is always a son. In the long run (over the course of resurrection, judgment, and exaltation, during which children mature and become full equals with their parents), the essential Mormon message about family is really “Marriages Are Forever.” As my Uncle Dillon used to say to young married couples: don’t worry, the first million years are the hardest.

**CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA AND TAIWAN**

I BEGAN THIS article with a missionary story. I conclude with another that in many ways mirrors the first, but this time with a twist.

It’s nighttime in Hefei, China. The air is thick with heat and exhaust. Snack vendors fry oil-cakes, and mothers hold their babies over the gutter to pee. Music and sales pitches blare from a dozen different stores. Cars, buses, and motorcycles are honking incessantly as they swerve and surge around the bicycles and pedestrians. I’m sitting in a basement level café, a mercifully air-conditioned and relatively quiet haven. Outside, chaos reigns, capitalism rages, and the hearts of men and women are being enticed away from God. But here, inside, we have our own sacred space as we sit around the table with scriptures and tracts opened before us.

Sister Shen, Brother Chen, and Sister Li are member mis-

**CONCLUSION**

HILIP JENKINS, A scholar of global Christianity, notes that the global center of balance of Christianity is shifting southward and eastward, away from North America and Europe and toward Africa and Asia. In actuality, he observes, Christianity is simply returning to its roots in the East, when the center of the primitive church was in Jerusalem, not Rome. Is it any wonder then, that a religion claiming to restore the traditions of primitive Christianity and of the even more ancient religious traditions found in the Old Testament, Mormonism has so many elements in common with “Eastern” religions such as Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism? On key issues such as polytheism, corporeality, cosmology, dietary laws, hierarchy,
gender roles, and family bonds, Mormonism can be more in agreement with Eastern religions than with mainline Christian denominations. Mormonism as an Eastern religion: where does that notion lead us? This idea may prove to be more useful in showing contrast than commonality. An emphasis on the “Eastern” aspects of Mormonism in Asia may win accolades but not necessarily converts (as illustrated by my exchange with the Daoist priestess). In places such as Taiwan, where Confucian and Mormon culture overlap, missionary work is helped by the fact that some people already believe in strong families and want to strengthen theirs, but it is also hindered by the fact that some people already believe in strong families and see no need to join The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to continue doing so.

Where these “Eastern” aspects of Mormonism have the potential to pack the greatest punch is in the way we define our religion in the context of other religions, especially within Judeo-Christian societies. Too often, in our fervent desire to be acknowledged as followers of Jesus Christ, we have lumped ourselves together with a smorgasbord of Christian groups whose doctrines, cultural values, and civic affiliations are often fundamentally different from our own. In so doing, we have overlooked our natural affinity with other religious traditions, including Eastern traditions. The overlap between Mormonism and Buddhism, for example, is just as substantial, illuminating, and attractive as that between Mormonism and any Christian denomination.

Pointing out Mormonism’s doctrinal and cultural parallels to Eastern philosophies is particularly fruitful in secular intellectual settings like the newsroom or the university, where Christianity is often associated negatively with religious conservatism and where non-Western thought has a certain cachet. In these settings, people who are wont to dismiss Mormonism as simply a more virulent strain of the plague of the religious right may be surprised and genuinely interested to learn the similarities between Mormon and Buddhist cosmologies. These similarities in turn highlight some of Mormonism’s most powerful and distinctive teachings.

By stressing the contrast between key tenets of Mormonism and the major philosophical assumptions of Western mainstream society, we acknowledge the vital tensions that constantly refresh our faith and make it relevant in today’s world of change and paradox.

In sum, perhaps the conversational question that we should pose to others instead of “Are Mormons Christian?” is “Are Mormons Confucian?” Instead of fretting about how to get ourselves invited to the mainstream Christians’ party, and wondering why Christians are so particular about the doctrine of the Trinity when we “basically believe the same thing,” we could proudly identify Mormonism as a polytheistic Christian religion. Instead of envying Episcopalians and Congregationalists for their user-friendly theology, we could rejoice in the paradox and productive tension that spring from Mormons’ ability to inhabit many worlds: the world in which Joseph Smith saw Two Personages standing in the air, the world of priestly blessings and temple rites, the world of science, the world of reason, the world of worlds without end.

NOTES
1. Of course this comparison depends on how one defines East and West and how one separates ideas, symbols, and institutions from their geographical and cultural origins. Coming up with a proper definition would take too much time and would result in a definition so long and technical that it would be useless. So to make things simple, let’s assume that by Western, I mean the cultural and intellectual traditions of Western Europe and the Americas, and by Eastern, I mean the cultural and intellectual traditions of Asia, while acknowledging that this is a clumsy dichotomy in which major civilizations such as those in the Middle East are ignored and that this is a very rough and imperfect way of sorting humankind’s entire selection of ideas, big and little. By Western religion, I mean principally mainstream European/American Christianity. By Eastern religion, I mean Chinese popular religion, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, indigenous (and often syncretic) Christian sects, and others.
2. Although the original teachings of Confucius recognized mutual obligations between husbands and wives and disparaged the abuse of power, later teachings which entered the Confucian canon during the Song dynasty (960–1279) and the evolving legal code of imperial China itself formally enshrined and protected the Confucian gender hierarchy even in its cruder forms. For example, in this code a wife who struck her husband was subjected to punishment much more severe than that for a husband who struck his wife. Significant legal and social barriers to gender equality continued to exist in China throughout most of its history up until 1949, when the Communist Party assumed rule and proclaimed new laws intended to strengthen women’s rights.
3. These oral histories will not be publicly available for a few more years to come; I was able to access them because I was the interviewer.
5. I’m speaking a little facetiously here, certainly not scientifically, but I’m drawing on my considerable experience with Mormon-Asian-American families.

SWIMMING HOLE
Knees and elbows, gills and fins, we sailed the rope-swing pond all summer until sunburned arms wouldn’t fit cuffed shirts. Minnow on a hook, small-fry in the way of fish for a pan but, in the lower pond, the legend of a bass that swallowed boys. In a whispering ring of willow we were swallowed up by greenish water until supper. Then afterwards, by ones and twos, we gathered by cat-tails at the edges, while frogs thumbed twilight deep and deeper, fireflies whisped across an everlasting summer sure as the thin whure of mosquitoes. We were all blood-brothers in the dark remembering the perfect butterfly of skinned knees and elbows stroking water, to dive and come back up again tomorrow.

—TAYLOR GRAHAM
ANZHEN LIFTED THE ALUMINUM GRILL DOOR of her home, her arms trembling under the door's weight. She felt the hinged metal catch and shouldered the door into an impermanent place, giving her time enough to wheel her motor scooter from the front room onto Taibei Street. She rocked the scooter onto its stand and stooping to fix her nylon anklets, met the eyes of a Xeroxed foreign devil robed in white, arms outstretched, decorating a leaflet on the ground. For a message of mercy and peace, contact Sister Shi and Sister Wu. Yanzhen stuffed the tract in her pocket, lifted her eyes to a grey tile and tin horizon, and listened to clanging garage doors and the coughing start of scooters down the narrow street. With a sigh, she fitted her helmet and mask, and joined the darting and braking race through traffic lights.

Today she passed several churches, each marked with a cross. As a child, she'd been attracted to the hallelujah energy of a church off Market Street. While her mother haggled in the market, she'd creep one step closer to it. Lingering on its outskirts behind a guava stand, she'd clapped with the chant that rocked the courtyard. Zhu Yesu, Zhu Yesu, jiu wo Zhu Yesu—Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus, save us Lord Jesus. She crept closer each day until her mother caught her nosing the church's iron bars, a Jesus song on her lips. “Don't betray the ancestors,” her mother had snapped, and gripping Yanzhen's wrists, dragged her home to kneel before the family shrine, burn paper money, and set out fruit for the dead.

The light changed, and Yanzhen braked hard. A helmeted man with two children crouched beneath the handlebars of a scooter grazed her leg. The light changed again, and the family zipped between two cabs. The children yawned exhaust through their masks on their way to school. Yanzhen repeated the name of Buddha and adjusted her mask, looking past her reflection in shop windows.

SHE DIALED THE first number on her list. “Hello,” she said, “I'm calling from Zhanghua Insurance to offer a lifetime insurance policy beginning at only 300 NT per month.” She was surprised to hear herself finish the sentence before the person on the other end of the line hung up. Phone clenched beneath her ear, she listened to a line of beeping and turned a page in the directory.

The only businesses doing well in these times were insurance agencies. She'd seen them pop up like red bean cakes, oyster floss noodles, and pearl tea stands on street corners. The insurance companies tried to employ women with rosy lipstick and mid-thigh skirts, who kept to strict yogurt drink diets, and who minced down the street, distributing cards and smiles. Yanzhen, with chopstick legs and knuckle knees, knew she couldn't have landed this job on looks alone; so, when manager Zhang glared at her from across the table, his lips and teeth red with betel nut juice, she studied a phone book, waiting for the blur to steady into lines and numbers. She would dial every number in the book to make her fifteen sales this week, even if her eyes fell out. Yanzhen wondered, if her eyes failed this year, would her life, at forty-three, be reduced to shuffling and tapping, eyes opaque and unblinking? Wearing stained knit shirts, would she resign herself to time told in the rotations of a wheelchair? Without children of her own, she wondered who would care for her.

The phone rang. “Zhanghua Insurance. How may I help you?”

“You left the back door open, and he got out!”

“I'm sorry, you've reached Zhanghua Insurance.” She twisted the phone cord around her pale pinky. Perhaps nails fixed with flowers and bright paint would give her confidence and image.

“The neighbors spotted him pissing in their garden.”

“Shuzhen?” she said. She glanced at her boss and lowered her voice. “I'm at work.”

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“Where do you think I am?”
“Can I call you later?” She rubbed her eyes. “Never mind. I’ll get him,” she said, pushing back from the table. “I’m going to meet a client,” she said when manager Zhang looked up from his paper. She’d pass out a few cards along the way.

She saw her life reflected in Main Street. Cracked plastic buckets marked the absence of the bright cellosphere-wrapped sunflowers, daisies, and lilies once sold by the flower shop on the corner. A former storefront of white-lighted porcelain and chrome faucets wore boards over its windows. Even her mother’s favorite bean curd stand during her stay in the hospital had become a glass booth with neon lights and high-heeled women in lingerie. Yanzhen missed pressing her nose against the bean curd to sniff out freshness and poking the golden or rich red tofu with her index finger to gauge texture. The store manager didn’t mind; Yanzhen always drove away with her mother’s favorite aged tofu (the kind that foreigners complained had the smell of rotten socks), her sister’s favorite fried tofu, and the soft white tofu that was good for her father. Now, instead of dried, smoked, deep fried, and fresh bean curd sales, the stand sold lime and oipium-laced betel nuts prepared by women who worked through the night and into early hours of the morning.

Yanzhen passed the hospital, the church on the corner of Five Authority Road, and then paused at a rollaway stand next to a convenience store. She traded two kuai for a bag of pan-fried radish cakes and steamed soymilk. She tied the bag to her bike and noticed that the church on Five Authority Road was adding on to its walls.

With its white walls and blue roof, this particular church was an ordinary one-story building encircled by manicured hedges and flowers that changed each season. On Sundays, it filled with families that arrived on motorbikes and in a few cars. The women wore bright dresses and flashed smiles at each other, disciplining children between smiles. The men wore white shirts and colorful ties; some wore suit jackets, other, suits and dresses to park their bikes and escort people into the church. The women wore bright dresses and flashed smiles at each other, disciplining children between smiles. The men wore white shirts and colorful ties; some wore suit jackets, other, suits and dresses to park their bikes and escort people into the church.

Merging back into a sea of motor scooters, Yanzhen swerved to avoid hitting a breakfast street vendor. She watched him push his cart across the road, pink and blue plastic stools hanging off a line of rope. His earnings that morning were doubtless only enough to buy the ingredients for tomorrow. She scanned the streets. Her father had last been seen heading toward Renmin Market, the neighbors said. He was wearing red or black—or was it blue. She turned into a dark alley that opened up into a network of lanes filled with crimson wax apples, the shape of bells, eels, and shrimp writhing in plastic buckets. Yanzhen purchased a few guava and reached for a handful of tender hollow heart leaves—she might as well get dinner.

“Have you eaten?”
Yanzhen started. Two girls with Jesus nametags blocked the flow of traffic. She started her motorbike, but they moved in front of her wheel. She maneuvered around them, but they walked alongside her, pleasant looks on their faces. Yanzhen wondered where their bikes were and whether or not they’d hand her a book.

“Where are you going?” one said, practically beaming.
“I’m sorry, I’m busy.”

“Oh, yes, getting dinner?” the other said, her eyes on the bag of greens tied tight around the glove box of Yanzhen’s scooter. The girl offered a smile like a half moon.

Yanzhen squeezed the throttle and said, “I’m looking for my father,” while inching forward.

The girls shared a look. “What does he look like; can we
help you?” they said, eyes wide.

Yanzhen stared at the sweat beading on the girls’ brows. They didn’t look more than eighteen, her age when she had tried to leave home. “It’s hot out,” she said. “You’ll get dark in this sun.”

“That’s why we wear these,” the girls said, raising their arms in sleeves that blocked the sun.

“Here,” Yanzhen said, handing them each a guava. “This is a cool fruit, good for the liver,” she said. She’d ask the Goddess of Mercy to bless these children. She wondered if they returned home at night to steamed rice and wok-seared vegetables. She wondered if they had parents, because what parents would let their children roam streets so far from home.

“Thank you,” they said, tucking them into matching bags. The girl with the blue eyes looked closely at Yanzhen. “We’d like to share with you a fruit that’s fairer than all other fruits, sweeter than anything you’ve ever tasted.”

Yanzhen raised an eyebrow. Their smiles were suspect. A well-balanced meal required the satisfaction of bitter, sweet, salty, spicy, and sour senses. Satisfaction demanded contrast.

“Can we come visit you tomorrow night to share our message?”

Yanzhen shook her head. If they hadn’t already, these girls would feel sweat in their eyes and blisters that callused over with time and disappointment. “Maybe later,” she said with a weak smile, turning onto the road leading home.

“Here,” Yanzhen said, handing them each a guava. “This is a cool fruit, good for the liver,” she said. She’d ask the Goddess of Mercy to bless these children. She wondered if they returned home at night to steamed rice and wok-seared vegetables. She wondered if they had parents, because what parents would let their children roam streets so far from home.

“Thank you,” they said, tucking them into matching bags. The girl with the blue eyes looked closely at Yanzhen. “We’d like to share with you a fruit that’s fairer than all other fruits, sweeter than anything you’ve ever tasted.”

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SHE FOUND FATHER sipping tea at a neighbor’s house, and after giving him a tongue-lashing and bearing the disapproving heads wagging at her, she escorted him back inside their two levels of concrete.

“Wait here,” she said, sitting him on his wood-backed chair, fitting his feet with slippers.

Rinsing roach dung from two pairs of chopsticks, Yanzhen watched the water run out of the sink, a circle of darkness, and felt it splatter into the concrete gutter that channeled out to their garden. Navigating her way back, she started to sing, “Zhu Yesu, Zhu Yesu,” but caught herself and bit her tongue. All these years and she still couldn’t forget the songs she’d sung so wholeheartedly as a child for those few rare days. She’d been brave then, accepting a middle school classmate’s invitation to a Christian youth retreat, telling her mother that she needed help with math. There, on the grounds of the church marked with a cross, she had felt the thrill of new territory and traditions that asked nothing of her but discovery. In the present moment, she was bound to no one and nothing. God is love, her new friends said, welcoming her to the fold. Will you accept Christ into your heart as your Savior and Redeemer? Not sure of their meaning, but curiously warm in their embrace, she nodded her head. They clapped their hands, surrounding her with a wave of smiles. This is the body of Christ, they said, resting a wafer on her tongue. This is the blood of Christ, staining her lips red.

She’d continued her “math” classes as long as she could, but her father came home one day when she was out. Dinner wasn’t made, and later that night, the truth was rooted out. Yanzhen was confined to the house for associating with Christians and was taught to relinquish her desires.

Yanzhen turned on a small lamp and propped a pillow behind her father’s back. She opened a cardboard box full of rice, oiled glass noodles, spinach, tofu, and pig’s feet. “Here, eat,” she said. “Pig’s feet—your favorite.”

A repeating cicada’s voice fell in through the window and echoed off the concrete floor. Eyes glazed, her father brought the chopsticks to his bowed head, his arm slow and shaking like the white tufts of his eyebrows. She listened to the slow click of his chopsticks and watched the pumping blue veins of his hands. This was the waning period of his life cycle, a time when her proper role as daughter required the overriding of self-interest. Her mother would say that the economic downturn of the last eight years could be traced to Confucian principles no longer followed. These days, she could drive down neighborhood streets on the first and fifteenth of each month without having to navigate around the smoking incense pots and lighted braziers burning paper money into the spirit world. Neglected rituals followed abandoned roles. She’d seen young girls and young boys at the night market eyeing each other without parental approval. Also, some sons and daughters left home without intending to return to care for their parents. If her mother were here to explain it, the lack of ritual, filial piety and humanity had incurred the wrath of the ancestors and created a netherworld of hungry ghosts.

Squatting on a stool, Yanzhen toyed with the dinner box on her knees. “To perform one’s role correctly is to ensure harmony and prosperity within society,” she said under her breath to appease her mother’s spirit. With her chopsticks, she squeezed the grey jelly of an egg aged in acid. This is the body of Christ, she thought. She shook her head to chase out the thought and placed the egg on her father’s rice.

In high school, when her peers began linking arms under the broad wax leaves of mango trees, she’d found herself drawn to the cult of mercy, to women monks with bodies robed in brown cotton and turmeric, heads shaved, eyes emptied of the world. Their drones and murmurs transporting them to somewhere beyond the present, offered more allure than did the dark stares of young men in her class. The women’s eyes communicated that they’d found stillness which she felt was more achievable than the perfect love spoken of by the Christians, if only for the reason that her parents were less likely to oppose this choice. In the season of mangoes and guavas, Yanzhan had informed her parents that she wanted to become a follower of Guanyin, the goddess of a thousand arms weaving a mantle of peace. Since she rarely made requests anymore, her parents looked up from the television to listen. But the day before she was to enter the monastery, her mother had had her stroke. Her sister threw a fit, saying, “Goddess of mercy, you walk out now, and I’ll haunt you past the grave.” Through the years following, Yanzhen learned by bathing, feeding, and walking...
her mother, more about her duty to the ancestors. She was to forsake herself, to care for those who came before and after, and to continue a line of honor.

Yanzhen checked the ancestral altar, careful not to spill the hot water nor disrupt the settling leaves in her tea jar. She sipped the tea through her teeth and replaced the morning’s incense, now a pile of ashes. She lit new sticks, waited for the ends to glow, and then squeezed the tangerine offerings to ensure firmness and fragrance. After straightening her mother’s urn, she stooped and plugged in the altar. Guanyin’s lighted arms pushed back the room’s darkness. In the gold of Guanyin’s gown, Yanzhen saw her face; not even makeup could soften those lines.

Kneeling on a pillow, she bowed three times, “Amitofo, amitofo, amitofo,” she said. “Goddess of mercy and compassion, bless this earth with thy tears.”

Smoke snaked off the incense; ash crumbled onto the tile. With closed eyes and limbs tucked beneath her, she listened to the drone of gongs and rise and fall of chants playing from the meditation cassette tape. She inhaled and exhaled. Hello, life, she said on an inhale; goodbye, life, she said as she exhaled. Her temples cleared, her back opened, and she heard banging on the aluminum door.

Yanzhen stood and walked to the door. “Who’s there?” she said through the metal lattice.

“Missionaries for Jesus Christ. Sister Shi and Sister Wu.”

She made out the forms of two young girls in skirts and bike helmets. “Why are you here?”

“We believe that Jesus Christ and Buddha were brothers, that they both shared messages of peace. We bring an extension of Buddha’s message.”

Yanzhen laughed. “Brothers? I don’t think they’ve ever met.”

“We are all sons and daughters of the same eternal God.”

“If we’re all siblings, no wonder the world fights like it does,” she said, thinking of her sister and that afternoon’s call. Yanzhen recalled something the preacher had said. “Did Christ really tell his followers to leave their mothers and fathers to follow him?”

One girl stepped forward. “He asks that we trust him. He asks us only to do what is best for ourselves and our families, even our ancestors. We have a message to you from your father in heaven. You are his child. He loves you and has prepared a way for you to become perfect as he is and to return home to him again, to be with your family and loved ones forever. We know this to be true. Please, let us share it with you.”

She wavered, hand on the screen. “I’ve been saved,” she said. It seemed that even Christians were bound to family. She wondered what this god demanded of his followers. All promises exact a price. Didn’t Buddha teach that attachment is the root of all suffering? Survival, she’d concluded, required emotional detachment from promises that would never pan out. “I’m sorry. I have some things to attend to.”

Yanzhen removed her hand from the door.

“If you change your mind, our church is on the corner of Five Authority Road, next to the hospital and convenience store. Just ask for Sister Shi or Sister Wu.” They waited.

Yanzhen turned off the light and backed away. On her knees before Guanyin, Yanzhen toyed with her mother’s urn and scanned the plaques of ancestors. The goddess with her soft pearl skin, floating in robes of silk, set her fingers in a lotus of peace. Her delicate mouth with its slight smile, mocked the fierce bulging eyes of the arhats and protectors beside her. Yanzhen lit squares of rice paper, yellow like the color of money and touched her head to the ground three times. “Amitofo, Amitofo, Amitofo.”

Next door, a bell rang, a dog barked, and a garage door clanged loud enough to disturb the dead.

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JUNKYARD IN SARAJEVO, 1993

With the last sack of flour piled onto his wheelbarrow he takes the handles in his hands and runs through the streets, not looking back. If he stays in the open for too long or if someone catches him with this food—a series of cracks goes off like hot oil in the distance that must be sniperfire. He does not stop, he’s got to reach home, he peers straight up, eyes calm and concentrated like a runner with attention to the track. Things get lighter as he winds past the overturned buses and destroyed trailers, there, he’s done it, he gets into the back of the wrecked red buggy, turns and thinks he’s slammed the hood shut, locking himself safely inside. But there is nothing in his hands, the trunk’s still open, he looks out across the street—the toppled cart, his body on the curb with the bags of flour puffing clouds all around it, like the smoke of a starter’s gun at the beginning of a great race.

—MEHDI JOSEPH-OUNI
Let your hearts expand, let them be enlarged toward others. For not only is the mind or intelligence which man possesses . . . coequal with God himself . . . all the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement so that they have one glory upon another.

–Joseph Smith

I LIKE TO THINK THAT THE PROPHET'S URGING may to some extent underlie a credo I formulated in the Seventies, which I outlined in the preface to a book of my plays:

One of life's most important purposes and functions—its greatest source of fulfillment, at least for me—is to commune, to “connect” with others, at ever-deeper levels of understanding, mutual acceptance, sharing, identification by merging into one another's lives. And yet, how we tend to stifle our inclination, our need to do so, therewith missing the satisfaction and joy—the very nourishment to our souls—that alone derive from such communion, such connection. We do this largely, I think, from fear—fear of rejection. It is easily the most tragic tendency in human affairs and leads not only to emptiness and depression, but to resentment, hostility, and vengeful scapegoating. It lies at the root of the psychology that engenders and exacerbates all conflict and war, whether public or do-

As a self-styled polyglot, I have, for some reason, tended to pursue the language of “the enemy.” Don't ask why. My first mission call to Germany, headquartered in Berlin, occurred a good ten years after the end of World War II, and, obviously, I had no say about where the Brethren happened to call me. In fact, I'd earlier studied French and was secretly hoping that would recommend me for the land of our former allies. But I'd also already studied almost three years of Russian, for which, in 1955, there was not the slightest chance a missionary would have much use.

While in Germany, I got to know Erich Krause, devoted genealogical director for the North German Mission and a former devotee and SS bodyguard of the Fuehrer himself. His alter ego was surely another Krause, Walter, who had escaped a death sentence at the hands of the Nazis only by fleeing prison during the Allies' fiery bombing of Dresden and whose own father, an ardent East German Communist, had later denounced him for being less political and embracing Mormonism. Walter Krause had lived into his nineties and was the first to be called as patriarch for all of Eastern Europe.

I doubtless encountered many former National Socialists and sympathizers during that two-and-a-half year sojourn.
In Cold War Poland I discovered that the thrust of that nation’s fiercely patriotic Catholicism has been the memorialization of its defenders throughout centuries of suffering and defeat at the hands of occupying powers.
Many had probably fled from the Russians to Schleswig-Holstein, an early mission area of mine; and then, of course, there was Berlin itself. But discussing politics wasn’t part of a missionary’s job description, and, blessedly, we were mostly oblivious to the earlier background of our fellow members and those to whom we brought the “word.”

In the early 1990s, as a mission president in St. Petersburg, Russia, I could not help but be keenly aware that a number of our outstanding priesthood leaders, some of whom had been highly responsible professionals in the Soviet enterprise, would have had to be Party members only two or three years before. One of these—the late Vyacheslav Yefimov—particularly stood out for me. He was the street-smart but deeply spiritual president of our mission’s largest district, later the first native Russian to be called as a mission president. A few years earlier, he had been the supervisor of more than 500 employees in the St. Petersburg transportation system. Brother Yefimov saved me from making a number of grievous mistakes and naïve judgment calls as I first took over the reins there.

No, those who live under global alignments opposed to our own are simply, like us, mostly subjects if not victims, of where and—since those alignments so readily alter—when they were born. We should always keep this in mind, though I have not always done so. I painfully remember, for instance, disputing the solemn pro-
nouncement of a venerated tour guide in 1957 at the Lenin Museum on Red Square. I was still an LDS missionary, not yet released nor returned home, and, yes, there all by myself. I’d received the permission of my extremely indulgent mission president to a most presumptuous request: to take advantage of a “Gesellschaftsreise,” a group tour, advertised to Germans wishing to visit the former Soviet Union. As it turned out, no German as yet cared to, and I went all by myself for ten days, the distance from San Francisco to New York and back, with the finest hotel accommodations, restaurant meals, guide service, and more—all for $400. Moscow is now considered the world’s most expensive city. Those were indeed—and in more than one sense—“the good old days.”

My gray-haired guide was, for what seemed the nth time, pointing to another portrait of Lenin and reciting one of his gems of wisdom: “Serve your fellow men, and you will know great joy” (or words to that effect). So I impertinently rejoined—I was still a missionary, don’t forget—that someone else had said the same thing almost 2,000 years before. My guide, who had, with all the dedication of a secular nun, taught herself English just the year before in order to serve at the first post-war international conference of communist youth, was scandalized. After all, I was standing on her sacred turf, and she was, clearly, a true believer.

Have I as yet learned the important lesson I’ve here been preaching? I’m not so sure. Earlier this year, while with a grandson waiting for the Paris metro, I noticed a woman reading a newspaper in Serbo-Croatian and could not refrain from trying on her a few phrases from the time I’d spent in her homeland decades earlier. Somehow I readily remembered the sentence, “On vech veliki momak”—“He’s already a big boy”—and, though somewhat out of context, handily bered the sentence, “On vech veliki momak”—“He’s already a big boy”—and, though somewhat out of context, handily

During my numerous sojourns in Russia, I have always tried to visit a Russian Orthodox service—not so much for the liturgy as simply to bask in the choir’s glorious a cappella singing.

During my numerous sojourns in Russia, I have always tried to visit a Russian Orthodox service—not so much for the liturgy as simply to bask in the choir’s glorious a cappella singing. While I consider that church’s ethical stipulations and spiritual community quite lacking, its music, icons, and incense mesmerizingly convey a genuine mood of solace and consolation. I also respect the deep reverence its worshippers invariably supply. Also, in Poland, where I’ve had lengthy residences to study both its language and theater, I’ve been enthralled by the Krakow Franciscan cathedral’s marvelous art nouveau stained glass depictions of Deity and various saints, the creations of my favorite Polish artist, the marvelous portraitist, Stanislaw Wyspianski, himself also one of Poland’s noted playwrights.

Just as while in Vienna I learned that Austria’s foremost religion is classical music, in Cold War Poland I discovered that the thrust of that nation’s fiercely patriotic Catholicism has been the memorialization of its defenders throughout centuries of suffering and defeat at the hands of occupying powers. In other words, given their flat, defenseless location along what cultural geographers have called Europe’s “shatter belt” and their military vulnerability due to factionalism and political disunity, the Poles have been forced to commemorate their defenders’ failure to withstand foreign aggression. Although a seventeenth-century Polish king, Sobiecki, is credited with repulsing the Ottoman Turks outside Vienna, preventing further inroads into Europe, Poland long disappeared from the map after other powers partitioned it. And Poles suffered the proportionately greatest loss of life in World War II, approximately one out of every seven citizens.
This was the prevailing leitmotif I encountered in all forms of Polish artistic expression during my two fairly lengthy residences there in the 1970s. During a memorable tour with theater professionals (and some amateurs such as myself), I was introduced to films and stage productions by Poland’s foremost avant-gardists. I had, for instance, a privileged interview with the country’s veteran filmmaker, Andrzej Wajda, whose films had paid tribute to both the protesting Gdansk shipyard workers clandestinely massed in the early 70s and those who launched the Solidarity movement a decade later in the same locale. The world-renowned performances by Jerzy Grotowski’s Teatr Laboratorium in Wroclaw (formerly Breslau) focused on the ordeal and sufferings of those interned in the Nazi camps.

In the film, My Dinner with André, an actual New York-based director, Andre Gregory, tells the actor Wallace Shawn about undergoing a live burial in Poland as a participant in a meta-theatrical activity. This was the sort of thing Grotowski was now into, and a number of the more impressive members of our group had similar experiences during the two weeks we were with his actors. Others of us underwent grueling vocal and physical exercises—intended to free up our innate visceral emotions so that, on stage, our responses would be, like those of his actors, all the more primal and authentic.

The players had already ceased performing plays as such; but for a documentary film by Wajda, they had revived their last one—Apokalypsis cum Transfiguris—an imagined account of rivalry and disputation among Christ’s original disciples, leading to his rejection and abandonment before the Crucifixion. Our group was allowed to view two successive rehearsal performances in preparation for the filming.

The show’s idea had been suggested by personal clashes among Grotowski’s actors, who consented to expand upon them for the purpose of his production. The emotional intensity of the play was almost unbearable. If such dissension did in fact occur among Christ’s first followers, I felt transported, as though actually there. Christ’s desolation and loneliness were, under such circumstances, all the more vivid. A year or two later, the troupe, who had lived together like monks and nuns and whose sole purpose in life had been their art, broke up.

With the Church’s extensive outreach to individuals both within and outside the fold (home teaching, missions, humanitarian aid), the Latter-day Saint outlook on both within and outside the fold (home teaching, missions, humanitarian aid), the Latter-day Saint outlook on both

After returning home, I staged for the BYU Department of Theater a reconstruction of images, gestures, and scenes from Grotowski’s and others’ avant-garde productions. As our audience entered the Pardoe Auditorium, they were forced to walk over empty, worn shoes scrounged from Deseret Industries, reminiscent of the exhibits of liquidated inmates’ confiscated belongings on exhibit at Auschwitz since the end of World War II. Like our largely wordless reenactment, the effect was eerie and, I imagine, unlike anything BYU audiences had previously encountered.

But I am not always so unruffled—as was the case when, at the end of a recent month-long stay in Armenia, I went with the mission president there to the Genocide Museum in Yerevan. I already knew about the Turks’ horrific slaughter of Armenians during World War I, but the tour helped clarify the circumstances. This time the guide was younger and very knowledgeable. As we followed her from one exhibit to the next, I noticed that a swarthy young man in blue jeans had attached himself to our party, standing a little behind us but clearly following the guide’s English. On an impulse I turned and asked, “Are you also an American?” upon which he abruptly disappeared. I felt bad and asked the guide who he might be. Her answer: “He’s probably a Turk. They sometimes come like that to listen in but don’t want people knowing who they are.” I understood, but I felt bad that I’d provoked such discomfort.

The very next day after boarding the plane from Yerevan back to London, a British seatmate, a middle-aged woman, whispered in my ear that the bald-headed man sitting just in front of me, with his wife, teenage son, and daughter in adjacent seats, was “the former president here who, in protesting the recent elections, fomented riots in which scores of people were killed. He’s a very bad man.” Although we were already heading for London in a British Midland carrier, I thought it prudent to change the subject. My seatmate, an investigative journalist, found that agreeable enough until my reply to her question, “What are you doing here?”—“I’m with the Mormon Church.”—immediately brought down the conversational shutters. There was not a peep more from either of us for the rest of the flight. A reality check’ and strong reminder that, like Turks in Armenia, Mormons are not always so endearing—particularly at a time when America is far from admired and, in this instance, just after the media had given widespread attention to Warren Jeff’s Texas fundamentalists.

That old difficulty again: how to reach out to others with the certainty and conviction of our faith and values without counting on any personal acceptance or even respectful acknowledgement? But let’s turn that question around: How willing are we to extend to ‘the other’ equivalent respect and appreciation while not compromising what we call our testimony or standing at a comfortable remove from what may be our own energizing faith? Do we simply have to view the world’s various religious philosophies and systems of belief as interchangeable and relatively the same?

This ecumenical challenge was brought home to me
when in the 70s, my daughter and I toured and, for a length of
time, resided in India. While in Kashmir, we found our-
selves literally snowed in and unable to fly back to Delhi. My
daughter was laid low with the flu, so for three days, I trav-
elled to a nearby Muslim restaurant and carried back our
meals. The young waiter there finally asked if I were a
Christian and then exclaimed that he could not imagine
anyone’s being other than a devotee of Allah. I think my re-
sponse at the time was fairly inspired: “Whatever you and I
choose to call Him—Almighty or Jehovah—surely we can agree
that He created each of us and is the Father of us all. Isn’t
that what’s really important?”

More recently, and closer to home, my encounter with
Muslims has proved more ironic, even wistful. After retiring,
I took up an intense study of Arabic, the language of our os-
tensible enemies and geopolitical rivals. As a senior audit,
I enrolled in two year-length Arabic courses at the University
of Utah. My last teacher was Abdullah, though that had not
always been his name.

Born in New England and raised in Salt Lake City,
Richard Lux was a full-blooded Caucasian American.
Responding as an engineer to an offer from the University of
Utah Medical Center, Richard’s father had brought their
family to our area. Though Richard was not a Mormon him-
self, his best school friend and playmate was a ‘straight-
arow’ Japanese-American Latter-day Saint. Together, he tells
us, they played pranks and got into the typical scrapes of
young men their age. They were inseparable until one day, in
high school, this friend told Richard that a certain seminary
teacher had advised his charges not to associate with non-
members. Richard says that, from that moment on, he de-
tested Mormons. Later, while pursuing Arabic at Columbia
University, he converted to the Muslim faith.

I have seldom encountered a more delightful or dynamic
teacher. The irony is that—now a devout Muslim—
Abdullah’s opinion of Mormons has considerably softened
because he sees us in terms of his and our shared standards and
our respect for the Transcendent: “We have so much in
common.” Again wistfully, I suspect that his good friend and
neighbor might have eventually prevailed on him to seri-
ously investigate and accept the religion he now highly re-
spects, though from an almost unbridgeable distance.

Then there was my Arabic tutor Hussein, an Iraqi refugee
in his mid-30s who lives and works right here in my
Bountiful community. A Shia from Basra, Hussein was, as a
teenager, recruited to fight the Iranians in Saddam’s earlier
U.S.-backed offensive against Iran. Unlike Abdullah,
Hussein was not a very good teacher, but I was a far-from-
apt pupil, so one day, in the middle of a lesson and without
any explanation, he stood up and announced that he had to
leave. He never came back, and that proved to be our final
lesson. It was, I suppose, a face-saving way to let me know
he’d had it with this dull pupil. Maybe though, such a re-
sponse reflects the sort of politeness that, in being so direct,
we Americans have little sense of—another cultural dif-
ference and barrier to overcome.

I've yet to fully comprehend the sons of Allah.

DOUBTLESS THE MOST exotic place I've ever
visited is India. Even a good quarter of a century
later, my impressions of it are quite vivid. India still
has one of the most totally religious cultures on the planet—
its people fully accepting of Hindu tradition. As a Westerner,
I felt slightly uncomfortable with the general fatalistic as-
sumption that one's hardships and suffering were earned in a
previous life, But I also noticed that even the achhi—un-
touchables—sitting on an ash heap and sorting discarded
design and plastic for a few sustaining grains of rice, seemed
Indian life is certainly filled with its own distinct contradictions.

so essentially calm and accepting of their condition that few if any in that society appear to suffer from ulcers or require a psychiatrist. I suspect, however, that since I was last there, with India’s burgeoning, more westernized and relatively prosperous middle class, much has changed in that regard.

For the first two months, with Indrail passes in hand, my daughter Krista and I literally “rode the rails,” superficially taking in the entire subcontinent with the exception of Nepal. Everywhere there were beggars—the more freakish the better. At a seashore temple site in the Dravidian South, we were amazed to see a quite young girl carrying a full-grown turbaned man, his withered limbs wrapped, snake-like, around her waist. During a long train stop in Puna, encouraged by her father and brother, each with an amputated
arm, another young girl approached our train car. She went for the Arab men sitting at an opposite window, enjoying a repast of fresh fruit, imploring them with the uplifted stubs of her own arms, from which both her hands had been neatly removed. The Arabs laughingly held out a single grape which, somehow, she managed, tweezier-like, to grasp between the stubs and bring to her lips. Then they turned their backs on her. In Mumbai, while crossing a long bridge, we were swarmed by a pack of well-trainedurchins who, for all the world, reminded us of the similarly organized young Gypsies who, now everywhere in Europe, suddenly descend upon the unsuspecting traveler, reminding me that a thousand years earlier, the Gypsies' ancestors, speaking the Sanskrit language they call Romish, came from this same place.

Almost any morning in either Mumbai or Calcutta, where millions live on the sidewalk, doing their ablutions and preparing food with the help of fire hydrants and the open gutter, fresh corpses lay on the sidewalk, always discretely covered by a thin cloth. Crossing the country from Calcutta to Delhi through relatively poor and wild Bihar Province, we were accosted in our compartment by young men who compelled us to give up our reserved seats to them: we'd already heard of the Wild West-type banditry on trains, knives sometimes slashing through the partitions dividing one compartment from the next to reach the bandits' victims.

By contrast, we were, as total strangers, often invited by our current traveling companions to attend a lavish family wedding celebration at a forthcoming destination, which on one occasion we in fact did. Our presence as foreign guests seemed to add a certain prestige to the occasion.

Everyone had his or her “cobra story,” and we were grateful that, even after the monsoons broke—the season for their appearance in gardens and commodes—we somehow missed that stirring adventure.

Unlike the prominent body odor still frequently encountered in public places in Russia, I never detected anything but total cleanliness—thanks to Indian natives’ much lighter apparel and the worshipful practice of daily bathing. After our first landing in Calcutta, we had taken an evening stroll to a nearby marketplace: the variety and quality of products amazed us, but the locals seemed not the least style-conscious or ostentatiously self-aware—whatever might barely cover their nakedness would do. Finally, visiting the famed temples of Kajaran in the jungles of central India, we had a sense in the many bas-reliefs of the erotic abandon of an earlier mode of worship, called tantra.

Having located two able and willing tutors, I finally settled to study, first in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, center for the criminal cult that strangled its victims with silk cords, and called “Thug”—from which English derives the word “thug.” Finally I went alone to India’s ancient holiest city, Varanasi (corrupted by the British to Benares) but formerly known as Kashi, where, with the help of my phenomenally dedicated tutor, Virendra Singh, a Kshatriya (one degree below a Brahman), I rented for $40 a month a two-story building overlooking the sacred Ganges.

For coolness, like everyone else at that time of the year, I slept on my building's flat roof. The sights and sounds that awakened me at sunrise presented an unforgettable tableau. Streams of pilgrims passing by on their way to the river and salvation, shouting “Ram! Ram!” Beggars lining the path with hands extended for coins or a few grains of rice. “Dhanayawad,” the common word for “Thank you” was here studiously avoided since it was understood that the giving of alms is a saving act for which the bestower and not the receiver should be especially grateful.

My attention was nevertheless quickly diverted by the hawks and vultures that swooped ever closer, checking me out in case I’d expired overnight and was ripe enough for devouring. I had only a few minutes to gather my effects and descend from the roof before swarms of wild monkeys, the newborn babies often still clinging to their mothers, descended to steal anything still in sight—eyeglasses, reading matter, bedclothes. In one instance, I defiantly shook my fist, in turn receiving a still more defiant grimace. Don’t aggravate wild monkeys: they have sharp teeth and often carry rabies (if not, as we’ve since discovered, AIDS).

On a corner outside my window sat another deliberately amputated beggar, near naked, who ecstatically invited one of the many nearby sacred cows to lick the salt off his perspiring skin—his particular mode of ablation. Once the enchanting voice of another such pilgrim beggar whom I could not see came wafting from below. We later learned that, though he did not speak Hindi, this old man had come from Calcutta to end his life at the Ganges. The language he used was what everyone agreed was Bharat mei bahut, bahut mitya bhasha—India’s most beautiful language. Virendra in fact engaged the man to serenade us on the evening of my departure. The other guests and I passed the hat so that he had enough to keep him in rice for the next several months, a fee well earned.

Indian life is certainly filled with its own distinct contradictions: I eventually learned not to post my letters in official street-side receptacles—they never reached their destination. Apparently the postmen who collect them peel off the postage and throw the letters away, so it is only safe only to bring mail directly to the post office and witness, with his rubber stamp, a more reliable clerk performing the requested cancellation.

Meanwhile, openly published statistics—India, unlike Russia, is a viable democracy with freedom of the press—indicate that annually millions of young wives are, through the connivance of their dissatisfied spouses and mothers-in-law, burned to death in staged kitchen fires so that the husband can then find another wife with a new dowry. Exposés further suggest that far too many widowed women are—at whatever age—cast onto the street, even by their adult children, to spend the rest of their lives as either beggars or prostitutes. Many seem to take their fate stoically enough, however: “It's my karma. It's obviously my punishment for misdeeds in a previous life.” Devoted widows are also still...
occasionally praised for committing suttee—outlawed during the British occupation—in which a woman willingly throws herself upon her deceased husband's funeral pyre.

“The body is just an empty shell, while death frees the soul from its imperfections.” Despite this common sentiment, funeral rites are, like weddings, elaborate and costly. Virendra kindly invited me to witness part of an eleven-day ceremony conducted by his friend, chair of Benares Hindu University's civil engineering department, who, as his mother's oldest son and a Brahman, presided at her funeral.

With shaved head and wearing a single sacred string—his “garment”—the professor was at one point instructed to bring the string from his left to right shoulder. On another occasion, I was privileged to sit on the man's veranda floor—the guests ushered there in shifts, our food served in banana leaves, and monkeys clamoring just beyond us through the grillwork.

As a modern scientist, the professor had, Virendra told me, been particularly concerned about the raw sewage and diseased corpses that have brought the Ganges to an unimaginable coliform level, despite which most pilgrims have considered himself impervious to its harmful physical properties.

As nowhere else, there are in India a multiplicity of gods. One day I observed Virendra's wife sitting on their cold concrete floor intensely reading and reciting from the holy epic, “The Ramayana.” Virendra explained that she was doing so as a form of mourning—out of respect for her recently deceased father. With its supernatural mythological setting, the Ramayana eulogizes the virtues of its heroine, who is willing to commit suttee and do all else that would honor her paramour. Having several times noticed on their wall the portrait of Ganesh, the elephant god, I one day brashly asked Virendra, himself well educated, if he could really take such a deity at all seriously. “It's for my wife,” he confessed. Such animistic deities are, apparently, far more popular with the masses, while Virendra and the more scholarly tend to view them as symbolic, favoring a more abstract and sophisticated line of interpretation. It's the Indian equivalent of, say, our own culture's contrasting Unitarians and born-again evangelicals.

In my ongoing search for striking ritual and theological parallels between Hinduism, this oldest of all extant world religions, and Mormonism, I felt richly rewarded when I came across the early German Indologist Max Mueller's rendition of the Vedic soma ritual, which, with its washings and anointings, I leave for anyone who has been through an LDS temple to read about and ponder. Then there is the common presence of a water source—often an outside pool or vat—on the site of most Indian temples, which is also what Hindus call their holy edifices. I find these “fonts” nowhere else but with one particular people in all Christendom. I've already mentioned the sacred thread. Speculative as all this must be, it is perhaps helpful to recall that Hinduism is an at least 4,000-year-old Aryan transplant from the plains of Central Asia, with commonalities between the Indians and the Sky-God-worshipping Scandinavians.

Two high moments stand out from my month-long stay in Jabalpur. First, my all-too-brief interaction with Shri Matiji Pandit, a most gifted tutor, from whom I tried to acquire the rudiments of what may be the most difficult of all ancient languages, Sanskrit. With a Ph.D. in Vedic Sanskrit (the language's oldest form) from Benares Hindu University, Dr. Pandit had been engaged by my hosts, American and English professors at the local Methodist seminary, to teach Sanskrit to young Indians preparing for the Christian ministry. Despite her commitment to Hinduism, she was often confused in by these young future Christian preachers, who sought counsel regarding occasional impasses with their Western mentors.

One day, having read that at one time there had been practically a separate god for each devotee, I asked Dr. Pandit if, in her vast knowledge of Hindu lore, she had ever encountered a deity who had either preached love for one's enemies or voluntarily given his life for all humankind. After a long pause, she quietly answered, “No.” This conversation—now a quarter century old—was for me, a defining moment, providing a further, unexpected foundation for my conviction that Jesus Christ and his mission are truly distinctive, as they need to be, if he is the world's one and only Savior.

While in Jabalpur, I enjoyed the hospitality of a most gracious member of the seminary faculty, Dr. David Scott, who, though American, had grown up in India, the son of missionary parents. A year earlier, I had made initial arrangements to travel there, and though we were total strangers, Dr. Scott and his wife had kindly offered to have Krista and me as his houseguests. However, only a week before our departure, they sent us a telegram with the warning that others would not welcome us in Jabalpur because we were Mormons. His dean, while in the United States, had received a highly unfavorable impression of our missionaries. Nevertheless, when our train halted in Jabalpur, I stopped off anyway, half expecting to be stoned, and phoned Professor Scott. His curiosity piqued, he decided to come see us at our hotel. After meeting us, he at last declared that he would, after all, arrange both a tutor and accommodations for us—as it turned out, a recently vacated missionary bungalow with a staff of five servants. Such accommodations were then still fairly affordable. However, it soon became clear that neither the Scotts nor any of their Western Methodist colleagues wanted to hear a word about our suspect religion.

Then, one day, Krista became acquainted with a venerable Indian gentleman who resided in a neighboring bungalow. He was a former Muslim who, in his youth, had stowed away on a ship to the U.S. and, before returning to his native
community and clan, had earned a Ph.D. in theology at Princeton. After converting his extended family, he became Jabalpur's now highly revered first native Methodist minister, long retired. Upon learning from Krista about our own religious background, he enthusiastically leaped up and returned to the room with various photo albums featuring LDS temples. Later, his married daughter, a local high school teacher, made her appearance: the source of his pictures. Until that moment, we had imagined that no one within a 1,000-mile radius (excluding the faculty members at the seminary) had ever heard of Mormons. As it turned out, the venerable minister's daughter and her husband had previously served for two years as Hindi translators at the LDS Church College in Samoa, where she'd acquired a quite different—in fact, glowing—impression of the Church.

The week prior to Easter, her father invited me to join him on his way to the Methodist chapel for a service. Because of the heat, I had by then gone native and was, like him, wearing a diaper-like dhoti. So together we took off, walking arm in arm past cows and peasant carts along a dusty road. Then, entering his church, he escorted me to a prominent pew, reserved in his honor. I don't remember much about the service, but I'll never forget the astonished and slightly distressed looks on the faces of the entire seminary faculty, all of them in their allotted places. Some time later, the old minister's daughter asked to speak to me, earnestly declaring, “I want to join your church.” I assured her that she would not only need her husband's permission but also would probably have to wait until missionaries and a branch of the Church came to Jabalpur. I’d be pleased to know—and not terribly surprised—if by now, that is the case.

Also while in Jabalpur, we briefly made room for a British couple who had for years served in Africa and India as missionaries for the Assemblies of God. Civil as they were, their attitude toward us reflected that of our hosts, so we never discussed religion. Then, still later, the local minister for the Assemblies of God—a former Brahman—paid a call, requesting that I preach to his congregation, which I did. It was an exhilarating experience, and, subtly, I tried to insert a touch of my religious background, he enthusiastically leaped up and returned to the room with various photo albums featuring LDS temples. Later, his married daughter, a local high school teacher, made her appearance: the source of his pictures. Until that moment, we had imagined that no one within a 1,000-mile radius (excluding the faculty members at the seminary) had ever heard of Mormons. As it turned out, the venerable minister's daughter and her husband had previously served for two years as Hindi translators at the LDS Church College in Samoa, where she'd acquired a quite different—in fact, glowing—impression of the Church.

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BEIJING

China is really quite a different place—on the surface less compatible with my perhaps more transcendent outlook. According to professor of religion at Syracuse University Huston Smith’s distinctions, China is more noteworthy for its practical social skills and organizational management than—despite its ancient grounding in Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism—particularly lofty spiritual yearnings. My wife, Merriam, and I went there in 2001, the year after my retirement, at the behest of BYU’s China Teacher Program, where we spent a full ten-month academic year. I returned the next year to Nanjing University to study second-year Mandarin with a student group from BYU.

The regimentation of Chinese life was, throughout, clearly in evidence and hardly a surprise. The world’s impression at the recent Olympic games of masterminded synchronization is no exaggeration. Though we mostly effete old fogies had been required to take doctor-certified tests for AIDS before traveling there, we were apparently still under suspicion, and one day, with very short notice, all the foreign teachers at Peking U. were herded into buses and brought to a medical facility for further testing. I wondered if the same precautions are taken with the young women who adorn every barber shop, ostensibly to give massages. Their exertions, I’ve read, account for at least three percent of the entire Chinese economy, as available women are in short supply due to the nation’s one-child policy and the systematic abortion of female fetuses.

But—unlike anything I’ve yet to witness in Eastern Europe—one thing especially struck me: the Chinese seemed to eagerly lean into wherever they were going, whatever they were doing (so many up early in the morning on their bicycles). Construction projects take shape overnight with round-the-clock, ant-like shifts. The at-least-300-million “surplus labor” pool (i.e. “unemployed”) are that eager to earn another day’s bowl of rice and pass on a portion to their family.

Like Moscow, Beijing seems to extend itself interminably. Its high-rise facades are nevertheless graced by a variety of styles with traditionally curved gabled rooftops, a nod to ancient Chinese tradition. One could wish for such a flair for individuality in the monolithic structures of Eastern Europe. In Moscow and other Russian cities, I’ve noted, a greater attempt has been made more recently toward individuation—maybe inspired by and in imitation of the Chinese. Recent structures in Khabarovsky at the far eastern end of Russia, for instance, which is only thirty kilometers from the Chinese border and whose construction crews are clearly “guest workers” from across the Amur River, very much resemble those in Beijing.

Red lanterns line many a street for blocks on end—denoting the presence of restaurants. Somehow the Chinese manage to eat out a lot. Though I’m still told that our Chinese restaurant fare States-side is not the real thing, I’m hard put to see much difference—except that, as a student once put it to me, “We Chinese eat anything that creeps or crawls.” Unlike in Russia, night life is vibrant. Also, unlike Russians, who seem to do little more than export their mineral, oil, and natural gas wealth, the Chinese are, as we all know, extremely resourceful at producing just about everything—particularly cheap and fake goods with perfectly du-

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to the veil than during the subsequent several days I lay in thought I’d already recovered from. I have never felt closer.

As it turned out, I’d been attacked by epidydimitis, a serious student transportation on campus was limited to the ubiqui-
tous building, and I will drive you there.” This was unheard of—
in fact, had joined the class that very day, promptly arose
immediately go to a hospital. A student I’d not seen earlier and who,
with a particularly searing abdominal pain. I did not hesitate
to approach and join a panel of other judges to adjudicate various state
trials. For some reason, I thought to ask her if she had ever
had to sentence someone to death. Her too-calm answer,
after citing a particularly shocking number: “I interpret the
law as conscientiously as I can.”

Besides teaching our graduate students, I earned extra pay by taking on a number of undergrads for a conversation course. These far-younger students differed from the grads in their more privileged socio-economic background, better foundation in English (clearly the products of prestigious
schools), and greater sophistication. They reminded me of
our students an eager delight. Most of them of peasant
origin, they earnestly hoped to secure for themselves a chal-
 lenging profession and decent living standard. For many,
we were their first English-speaking instructors. As representa-
tive Americans, we may have also conveyed to them, along
with the language, a certain fashionable prestige. In any
event, they seemed to enjoy and highly respect us. They
often told us, “You are my parent,” a traditional Chinese re-
sponse to one's teacher. Maudlin as that was, they seemed to
mean it, despite the fact that a number of them were no
longer young adults, many married, and some already in
their forties. Except for rare holiday visits to their home vil-
lages, most had to live apart from their families, including
spouses and children. Some already had important and presti-
gious positions in Chinese society.

A month into the second semester, while standing one
morning before one of my classes, I was suddenly afflicted
with a particularly searing abdominal pain. I did not hesitate
to announce that I would have to end the class and immedi-
ately go to a hospital. A student I’d not seen earlier and who,
in fact, had joined the class that very day, promptly arose
and declared, “I am a banker. I have a car just outside this
building, and I will drive you there.” This was unheard of—
student transportation on campus was limited to the ubiqui-
tous bicycle. But I took advantage of the good banker's offer.
As it turned out, I'd been attacked by epidydimitis, a serious
urinary tract infection, consequent to the TERP operation I
thought I'd already recovered from. I have never felt closer
to the veil than during the subsequent several days I lay in
Beijing's only Western hospital, whose staff had just been
joined by its first Western-trained urologist the day I was ad-
mited.

Then there was the manager of one of China's five boxcar
factories, who weekly flew to Beijing from Dalien on the
Pacific Coast, just for our class. Later, on separate weekends,
both he and the banker flew Merriam and me to their re-
pective cities, where they housed and dined us. In Dalien, I
requested that we visit our student's boxcar factory, which,
starting with hoops of steel sheeting, turns a new boxcar out
every half hour, adorned with the purchaser's freshly painted
logo. They sell for an unheard of $15,000. When our super-
visor learned that we’d accepted these lavish invitations, all
she could imagine was that we were taking a bribe, but I as-
sured her that both students would receive the grade they
deserved. I have no doubt, however, that the grades of party
functionaries and their dependents were changed in their
favor if they proved not high enough.

One of our students was already the editor of a legal pub-
lication, and one of the lovely young co-eds, already a jus-
tice, periodically excused herself to travel on assignment
and join a panel of other judges to adjudicate various state
trials. For some reason, I thought to ask her if she had ever
had to sentence someone to death. Her too-calm answer,
after citing a particularly shocking number: “I interpret the
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Besides teaching our graduate students, I earned extra
pay by taking on a number of undergrads for a conversation
course. These far-younger students differed from the grads
in their more privileged socio-economic background, better
foundation in English (clearly the products of prestigious
schools), and greater sophistication. They reminded me of
the confident, well-heeled undergraduate Yalies I’d once
rubbed shoulders with—wearing scuffed blue jeans and
worn sneakers, their elite uniform—by contrast with more
formally attired grads like me, who were there only thanks
to generous fellowships. My Chinese undergrads had al-
ready seen pirated versions of films that had not yet come
out at home, and I could tell they were confidently looking
forward to joining the nation's ruling class. By now, they are
all, I imagine, very well entrenched.

Proselytizing is illegal in the People's Republic of China.
Wisely, the LDS Church has forbidden its functionaries to so
engage. While we were in Beijing, only ex-pats could as-
ssemble for LDS church services. Since then, hundreds of na-
tive Chinese members who converted while abroad and later
returned to their homeland have been permitted to assemble
together, but not with their foreign counterparts. One gen-
eral authority, Elder Chah, himself Chinese bearing a Hong
Kong passport, has long been allowed to serve as a liaison
with native Chinese Latter-day Saints. Despite the legal re-
strictions, various foreign evangelical Protestants—includ-
ing some of our own colleagues and fellow residents at
Peking University (who, incidentally, viewed us much as
had the British journalist in Yerevan and the professors at
the seminary at Jabalpur)—have openly preached to their
students, and baptisms have ensued. This seems to be tolerated because such groups allow their local leaders to be appointed by the PRC government, something the LDS Church would never allow.

Despite the fact that we studiously avoided any discussion of religion, an amazing thing occurred between us and almost all of our students—a one-on-one bonding, in this case with individuals whose racial, linguistic, cultural, and political traditions markedly differed from our own and despite relatively brief weekly contact. These connections were as personal and endearing as I can ever remember with my former students, missionaries or even, in some cases, our own children. How does one account for that?

During two successive semesters—with a totally new group of students showing up after the first—I required that, among other things, they write about their family history. I already knew that during Mao’s Cultural Revolution most genealogical records had been destroyed, so I asked them to phone home to a grandfather or maiden aunt if they could not return to their village during the intervening mid-semester holiday and learn more about their forebears—to become oral historians, that is.

My sample of brief but moving accounts—particularly of the sufferings of parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents; of aunts and uncles under, first, their earlier landlords, the occupying Japanese, and finally the ruthless forces of their Revolution—were often horrendous and deeply poignant. The Chinese people’s suffering has, I discovered, known no bounds. It is in every way equal to the millennia-long oppression of simple Russians. This particular assignment and the idea of it were entirely new to our students, something they weren’t much conditioned to think about, close as they all were to their immediate, still living family members.

Those who presided over the branch of the Church we attended for expatriates were remarkably gracious and generous on our behalf. Most were former missionaries or mission presidents who had served in Taiwan and who, because of their rare language facility as Westerners, were now the CEOs of major legal, accounting, and consulting firms that of their rare language facility as Westerners, were now the CEOs of major legal, accounting, and consulting firms that served in Taiwan and who, because of their rare language facility as Westerners, were now the CEOs of major legal, accounting, and consulting firms that had arrived in China on the commercial ground floor after the normalization of relations under Deng Xiaoping. These individuals were now multi-millionaires, two of whom who have since been called to the Quorum of Seventy. On one occasion, at a conference of the mainland China District, one of these brethren dutifully translated for the government official who frequently dropped in on our meetings, while the presiding Brethren from Hong Kong quickly adapted their remarks to the spirit of the twelfth Article of Faith. The Chinese official kept nodding his head in vigorous agreement, and we knew that the congregation’s immediate interests had been sacrificed for a greater, long-range cause.

The summer after that year in Beijing, I returned to China, this time as a student to Nanjing University. An American friend and I managed to visit a nearby Buddhist monastery and converse there with several novice monks who spoke surprisingly good English. With the earnestness and openness of his countenance, one of them particularly stood out for me. From a group photograph, I isolated his striking image and have, in my post-retirement mode as a portraitist, tried several times to capture, both in oil and pastel, what for me has become a kind of icon—as various fashionable images of the Savior serve for many a Mormon. I still feel I have fallen short but keep trying: this young Chinaman’s radiant gaze still eludes me and transcends my ability to depict it. Does this say something about my own spiritual deficiency? Or is all of this just some erratic obsessive-compulsive fetish—a figment of my all-too-mortal imagination? I know very little about this earnest young true believer, who might have so easily chosen his peers’ far more materialistic and conventional way of life, especially in a society in which such ascetic religions are generally viewed as antiquated anathema. But something about his face resonates with me, and—whatever it is—I consider it China’s spiritual gift to me.

CONCLUSION

YEARS AGO, IN a particularly thoughtful essay on ecumenism, Tancred I. King wrote the following:

Christianity can gain from Islam a heightened awareness of the majesty, the grandeur, and the absoluteness of God. From Hinduism, Christianity can gain greater respect for meditation and reflectiveness. From Buddhism, Christians can understand the impersonal side of ultimate truth. The Confucian emphasis on humanism, social order, and filial piety can enhance Christian life. From Taoism and Shintoism, the Christian can more fully realize the sacredness of nature.3

In a memorable endorsement of the spirit of King’s assertion, the First Presidency published the following statement in 1978: “The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God’s light.”

King’s observations would seem easy enough to apply. In practice, however, difficult ironies often abound as we attempt, bewildered, to reach across boundaries and interconnect. This is no less the case here at home between ourselves and others who see things quite differently: in my own case, former students and colleagues who, now disenchanted, have left the Mormon fold; and at the opposite end of the spectrum, friends, neighbors, and relatives whose political philosophy so markedly differs from my own. On one or another of those same two counts, even some of our children and closest kin do not see things as we do. But we must all still engage in vzaimnoe sousushchestovanie—mutual co-existence—as the Soviet propagandists used to put it. And, while remaining as forcefully committed as ever to what
gives our own lives special meaning and motivation, respect for the other’s right to his or her position with sufficiently empathic understanding of his or her reasons for it.

While once waiting for a plane in the Istanbul airport, I looked up from my hard metal chair at the row of seats facing me. There sat eight or nine Middle Eastern women, all swathed from toe to top in their heavy, suffocating burkas. I thought they were elderly, though it was hard to tell. Then, looking a little beyond them, I spied four Hassidic gentlemen, with ringlets dangling beneath their black fe-doras, each wearing phylacteries on his forehead and a large striped prayer shawl about his shoulders. The men were standing sideways in a passageway behind the women, bobbing up and down as they recited their morning prayers. Though in such close proximity, each group was entirely oblivious to the other.

If I’d dared, I’d have taken a picture. The juxtaposition of these two colorful yet so contrasting human clusters was uncannily reminiscent of their (or their counterparts’) uneasy co-existence in Israel. The fact that neither deigned to notice the other further conveyed the certainty each had of their own superior self-contained world—which made me wonder if what they projected might not reflect more than just the impasse between Jews and Muslims on a planet where by circumstance of birth alone so many different ethnic, cultural, and religious alignments keep us at such an aloof and suspicious distance, all offspring of the same Creator yet strangers to each other.

Quite by contrast, I once chaperoned a group of ten American students on a memorable odyssey to Yugoslavia. Most of them were Jewish, from New York City. Under the auspices of the Experiment in International Living, they would each become the adopted member of a Yugoslavian family, the “brother” or “sister” of that family’s counterpart their same age and gender.

Just days before their departure, they learned that we had been assigned to an all-Muslim community in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In fear and trembling, my six or so Jewish wards ventured eastward—as if to their doom. But not to worry! As we shortly discovered, the Bosnian Muslims—inheritors of 400 years’ of Turkish cultural and religious conditioning—were nevertheless as indifferent to events in the Middle East as they were to Tito’s communism. About the only danger my students faced was the Turkish coffee their hosts served at every meal—so thick one had to eat it with a spoon; so strong, it actually provoked heart palpitations in some of my charges. The overall relationship was placid, with not the slightest shade of cultural clash.

Which of the two circumstances was, I’ve since asked myself, the more ideal—the studied mutual disdain of those older parties in the Istanbul airport, or the far calmer indifference to the other’s ethnicity on the part of our hosts and my students in that small Muslim town?

Should we not try for greater awareness, even engagement with each other—with all the awkwardness, risk, even danger that might entail? If others view us with undue suspicion, shouldn’t we—with faith emboldened by the restored gospel’s perspective on universal kinship—look beyond those differences with broader understanding and the earnest yearning to bridge them? And finally, if that is how we ought to respond to those of another background, might we not feel as much impelled to reach out—despite our very real differences—to all within the fold of the Lord’s church?

That may well be our most imposing and most needful obligation.

NOTES

I EMERGED FROM MY MOTHER’S WOMB ON 14 May 1950 screaming and complaining. Rumor has it that I haven’t stopped since. Which is possibly the reason I chose to take up book reviewing as a hobby. Where else could I vent with impunity and be congratulated for it?

I grew up a Jewish boy in a Jewish family where ritual was observed only when necessary but where identity was everything. I have fond memories of Passover seders. To this day, I recite the beginning of the “fier kashas”—the questions that Jewish lads ask their elders, beginning with, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” For some reason, I especially remember my choice, one year, to wear bright red socks with a dark suit. An older cousin decided I looked “stately,” and this became my nickname for the next few years.

Growing up in a culturally isolated religion, I attended Hebrew school, became quite a little scholar in the Hebrew language, and went on to study more Hebrew in high school (it was New York, after all), winning citywide Hebrew language competitions. Now that I’m hurtling toward my 60th year of life, I find that I no longer remember about 99 percent of my Hebrew learning. Yeah, I can still read and translate a bit, but likely no better than a complete newbie.

At age 16, I was trolling downtown Manhattan in search of a summer job. Standing in front of the New York Public Library, I glanced diagonally across the street and saw a man holding a large sign reading, “Free book to any Jew who will agree to read it.” Intrigued, I crossed the street. The man was a Baptist missionary, giving out versions of the New Testament meant to evangelize Jews. I accepted the book. And, at the same time, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

Now, if you had asked me what had just happened, I couldn’t have told you even if you’d been holding a gun to my head. The whole thing was so foreign, so unfamiliar, but I agreed to begin Bible studies with a nice old couple in Brooklyn. Two years later, I was finally baptized, but not as a Baptist, to the great disappointment of my Baptist teachers. I just couldn’t swallow the whole hellfire idea. It was so contrary to everything that seemed rational and reasonable. Instead, I became a Seventh-day Adventist. At least they didn’t have a hot place to put their enemies.

When I converted, my family was furious. It took a while to restore good relations with my parents and other relatives. In some Orthodox families, if a child converts, the family actually holds a full funeral for the child. In their eyes, the son or daughter is dead. No further communication is allowed. Severe? You bet. No “court of love” for us Jews. If you think the circumcision’s blade is sharp, you haven’t been at the wrong end of a Jewish mother’s tongue!

Transitioning from Judaism to any form of Christianity is traumatic and upsetting to the family structure. It matters not one whit whether your relatives are practicing Jews or veritable agnostics. Judaism is more than a religion; it’s a culture, an identity, a tribal affiliation. Step outside the tribe, and you’ve committed a form of treason not to be tolerated.

Now, so many years down the pike, I recognize that summer day in 1966 as the day my life changed completely. I was now a Christian, or, as my Baptist friends would insist, a “completed Jew.” I believed in the Jewish messiah, Yeshua-Mashiach, and trusted Him for my salvation. This was not just a new path for my life; it was a complete revamping of everything I had ever thought I believed.

After that, I went to church on Saturday, abstained from unclean meats, and honored the Ten Commandments. We rejected the burning hell of our Baptist brothers, and (at
least early on) the trinitarian formulas of Catholicism and Protestantism. But as I became more integrated into Adventist culture, I learned, to my dismay, that distrust and outright dislike of Jews was as prevalent in that church as it was in the larger society.

Imagine my culture shock when I enrolled in an Adventist secondary school in the tiny town of Wildwood, Georgia. This was in 1969, the year after my baptism. I lasted a year. When I came home, I was much relieved to be gone from the oppressive atmosphere of the South. I returned to New York City ready to pick up my life where I had left off. It wasn’t long before wanderlust hit again, and off I went to San Diego, where I’ve lived for nearly 35 years. I’m ready to relocate again. Anyone know of a good low-rent district in Salt Lake City?

Since my conversion, I’ve developed an interest in all things Christian. And when I say all things, I really do mean all things, but with the uncoordinated passion of an amateur. The mess that constitutes my pursuit is nicely reflected in the chaos of my home. My Christian cortex is populated by the miscellaneous thoughts and aspirations of every moment of my life all getting processed through my Jewish hippocampus. No wonder I’m so adaptable. When you have your feet firmly planted in mid-air, you can do just about anything.

Often when I read Mormon literature as a Jew, I feel as if I’m watching a monumental clash of cultures—one chosen people trying to unseat another.

When I first considered writing the article you’re reading, I decided that it would be an impossibility because I wasn’t consciously reading any books through any eyes. I was simply reading. I believed a bit of it. I rejected the rest of it. And when I read it all again, I rejected things I had initially accepted and adopted ideas that I had at first tossed into the waste bin.

But, in that way, I don’t think I’m much different from anyone else. Each of us reads through the prism of our own experiences and biases. Whether these biases are a matter of nature or of nurture matters not one bit because the experience of reading is real. Can a purely objective reading of anything be attained, then? I’m going to suggest that it can’t be. In other words, I read in exactly the same way you do. I just have a Jewish background. And that’s probably what you’re here for, so let’s get started.

When a Jew reads Mormon literature, certain aspects border, not just on the strange, but on the offensive. It’s hard for many Jews to understand the Mormon fondness for certain doctrines. And some practices are just plain misunderstood.

Let me start with a simple one—the plurality of gods. To a Jew, the idea of other gods, no matter how you frame it, is
a complete denial of the cry of every Orthodox Jew: “Shema, Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu Adonai Echad”—“Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is One Lord.” Central to the “heathenness” of the communities that surrounded national Israel was their acceptance of many gods. It’s probably true that early Hebrews were not so much monotheistic as henotheistic—in other words, they acknowledged other gods but dismissed them because Yahweh was the biggest, baddest god in the hood who could beat the snot out of anybody.

But modern Judaism, much like Islam, is strictly monotheistic. It admits to no other divine power, no so-called “Son of God,” and certainly no eternal progression to godhood. Add into the mix the idea that God has a body of flesh and bones and that God, at one time, was human, and you rocket into an orbit beyond even Kolob. Yes, there have been Jewish converts to Mormonism, but they’ve had to abandon this central belief of their Judaism, which can be quite challenging.

Another part of Mormonism that is very hard for Judaism to swallow is the idea that the ancient prophets of Israel understood the idea of a messiah coming to die on a cross, and that his followers would be called “Christians,” and that he would be born of a woman named Mary, and so on. Frankly, all of this is hard for Catholics and Protestants to swallow, too. Outside of Mormon literature, there is no real evidence that these ideas are true. Of course, it doesn’t mean that they aren’t true, but rather that Mormons seem to have a corner on this knowledge. Like the Mormons, Jews believe they are the chosen people, but they’ve never thought that they had a corner on religious knowledge.

A Mormon practice widely misunderstood by Jews, and sometimes causing some friction between the two religions, is proxy baptism. Those unfamiliar with the practice think that being baptized for a relative is intended to make that person a Mormon at a stroke. But those who understand the idea behind the practice know that this rite simply opens the door for the deceased to accept the gospel if they so choose and continue their progression. Until then, they’re kept in something of a prison, one they wish to be free of. When the recent kafuffle over the proxy baptism of Holocaust victims hit the headlines, I initially wondered what all the fuss was about. But after thinking about it for about forty-five seconds, I realized what bothered the Jewish authorities so much.

It wasn’t that they believed that such baptisms turned the victims into Mormons; rather they worried that the baptisms reflected an attitude that has plagued Judaism for years—the idea that somehow their religion is defective. Yes, Christians argue, the Jews may have been God’s chosen people at one time, but now, their religion isn’t good enough. They need something else, whatever it might be—a baptism or an oven. Believe me, your average Jew—even your unaverage Jew—will reject the idea that anything needs to be added to the sacrifice made in the camps of Nazi Germany. Being Jewish is sufficient in itself.

Mormonism has more to say about Israel and the Jewish people than do most other Christian denominations. Having rooted the Book of Mormon in Jerusalem and anchored its story in the Law of Moses and the identification of Jesus Christ as the Jewish messiah, Mormonism could in theory go a long way in bridging the distance between Jews and Mormons. But at the same time, it makes Jews a bit suspicious about the whole enterprise. If there really was a prophet Lehi, why is this the first we’ve heard about him?

So often when I read Mormon literature as a Jew, I
feel as if I’m watching a monumental clash of cultures—one chosen people trying to unseat another. Yes, Mormons honor Israel and understand their scripture to be “one in thine hand” with that of the Jews. But, if you ask a Mormon, Jews are not the apple of God’s eye right now. Don’t think you’re going to make any Jewish friends by preaching that.

I’m not really certain why a group would fight to be God’s chosen people in the first place. God never chose anybody except for service and sacrifice. Chosen doesn’t mean pampered. To ascend to heaven, you have to take the stairs, possibly even the fire escape. No one is going to install an escalator for you. Your journey to exaltation will be entirely self-propelled. But God certainly has focused His eye on particular sets of people from time to time. And those people, whether Jews or Mormons, better understand that God means business!

Like Mormonism, Judaism is a funny mix of belief, practice, and just plain repetition. As a Jew, you go through cycles of celebration and mourning, you have a checklist of dos and don’ts; but you also have a rather wide spectrum of orthodoxy from which to choose. Here, Mormonism and Judaism part ways. From the Hasidic and Orthodox brands of Judaism, with their stern, sometimes unforgiving, rigidity, to the very liberal Reform Jews, any son or daughter of Abraham can find a place to immerse him or herself in the traditions. For example, I attended a liberal Reform congregation, arriving just after the sermon, and heard a young lady expressing to the rabbi her gratitude for the sermon and her relief to learn, at last, that pre-marital sex was okay.

I’ll give you a thousand dollars if you can find a Mormon bishop who would preach the same thing.

I HAVE A friend who is a professor of philosophy at the University of San Diego. Some years ago, she asked me, “Do you know what philosophy is?” Of course I know what philosophy is—what a question! But I was wrong. Her definition is, “Philosophy is everything that isn’t something else.” It took me a minute to wrap my brain around this idea (and sometimes I wonder if it did irreparable damage).

It does make some sense, though. What is now mathematics or science has its roots in the philosopher’s mind. Maybe religion, too, is everything that isn’t already something else. We bayed at the moon and called it religion. Now we call it superstition. We burned witches in the name of religion, and now we admit it was mob violence. We worshiped the sun, moon, and stars, until we understood that they were merely natural phenomena. We now call our heaven-gazing “astronomy.”

As we enter into a new age of humanistic brilliance and ethnocentric hubris, science is trying to move even more of religion into the category we call superstition. We want things explained; we want them proven. Mormonism is certainly facing such a challenge. DNA evidence, archaeology, historical and linguistic studies have all been mounted to challenge belief in the Book of Mormon, for example. Yes, you have FARMS and FAIR to supply the last word on Book of Mormon evidences. But you also have Signature Books to remind you that the last word has not yet been uttered. What you end up with are true believers who cannot substantiate their beliefs with scientific fact but don’t seem to mind.

To this group, I say, Hooray! Jews find the whole idea of scientifically proving religious belief to be a strange and woefully misguided enterprise anyway. We believe there was a Moses although we don’t have any science to back it up.
I have no hope, and indeed no aspiration, of ever having my own planet. I’m far too lazy for that. But I do want to ascend a little higher than I am right now.

And we believe that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob existed, not because we’ve found their green cards but because our Holy Book tells us so.

Isn’t it great? Jews and Mormons have something in common. We choose to believe, even when we lack empirical, objective evidence. But there is one important difference: Jews don’t make empirical claims about the historicity of the Bible. They simply accept it. Many Jews, of course, have dismissed biblical history as just so much nonsense; but they continue to teach, live, and pray as if the biblical heroes really existed.

In all my years of attending synagogue, I can’t recall a single person getting up and saying, “I know that Moses was a true prophet of God. I know that the Bible is true. I know that Judaism is true.” We Jews just don’t talk like that. Instead, we go about our lives as if we believed these things. A life lived is considered more compelling than a slogan recited. For this reason, a Jew would probably leave a Mormon testimony meeting scratching his or her head. Why all the protestation that one is a Christian? Why all the insistence that Nephi was a real guy? Just live it! But we understand and honor the belief statements of other faiths. We get it — different strokes for different folks.

But let’s not get too chummy here. Because I really have to tell you that, when compared to Judaism, Mormonism is just too darned coherent. You guys have a systematic theology (a phrase that rings oddly in the Jewish ear), you have a creed, you have a body of men who decide what beliefs constitute orthodoxy and when to discipline dissenters. Judaism thrives on conflict; Mormonism avoids it at every turn. Judaism celebrates a variety of belief; Mormonism shies away from it. Jewish mothers love to exclaim, “My son the doctor!” Mormon mothers—oh wait, they kind of like that, too.

I will confess that I abhor any attempt to correlate belief—it seems so counterintuitive to the entire religious enterprise. But I understand the need of any school of religion to present a unified face to the world. The chaos that is early Mormonism —the rough landscape of ideas, sane and otherwise, that can be found in the earliest writings—needed to be paved and striped so that seekers would know exactly where to park. But I prefer driving recklessly as I tour the religious landscape of America. I don’t like speed limits, and I categorically reject toll roads or other constraints on my free-wheeling imagination. Consequently, while I find much in contemporary Mormon literature to be spiritless and void of any energy, I can always hop on the Journal of Discourses express and, without fail, find something to carry me through.

It really hasn’t ever occurred to me that I should become a Mormon. I don’t have a testimony of the Church, or the Book of Mormon, or the Tabernacle Choir. I hardly ever attend ward meetings. I do, however, read the Book of Mormon and other Restoration scriptures. And my home looks like a giant LDS library hit by one of California’s famous earthquakes.

But there are ways in which my own near-Mormonism has affected the way I think and act. I really believe that my exposure to Mormonism and my admittedly puzzling affection for even the schlockiest manifestations of Mormon culture have helped shape my worldview. My friends are completely perplexed to find that I love to spend time at Temple Square. I can sit and watch the movies at the Legacy Theater and the North Visitors Center, recognizing that they are revisionist to the max, and still enjoy them. I even purchase DVDs of the films so I can watch them again!

Perhaps even this is part of my Jewish upbringing. We never seem to do things halfway. When we develop a passion, we go all the way with it. Jews, I believe, are so successful in business, in entertainment, and in other fields precisely because we’re raised with a passion to excel. There’s
nothing quite like having a Jewish mother pushing you along to be your best.

I don't suppose I'll ever be able to liberate myself from the strictures of my Jewish upbringing. I don't think I even want to. I am content to see just about everything—from the Book of Mormon to the daily newspaper—through the eyes of a Jew who has emerged from his tribal constraints into the larger diaspora of Christendom.

I remain focused on what the Apostle Paul called "the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus." I remain confident that, however things work out in the end, God is in charge of the operation. And I always remember what my friend Father George Keith said one day: "A table not set for all of God's children is not a table set by God."

Someplace in Eastern Europe, many years ago, it was the practice of Orthodox Jews to meet during the Days of Awe, the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Each morning the people would gather at the synagogue, but the rabbi would never be there. A visitor asked the townspeople about this and was told that the rabbi was so holy that during the Days of Awe, he personally ascended to heaven to present his petitions to God.

The stranger didn’t believe it and was determined to find out what actually happened to the rabbi. One night, he stole into the rabbi’s home and hid under his bed. The next morning, the rabbi awoke, performed his ablutions, and then, curiously, put on his coat and grabbed an axe and a length of rope, all the while reciting the first of the three prayers for the Days of Awe.

Tailed by the skeptic, the rabbi left through the back door of his home and went into the woods. He chopped some firewood and bound it with the rope he’d brought. As he chopped, he recited the second of the prayers for the Days of Awe.

He walked to an adjoining town, mostly gentile and very poor. He walked through the streets, shouting, “I have firewood for sale! It’s very cold! Anyone want to buy some firewood?” An older lady stuck her head outside her window and shouted, “Mister, I need the wood, but I have no money.” “Ach,” the rabbi answered, “money, schmuney. I’ll be right there.” The rabbi entered her home, dropped the wood into the fireplace, lit the fire, and recited the third of the prayers. The old woman was sick and very poor. The rabbi knew of her need. He left her home with her blessing and her thanks.

Now, when the stranger comes to this town during the Days of Awe, he hears about the rabbi who is so holy that he ascends to heaven and presents his prayers to God. And when he’s asked if he believes that the rabbi ascends to heaven, he responds, “Maybe higher.”

I suppose, at heart, this is what I want. I want to ascend to God, not physically, but ethically and spiritually. And I suppose Mormonism has something to say to this old reprobate Jew. It tells me that maybe God is busier than I had ever thought. Maybe he has arranged things so that a young boy named Joseph Smith would stand at the head of this dispensation and bring about a new set of realities, grounded in Americanism and a radical liberalism. Maybe this fellow taught us all how to be better people, how to be more like God, and maybe, just maybe, how we may become gods ourselves.

I have no hope, and indeed no aspiration, of ever having my own planet. I’m far too lazy for that. But I do want to ascend a little higher than I am right now. Like the rabbi, I want to learn to put my religious notions into action, to be a light to other people, and to live a useful life. Can Mormonism bring me face to face with God? Maybe it can bring me even higher. Maybe it can teach me what it means to be a godly person in an ungodly world.

Alas, the progress is slow, but I trust the direction is right. Enfeebled and defective as they may be, these old Jewish eyes continue to search for truth wherever it may be found. And that, my friends, is what being a Mormon is supposed to be about and is, indeed, what being Jewish is all about. The nexus of my Jewishness and my quasi-Mormonism has yet to be discovered. But when enlightenment does come, you’ll be the first to know.

EGRETS

The egrets dance
but what connects their flight,
undulates them down at river ice?

What draws one flash after another
to race to meet the blur
of its own reflection?

What urged prayer beyond its knuckles,
festooned a collar bone with sparkles,
What part rosary, what part necklace
follow it back up
to taste perspective,
dip wings in well of sun
to write hover and droop
then swoop again
to part the cold with bristled wind?

— Thomas Robert Barnes
ON CHRISTMAS MORNING 2007, DANIEL JENSEN was handed a present wrapped in red, holly-patterned paper. The box, shipped from Utah, came from his sister-in-law, who had drawn his name for Christmas. Daniel sat by the tree. His wife, Monica, sat on the couch to catch his reaction on the video camera. Unaware of anything else, their two children, one- and three-year-old boys, were busy inspecting their own Christmas treasures.

Daniel opened the box.

Inside he found a silver-beaded necklace; a black patterned skirt with silver sparkles; a light-blue blouse with a ribbon to tie into a bow; and a cream-colored, low-cut ribbed sweater.

Daniel's giddy smile, captured on video, shows that this is one of the best gifts he's ever received.

Four months earlier, Daniel had disclosed to his family (including in-laws) a secret he has kept to himself for almost twenty years: he's been a cross-dresser since age ten.

Daniel goes to his California ward each Sunday. He wears a suit, tie, and black shoes. He reads the scriptures and sometimes invites the missionaries over for dinner. Daniel looks like a typical LDS male, and he considers himself an active member of the Church. In the privacy of his home, however, he brings out his female persona, “Debbie.”

Daniel buys more makeup than his wife does and owns a jewelry box for his necklaces and bracelets. He owns five pairs of heels, all bought by his wife at Payless Shoes. In men's shoes, he's size 11 but can squeeze into a woman's 13 if that's the biggest size the store carries. When dressed up he crosses his legs while sitting and his voice gets higher. As Debbie, he likes to wear headbands and especially enjoys playing card games with his wife—Debbie is more social than Daniel is. With nylons, fingernail polish and lacy underwear, a shoulder-length wig, and trimmed eyebrows, the only thing that makes Debbie look like a man is a five o'clock shadow, which he said he's getting better at hiding.

Typically, Monica is the only person who sees “Debbie.” Monica said she was somewhat aware of Daniel's cross-dressing before marrying him in the LDS temple, and that she's OK with it as long as “Debbie” stays within the boundaries of the house.

Not everyone can be so accommodating, however. Despite his faithful activity in his LDS ward, Daniel said he often feels inadequate and unaccepted because of his cross-dressing secret.

LDS Church statements on cross-dressing are sparse. The Brigham Young University Honor code mentions cross-dressing once under sexual and similar misconduct in its “Live a Chaste and Virtuous Life” section. It states: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and BYU affirm that sexual relationships outside the covenant of marriage are inappropriate. Examples include but are not limited to the following: extra-marital relations, promiscuity or predatory behavior, aberrant behavior, solicitation of sex, homossexual conduct, and cross-dressing.” Less specifically, a search through General Conference archives turns up reminders to set proper examples through distinctive family roles. A first call to the LDS public affairs office about the Church’s official stand on cross-dressing elicited a firm “no
comment.” A second call was answered by a woman who, emphasizing that she is not an official spokesperson, said, “I don’t know why you are interested. An active member wouldn’t be a part of that.”

Though cross-dressers rarely share their habit with anyone besides their spouse, that doesn’t mean cross-dressing isn’t out there, says D. Kim Openshaw, Utah State University associate professor in marriage and family therapy. Usually cross-dressers want to keep the behavior in a context that is more socially acceptable as well as private. “Religion plays a facet because it creates a moral perception of right and wrong,” he explains.

Guilty reactions to one’s cross-dressing often turn into self-loathing, says Lee Beckstead, a psychologist who works at Aspen Grove Counseling in Salt Lake City. Cross-dressers binge because it’s hard to deny wanting to dress up. After the binge, horrible guilt creeps in, and the cross-dresser promises to never do it again. Through that promise, cross-dressers feel better about themselves. They might even throw away all their opposite-gender clothes.

Afterward, they feel like good LDS spouses again. But, just as in dieting, a person eventually gets hungry, Beckstead says. Desires and needs come forward, and the binge starts over. “That works really well with the religious framework—you’re a good person when you’re not sinning and you’re a bad person when you are sinning. That cycle works for quite some time but then starts breaking down and attacks self-esteem and confidence.”

This process has two costs: withdrawing from self and withdrawing from others. A cross-dresser commonly isolates him or herself, avoids people, lies, and sometimes discriminates against other sexual minorities just to publicly say, “I’m not one of them.” After a lifetime of isolation and hiding, cross-dressers can feel like monsters or out-of-control perverts, Beckstead says, and suicide can become an attractive option. “Nobody would want them, so of course killing themselves would be much better than having the re-
jection from the family or even the family name being tainted. It's all based in the assumption that [cross-dressing] is wrong and it can be controlled or gotten rid of.”

Daniel reports that he has experienced this isolation since his cross-dressing habit started. He constantly feels as if no one knows him. During 2006, he felt so bad that he contemplated suicide. He made sure his life insurance was in place and even planned how he would take his life. In a cry for help, he overdosed one evening on Valium and lay down on the living room floor. Monica called poison control who warned her that he would have to go to the emergency room if he fell asleep. Throughout the evening, he tried to doze off but visiting family kept him awake by making him move around and talk.

After this event, Daniel and Monica decided it was time to visit a therapist. The therapist suggested Daniel find a communication outlet by joining a support group, talking to a friend, or letting a family member in on the secret. Daniel knew it was time.

He contacted his sister first because she had been his protector growing up. Long pauses filled the phone conversation before Daniel could tell her. “My heart was racing at a million miles per hour, and I got really hot and dizzy,” he recalls. Over the phone, Daniel couldn’t read his sister’s facial expressions and was uncertain of her reaction to his revelation. For a few nights afterward, Daniel had difficulty sleeping. However, his sister received his news sympathetically and has since helped Daniel come out to others, including his own family.

WITH THE UNDERSTANDING of his loved ones, Daniel feels less isolated, but he is still unsure of his standing in the LDS faith. “If the Church suddenly becomes more aware of [cross-dressing], will they just instantly expect me to stop?” he asked. “Because that just won’t happen. It’s as much a part of who I am as anything. I consider myself an active Mormon. I just wonder when something will change, because we could get more strict and then suddenly I will not be able to be a Mormon.”

Beckstead said a few LDS cross-dressers find a way to maintain their religion by re-evaluating their gender beliefs. “I think some of them say, ‘Well, my religion doesn’t understand that, so I put it on the back burner,’ he explains. “I think that’s a healthy way to help it; but for many, going to church is painful because of the gender-traditional talk that keeps going on.” To sidestep gender-traditional talk, Beckstead said cross-dressers can develop resources inside themselves and create safe spaces for their beliefs. A social resource such as a relative or friend could also be developed as a safe space. These spaces are important when cross-dressers don’t feel enough validation from the outside world—here cross-dressers can receive affirmation despite their differences.

However, if cross-dressers are in relationships or have children, some boundaries have to be set, depending on what the cross-dresser considers priorities. Beckstead encourages his cross-dressing clients to improve their relationship with themselves. Getting to know their cross-dressing desires at a more accepting, loving level is the most powerful tool when the rest of the world rejects them. At least the cross-dresser can be his own support.

Kevin Mitchell, a client of Beckstead’s, has been cross-dressing since he was a teenager. Now married with children, Mitchell still deals with self-loathing and feelings of despair.

“It’s hard to get up and put on a suit,” Kevin says. “Really hard. I feel like crying when I do. I avoid it when I can. I don’t have a job where I have to wear business clothing for that reason. I seriously feel like throwing up when I think about putting on a Polo shirt. And then I look in the Ensign, and what is everyone wearing? Well, the men are wearing Polo’s or button-down shirts.”

“That is why I don’t feel comfortable at church,” he continues. “That is why I don’t like going. I love the Church, but I hate being treated like a pervert. It hurts to hear that I am a ‘bad Mormon.’”

When Mitchell spoke to a bishop and stake president about his cross-dressing and gender identity, he said they didn’t know what to do, simply telling him that cross-dressing was unbecoming of a priesthood holder. “I already feel like a monster for not fitting in anywhere. It’s hard to go to church every week and hear someone bash gays or transvestites or other people that are trying their hardest to survive,” he said.

In California, Daniel still attends church with his wife and children. But he doesn’t see things as black and white, the way he did while growing up. He wonders what to do about a church that skirts an issue his life is rooted in. But for now, he has his family.

 “[The Christmas present] meant a lot to me,” Daniel says. “It was kind of a feeling of total acceptance that someone was going out of their way to give me something they knew I really wanted and really liked. But I have never been able to have that type of present. I didn’t even know how to react. I’ve been so isolated for so long—it was a moment of realization that other people know and are there with me more than anything.”

HAIKU
Off weedy tracks: train
Cars rusting. From foggy warmth
The bullfrogs croak
—REBECCA LILLY
I

was copied again on an unusual Wormwood email. I share it here because it relates to many Borderland experiences. I have been cc’d on these emails before, and have shared two of them in previous columns. The sender is apparently an “Uncle Screwtape” type, an Advanced Tempter Trainer in the Devil’s Minions. He is overseeing his nephew, Wormwood, a Tempter Trainee assigned to a thoughtful young Mormon man with one foot in the Borderlands. Uncle himself is assigned to a well-regarded high priest serving on his stake high council.

From: Uncle666@temptationcentral.hel
To: Wormwood001@cellblockboutiful.hel
cc: D. Jeff Burton <jeff@eburton.com>
Sent: Saturday, January 20
Subject: Your recent message

My Dearest Nephew,

Your last email has provoked considerable distress on this end. Despite the fact that your man is moving into the LDS borderlands, you are having a devil of a time (as mortals say) tempting him into even the most basic of dishonest behaviors. Perhaps your latest failures will motivate you to better learn how to properly corrupt your man’s natural desire to be honest.

You surely recognize that honesty is one of the chief cornerstones of our Enemy’s principles of virtuous living. Honesty and truthfulness, for example, are the first items of their Thirteenth Article of Faith, “We believe in being honest, true . . . ,” and their temple recommend interview includes the significant question, “Are you honest in your dealings with your fellow man?” Further, honesty will undoubtedly be one of the top measurement criteria at the Final Judgment.

Given that these facts are well known, one would think we would have a terrible time corrupting any Mormon’s honesty. I must say, however, that we have had considerable success in perverting and obfuscating the very meaning of honesty and how it is to be applied to mortal life. For future reference, our methods work equally well in any religion.

It has been said that there is “not an honest man to be found” on the face of the earth. That observation comes close to reality for large chunks of humanity. Our Father below, rightfully known as the Father of Lies, should be credited for this resounding success. You must strive heartily to magnify your calling and follow as best you can the excellent methods developed by our most debased leader.

But before you go off blundering again, remember the basics. First, you have no hope of tempting your man into bald-faced lies. I am dismayed to read, for example, that when your man inadvertently slept late, you tried to tempt him to lie about his tardiness to work. “Tell them you had a flat tire,” you whispered in his ear.

My badness! You should have known your man wouldn’t fall for that kind of straight-out dishonesty. Even when willing to tolerate some duplicity, most Mormons are clever and will avoid any too-obvious dishonesty. What if your man’s boss had said, “Let’s take your flat tire and get it fixed.”

Busted!

Now read this next sentence carefully.

Contrary to what you may think, you don’t want your man getting caught by his fellows! Bear with me here. Humiliation is the one emotion men never forget. Being caught in a dishonest act or lie has created motivation in countless men to repent and curtail dishonest behaviors. So, your attempts at honesty corruption can actually be counter-productive to our cause.

Let us credit your clumsy efforts to a lack of knowledge. Though it is not for lack of trying on my part, your progress as a tempter worries me.

To be successful, a lie must appear to be truthful; it must not disclose any intent to harm the deceived one. It must be useful in some way to the liar; and, finally, it must convince the potential victim that your man really believes what he is saying. These four factors are the gold standard of successful dishonesty.

So now for today’s lessons.

First item. It is important that your man come to believe that all earthly creatures must necessarily be dishonest or deceitful in some circumstances. “It is in human DNA,” you can tell him. “You can’t help it.” You can argue, for example, that it is as natural for a lioness to hide in the bushes so she can catch and carry food back to her hungry cubs as it is for a husband to tell his wife she looks beautiful when asked. In both cases, nature and survival are the authors of such “necessary” deceits. In these cases, something positive and good has occurred.

Yes, this sounds counterproductive to our intentions. And perhaps there are times when this kind of deception results in overwhelming good. (We must ignore these rare episodes.) But in the end, confusion about honesty is very helpful to us.

For example, Mormon history is replete with “acceptable” and “necessary” deceptions, e.g., those surrounding the practice of polygamy, the operations of the shadowy Council of Fifty, and so forth. Since such deceptions have never been completely repudiated in most Mormon minds, secrecy,
deception, and dishonesty appear acceptable in "certain circumstances." Plus every Mormon well knows the concepts of "milk before meat," "faithful history," "apologies," "discriminating truth," and other subtle twistings of straightforwardness.

When you can enhance your man's acceptance of the "naturalness" of dishonesty and exaggerate "all the good" that can occur when he is given the opportunity to be deceptive, he will become much more willing to justify a broad range of "necessary" falsehoods and expand the scope of "certain circumstances" that "require" deception. He will become more adept at overstating the "need" for artifice and moving ahead with confidence. He will be able to select truths that help him and ignore those that don't.

SECOND item. There are four types of honesty—two that are detrimental to our cause and two that are helpful. Your corruption work must be tailored to the specific types of honesty your man favors.

The first helpful type—one that I personally love—is what we sometimes term "fierce frankness" or "brutal honesty." This is where your man is enticed to say (what is to him) "the simple truth." He must think of it as "plain honesty."

Now it may sound counterproductive for us to champion any type of honesty, but hear me out. As I mentioned before, suppose your man is asked by his wife, "Do you think I'm pretty?" Thanks to your promptings, he should answer, "Not really. Your hair is greasy, and because of your cold, your nose is kind of red. That's what I honestly think." Such correct (but hurtful) "truths" and (destructive) "honesty" will naturally lead to other sinful behaviors by both of them! Trust me.

Another type of "honesty" we support is something I call the "presenting truth." PT, for short. Many mortals employ the presenting truth or reason when explaining themselves to their betters, answering touchy questions, or trying to justify questionable behavior. It is the one statement calculated to win someone over to their side; it is the single best-sounding answer.

For example, if my man were asked why he pays tithing, I would have him solemnly respond with the best PT there is, "Because it is a commandment of God." If he insists on saying more, I will encourage him to repeat one or two self-serving PTs, "I couldn't afford not to pay tithing" or "It is an excellent way to learn how to share."

But then, of course, he should do no more thinking or talking beyond the presenting truth. I do not want him to think about or say any other truths, e.g., "I want to maintain a temple recommend," "My wife would be upset, and that could result in less fun in bed," I would lose my prominent calling in the stake," "I would be embarrassed at tithing settlement," "I'm afraid that God might take away all my stuff," "God might make me sick," The Church needs the money," "Because my boss is a bishop, I might lose my job promotion," and so forth.

Not being upfront about such other truths (to themselves as well as to others) is a wonderfully subtle form of dishonesty that many Mormons do not readily recognize or, if they do, simply ignore. No matter. They are on our path.

On the other hand, one of the detrimental types of honesty is sometimes called complete, thoughtful, or transparent honesty. This type you must try to keep from your man at all costs. He should not be allowed to consider it . . . or even to know about it.

This approach recognizes that honesty is often not "right or wrong" or "black or white" but a continuum with many facets to explore. It takes work and thoughtfulness to approach the "whole truth" of most matters affecting human behavior and thought.

Let me refresh your memory with your own man's recent experience—one of your failures. As you recall, he was asked why he attends church. Because you had not properly coached him, he responded with something approaching the complete truth.

"Well, there are a lot of reasons," he said. "I'd have to think about it to give you the complete answer, but these thoughts come quickly to mind. First, we are asked to attend—maybe even commanded for some meetings; I usually learn something new about how to live my life better; my friends are there; my wife expects me to be there with her; I want to keep my temple recommend; it feels good to be thinking about Jesus and how he would live if he were here in my shoes; my parents would be upset; I would feel guilty staying home; I am afraid that if I didn't attend, I might not get some blessings and/or God might punish me; I like the peace and quiet of meetings; and finally, I suppose, it has become a habit."

Yikes! Approaching the truth in this complete and thoughtful way allows mortals to see themselves more clearly and encourages them to make positive changes in their lives which makes our task that much more difficult.

Yet another ominous honesty type is
called “personal honesty,” or “self-honesty,” it is closely allied to the complete truth mentioned above. Having personal honesty is being able to recognize all the motives and reasons for one’s actions, being able to know and plumb the depths of one’s mind and soul, and being able to account for, accept, and act on one’s actual and genuine beliefs, emotions, and behaviors. Again, this is a form of honesty that we must continue to avoid and corrupt with all our might.

Let me give you an unfortunate example of my man in one of his rare displays of self-honesty several years ago. It occurred one weekend when I was away escorting a former successful client to Outer Darkness.

My man went to the stake president’s office to renew his temple recommend and, among other things during the conversation, was asked what he thought about the possibility of serving as a stake high councilman. My man was excited but held his composure and quietly told the stake president, “Yes, if you think it would be appropriate.”

The stake president responded with, “Well, that’s why we’re having this little chat—to discuss the possibility. Do you think it would be a good calling for you at this time?”

My man immediately stated a common and “harmless” deception (which everyone knows is the requisite false humility in these circumstances and is thus mostly ignored) plus an appropriate presenting truth.

“I really don’t have any ambitions for such a calling,” he said humbly. “But I am always willing to serve you and our Father in Heaven in any calling you . . .” My man paused to let the President “fill in the blanks” but the stake president just smiled and waited for my man to continue. So far, so good.

Then suddenly, because I was not there to guide him, my man began to share with the stake president some of the complete truth, showing an uncharacteristic degree of personal honesty. He went on about how he was a sometimes-prideful man who enjoyed being in the limelight, that the calling would give him stature in his family and ward, that it could help him in his daily job because his boss was a bishop, that he had always wanted to sit on the stand, and even that it might make his neighbor jealous. He even admitted to wondering if the Enemy had rejected him by withholding “higher” callings from him before.

It was a frightening performance, believe you me! Of course, the stake president was pleased by my man’s honesty and humility, told him so, and soon gave him the calling. That’s how my man got on the stake high council, much to my dismay (and later, amusement).

When Slopbog found out about this whole sordid affair, he was about ready to banish me to Outer Darkness. But I convinced him that it was only a temporary setback. Slopbog gave me another chance, thank the Devil.

Remember, young tempter, you must tailor your temptations to each situation. Help your man discount dishonest acts through plausible rationalizations such as, “a lot of good will come of it,” “it doesn’t hurt anything,” “everybody does it,” “it’s part of nature,” “no one will know,” “no one will care,” “the situation calls for it,” and so forth.

You must pervert your man’s natural desire to be honest into a desire to appear honest. A subtle difference on the surface, but as deep as hell.

And finally, you must keep in mind the fact that a truly honest man is also likely to be kind, patient, thoughtful, caring, and generous and possess other nasty traits that take him far from our path.

I look forward to a positive report from you soon!

— Your Caring Uncle

Please send me your experiences from life in the Borderlands.

D. Jeff Burton, jeff@eburton.com
BOOK REVIEW

WILL THE REAL COKE PLEASE STAND UP?

ON THE ROAD TO HEAVEN
by Coke Newell
Zarahemla Books, 2007
333 pages, $16.95

Reviewed by Jonathan Langford

In our insistence on the literally true, we may give up some of the reality and power such narratives might contain if we cared a little more about truthfulness and a little less about accuracy in the details.

Each new story is a chance to meet a potential friend. That's particularly true of first-person narrative, which tends to stand or fall on the quality of the narrative voice—how vividly we experience the "I" of the story and how we feel about the time we've spent with that character once the story ends. This is the case whether the narrative is an autobiography, a first-person novel, or—like Coke Newell's On the Road to Heaven—some strange hybrid of the two.

This book combines two classic Mormon genres: the conversion story and the mission story. The result is an engaging, well-written narrative that Newell and his publisher chose to call an autobiographical novel.

The book is an account of the spiritual journey of a boy named Everon "Kit" West who grows up with a love and reverence for nature, influenced by Native American perspectives (at least in some of their better-known popularized versions), who hitchhikes, uses marijuana with his friends, and experiments with hippie culture, only to find it ultimately unsatisfying. Along the way, he acquires a Mormon girlfriend who's rebelling against her own convert family background, and the two fall in love. He encounters the missionaries and joins the Church, and she independently becomes active again. Then they sort of break up and each serves a mission before they come home and marry each other.

It's a well-crafted story arc, showing the passion of Kit's first yearnings for spirituality and how the path that introduces him to Carlos Castaneda (the author of popular books on Mesoamerican shamanism) is the same path that leads him to Mormonism and eventually to preaching the gospel to poverty-stricken Colombians. For Kit, white shirts and ties may have replaced tie-dye, but not as a repudiation—rather, as a destination, a fulfillment of sorts.

On the Road to Heaven is a most enjoyable read. Satisfying and hatred-inducing, in an envious-writer sort of way.

There's just one problem with Kit's story:

The way it's presented. I don't know how much of it is true.

The autobiographical novel is a respectable literary form, with examples ranging from Jack Kerouac's On the Road to Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. Legitimate or not, though, it turns out to be a form that rouses my suspicions—and in this, I suspect I'm a lot like many Mormon readers.

After first reading On the Road to Heaven, I posted a review to AML-List in which I made a stab at articulating why the autobiographical novel rubs me the wrong way. I argued that narrative in part invites us to get to know the person behind the "I," holding out the promise of a potential connection with someone. I'm perfectly fine with that "someone" being a fictional character; some of my best friends have names like Frodo Baggins. Still, it's important to me to know just whose acquaintance I'm being asked to make. Frankly, the autobiographical novel seems a bit like a copout: claiming the moral and narrative authority of "I-was-there," without making any commitment to live up to the accompanying responsibility to tell the truth as best you can. That makes me uneasy.

And so I like the "Everon 'Kit' West" of the story, and I can't help but think I'd like Coke Newell too, but I can't really be sure. All I really know for sure that's true about the protagonist-as-Coke-Newell (from the About the Author page at the back of the book) is that he was indeed "a former tree-hugging, Zen-spouting, vegetarian Colorado mountain hippie" who joined the LDS Church, as described in the book. All I know for sure that's not true is that his name wasn't Everon West. Everything in between is, presumably, negotiable. Just how negotiable is unclear.

I'm sure some people will want to call me to task for imposing an unacceptable limitation on the creative choices of the artist. My point, though, isn't that Newell shouldn't have done whatever he did in this book. Rather, I'm simply saying that the choices he

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made got in the way of my con-
nection with the story.
Following my initial post to AML-List about On the Road to Heaven, the re-
doubtable Levi Peterson asked: “What do you mean by ‘telling the truth’?” Writing in response, I clarified:

“Telling the truth,” in an autobiog-
raphy, means telling what actually happened—to the best of your ability, and vagaries of memory and perception aside. Yes, we all know that all experience is filtered through the lens of our own minds. But in an autobiog-
raphy, still we do the best to (at least) reflect that mental perception of the past accurately . . .

In a novel, on the other hand, I would say that “telling the truth” means something entirely dif-
ferent. It means making things work the way they work in the real world. Cause and effect. Most of all, it means doing our best to make sure that the characters act in ways that real-life people would act, in the circumstances we’ve created . . .

I’m fine with both varieties of truth-telling. But when both are invoked simultaneously, I find it confusing and hard to accept. It’s a matter both of categories, and of framing the way that I read a par-
ticular work.

Thinking it over, I can’t help but think that this difference between fictionalized narrative and history is a particularly sensi-
tive point for Mormon readers. In recent times, one General Authority’s imagina-
tively retouched personal narratives got him into what seemed to some people like an awful lot of hot water for something that’s frankly been standard practice for sto-
ries told around the campfire pretty much as long as we’ve had campfires and stories told around them. But a religion that bids
eries told around the campfire pretty much
that’s frankly been standard practice for sto-
your curiosity as a reader. I wanted to see

Our fierce emphasis on the literal
doesn’t always serve us well in our re-
sponses to literature, including literature that forms part of the scriptural canon. I’ve seen the argument made that Job had to
have been a historical figure, because other-
would have been a historical figure, because other-
wise God’s comparison of Joseph Smith’s sufferings to those of Job would have been

a deep insult to Joseph. Such a response seems to me to miss the entire point of lit-
erature: that one reason it exists is precisely to help us deal with the challenges of life by presenting them in purer, clearer, simpler, fictive versions of reality. I’m reminded of Jesus’ rebuke to Nicodemus for his failure to recognize a metaphor when he heard one.

Those who work in Mormon literature, either as creators or critics, have long com-
plained about the literal turn of Mormon readers’ minds, of our struggle as a people with accepting a role for fiction—and more so when that fiction strikes close to home in works by Mormon writers or about Mormon themes and characters. All the more so, I suspect, in genres such as the auto-
bibliographical novel where it’s unclear where historical truth ends and fictional truth begins. Our cultural genetics more or less destine us to be uptight in this area.

Which is, in some ways, a shame. If our notions of truth in narrative demand that our accounts of ourselves must be utterly, literally true in every particular, what hope do we have to see personal narratives that lay bare the deepest struggles of the spirit? Clearly—based on the large numbers of bi-
ographies and autobiographies among Mormons, and even the multitude of sto-
ries in Church magazines about the lives of members in many countries and circum-
stances—there’s a hunger for stories not just about Mormons, but about real tan-
gible Mormons with historically verifiable lives.

Too often, though, one senses that the real challenges in those lives are only hinted at or presented in code. Even Newell’s narrative glosses over some mat-
ters, such as just how far the physical rela-
tionship between the two main characters went. As someone who has no intention to publish a narrative about my own life, I cer-
tainly can’t blame Newell for his reticence.

But it seems sad that in our insistence on the literally true, we—and I include myself—may give up some of the reality and power such narratives might contain if we cared a little more about truthfulness and a little less about accuracy in the de-
tails.

A few days after I posted my initial re-
view on AML-List, Chris Bigelow (Newell’s publisher) responded with Newell’s re-
sponse to my thoughts. According to Newell, all the events in the book had in fact happened as described, to the best of his recollection. “Ultimately,” he wrote,

On the Road to Heaven is missing a

very significant piece of chronology—the episode of “the other girl” and what impact that had on the relationship between Annie and I [sic] . . . Its separa-
tion—done primarily because my former agent felt it broke the flow of the Kit–Annie story (in other words, Truth got in the way of good story)—is the primary reason OTR2H is billed as autobi-
bibliographical fiction.

Newell has written “the other girl” seg-
ment as a short story, “Toaster Road,” which won the 2003 AML short fiction
award.

Newell clarified further that On the Road

to Heaven was not initially written as fiction . . . I worked the first draft directly from my journals, which in an earlier, easier era were very exten-
sive and detailed. Conversations, of course, were not specifically recorded in my journals, and I was forced to create from the memory of circumstance and rela-
tionship. I am confident that most of them are very close to accurate.

Another reason Newell changed the genre from nonfiction autobiography to au-
tobibliographical novel was to appease his
wife, who “was less comfortable with the story of conversion and change than I was.”
I see her ambivalence as the flipside of my own curiosity as a reader. I wanted to see
and know whether the author of the story and the character I was reading about were one and the same; she wanted to keep that particular door closed. Both impulses are understandable. In retrospect—and knowing now which parts of the narrative are true and which aren’t—I see why Newell chose the autobiographical novel form as a kind of compromise between these two imperatives.

Which brings us to the classic
question most readers of book reviews ask: “Will I like this book? Is it worth shelling out $16.95 to buy it and ten hours of my life to read it?” Here, we tread on shaky ground, because despite my enjoyment of the book and my sense that it’s well-written and likely to appeal broadly to many readers, I also have to admit that much of the book’s attraction lies in its resonance with my own experi-
e.
was My Side of the Mountain, by Jean George, a book about a teenage boy who goes to live on his own in the mountains of upstate New York. Granted, living off the land wasn’t something I ever had the skills to do—I never even made Tenderfoot in Boy Scouts. But growing up loving the woods and mountains of western Oregon, I used to fantasize about it, even though I knew that between mission and college and all those other things faithful Mormon boys are supposed to do, it was never going to happen to me. So a book about a boy who grew up in—and largely on—the mountains of Colorado in the 1960s and then made the transition from eco-hippie to Mormon and who managed to balance Mormonism and environmentalist counter-culturalism touched on something very familiar and personal to me.

Ironically, when it comes down to actual events, there’s not much of Kit West’s life that resembles mine. I never actually tried drugs—was never even approached with an offer. Didn’t have a girlfriend (well, not before my mission). Heck, I was the kid in my fifth grade class who campaigned for Nixon in 1972. And I don’t have many dramatic stories to tell about my own mission (to Italy, not Colombia), although it was an important experience on a personal level. So why does Newell’s narrative speak to and for the person I was during those years—and to some degree the person I still am?

Describing the origins of his lifelong love for fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien wrote:

Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened desire, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded. I desired dragons with a profound desire. Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighborhood, intruding into my relatively safe world. . . . But the world that contained even the imagination of [the Norse dragons] was richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril. The dweller in the quiet and fertile plains may hear of the tormented hills and the unharvested sea and long for them in his heart. For the heart is hard though the body be soft. ¹

I don’t think I ever really wanted to live Kit West’s life. I can’t deny, though, that many of the concerns and desires that were central to my growing up are played out almost archetypically in Newell’s narrative. Things that were important to me were also important to him. That affords a sense of kinship and recognition.

Which raises the inevitable question: Will Newell’s book appeal to Mormons (and non-Mormons) who don’t share his background, experience, and perspective? This is one of those questions we don’t talk about that much in literature classes: just how much do our judgments about any work of literature rest on our interest in its subject matter? In the ideal world of literary critics, we should love stories for the quality of their crafting, irrespective of their setting or themes.

But in the real world, this isn’t really so—and, judging by the evidence, no more for literary critics than the rest of us. Yes, the appeal of literature arises partially from the archetypes and larger narrative patterns—but also from the details: the joy of seeing in fiction those same beloved (or even hated) details that we remember from our own lives: the books we read, the arguments we had, the music we listened to.

Of course, it doesn’t have to play out this way. Sometimes the writer’s craft can provide a bridge to otherwise alien experiences. A good example in my case is Ed Geary’s Goodbye to Poplarhaven, a set of personal essays about growing up in rural Utah during the 1940s and 1950s. It’s a glimpse into a foreign landscape and mindset I didn’t share but that become familiar to me through his telling. For me, the attraction of Geary’s narrative lies not in its evocation of the familiar but its exploration of the unfamiliar. I think that Newell’s narrative has the potential to work in this same way for readers whose experience is far removed from the world he describes.

A criticism sometimes made of Mormon literature is that its scope is narrow. In particular, some say that most of what’s available is set firmly in the old Mormon Corridor, that arid area of pioneer settlement in the western United States more or less corresponding to the boundaries of the old State of Deseret.

I haven’t read widely enough in Mormon literature to know how just that criticism is. What I can say is that Newell’s autobiographical novel is the first Mormon narrative I’ve read that directly reflects important elements of my own growing up. I suppose that’s the reason I feel such a strong desire to plop this book in front of my non-Mormon friends (or even my stake president, for that matter) and say, “Here. Read this. Kit’s story isn’t mine, but this will give you some idea of what being a Mormon felt like during my adolescence, and part of why I’m a Mormon still.”

NOTES


BUTTER CHURN

There’s a flip flop sound in the farmhouse: wooden paddles beating sweet cream, wide glass jar bulging at the bottom, metal gear spinning at the top. The handle protrudes like a prayer flag.

Every child gets his chance to hoist the rhythm, the butter like a child being born of its mother, an alchemy of myth and legend churning the Milky Way for its butter, spinning immortality—the essence of anything deep down liquid gold.

It’s a movement we all long to join. We are children lining up, holding hands, the paddle clapping, our minds, hearts, feet finding the rhythm of our late liquid birthing in the dance.

—ANITA TANNER
PIECING AND SEWING quilts has long been a part of Mormon women's heritage. Our pioneer ancestors never had much to work with, gleaning bits of still usable fabric from worn clothes and turning them into patches that would somehow fit together. And then, over countless hours, they hand-stitched each piece together, fingers handling every inch of each square of the quilt numerous times. Then came the binding when the whole quilt was sealed up, creating a single entity from what was once the remains of many lives.

Bound on Earth assembles a quilt from pieces of the lives of grandmother Tessa, mother Alicia, and daughters Marnie, Tina, and Beth. But rather than focusing on the fabric of the quilt, Hallstrom turns her eye to the seams where the pieces come together. And what does she find? Unevenness, places where the fabric won't lie smoothly, where the stitching is loose or coming undone.

Two sisters, Marnie and Tina, sit in Primary, already feeling the tugs of separation. Marnie, the righteous daughter, fits in well. The lessons bolster her every thought and emotion. But Tina, the troublemaker, sits stewing in a horrible sense of her own damnation. But then, at fast and testimony meeting, Marnie stands up to let flow her righteousness. As she begins speaking, she notices the heads turning back around and away from her as people shift in their seats to face forward again. This ward knows Marnie, knows what she will say—what she always says—and while it's charming and sweet, it is hardly dramatic. They get back to shushing their children, thumbing through their lesson manuals, closing their eyes.

But Marnie's testimony keeps going. 'I know,' she says, again and again. When she finishes and sits back down, her father covers her knee with his hand.

Marnie is an obedient girl who dutifully accomplishes all that is expected of her (including testifying every month). Her father approves of her, his hand on her knee, but a thread frays and a seam opens as the congregation ignores her.

As time passes, some of these seams tear deeply. Mother Alicia develops a great fondness for Kyle, the charismatic boy dating her daughter Beth. She is overjoyed when Kyle and Beth marry, feeling that she finally has a son. But soon Kyle descends into a bipolar disorder.

The first time he went off his meds and relapsed, we rallied around him. 'You can do it, Kyle. We're here. Be strong!' And he was, for a time. He seemed so much like his old self that when Beth became pregnant, I even allowed myself to be optimistic. But then Stella came and Kyle's crash was so swift, so terrible. I can't get the sight of my daughter out of my head: Beth holding her newborn in her arms and sobbing from fear and exhaustion and confusion and betrayal, her young body limp and drained of hope. I vowed then I would never trust him again. Never again.

Alicia's pain stems not only from the damage Kyle has done to her daughter, but also from the hole he has left in Alicia's own heart. The heart that had grown to love him as a son.

Beth convinces Alicia to let Kyle recover at the family's home after some rehab. Though she allows it, Alicia shifts into a distant, supportive role, unwilling to be hurt again. So, when Kyle tries to talk to her, they speak across a rent seam that is practically a chasm:

'Do you still love me?' he whispers. His voice is very small. He is so young still, not quite twenty-five. A boy. He doesn't look me in the face, but at a point just past my shoulder. 'You did, before, I know you did.'

'I . . . ' My voice trails away. I hear Stella, rattling against the bars of her crib.

He finds my face, looks at me straight. 'It's a yes or no question. Please just answer it.'

'I know,' she says, again and again. When she finishes and sits back down, her father covers her knee with his hand.

Marnie is an obedient girl who dutifully accomplishes all that is expected of her (including testifying every month). Her father approves of her, his hand on her knee, but a thread frays and a seam opens as the congregation ignores her.

In many ways this ragtag quilt, full of frayed holes and loose seams, asks the question: "Is family worth it?"

LIA HADLEY makes her living teaching all levels of college writing. She also works as a part-time librarian at her local library—mostly so she can find good books to read. She has ambitions to start a Ph.D. program in the near future in anthropology/women's studies. Lia is married to a former professional clown who keeps her entertained.
Then I go and get his child.

It works: this searching moment, where the embittered mother-in-law makes a first attempt to close the rift between herself and the boy who has betrayed her and her daughter, where she stops seeing Kyle as “other” and sees him as part of her, sees that they are a pair. With skill and insight, Hallstrom manages to circumvent what could have been a horrible sentimental moment replete with tears, hugs, kisses, and testimonies. Instead, she shows a heart beginning to beat again and leaves room for the rebuilding of the relationship to happen.

In many ways this ragtag quilt, full of frayed holes and loose seams, asks the question: “Is family worth it?” As Hallstrom pulls at the seams and peers through them, the closest we seem to get to an answer is “Maybe yes, maybe no.”

After maintaining this tension throughout the book, however, the concluding pages try to simplify the answer to “Yeah, it really is,” in a tone dismissive of the question’s weight. In the last chapter, the family gathers, enough pieces present that the quilt is ready for rebinding. The grandmother, Tessa, gives a short speech to the family:

I chose your grandfather long before I had any idea what marriage was all about . . . But you get married and you work hard and you try; then you look around and suddenly there’s a room like this, full of all these people you love. It’s amazing, really. A miracle.

At this moment, Tessa is looking at the quilt as a whole, not at the pieces nor their shoddy seams. And in the closing lines of the book, she folds her current version of the quilt up to put in her cedar chest for later.

It is hard to imagine eternity. The vastness of it. The emptiness waiting to be filled. She trusts there will be children there, and music, and cake, and husbands and wives and daughters and sons. It will be heaven, after all. And she is not afraid.

It seems strange that Hallstrom picks such a clichéd Mormon moment to end on. Like putting heart-shaped iron-ons over the most worn parts of an heirloom quilt. Throughout the entire book, she has been tugging hard at seams and pushing her stories through the worn patches, and now she suddenly stands back to look at the whole, lit dimly so it can look its best. The whole, the final chapter argues, is more important than the seams and thin spots in the material.

If this is the case, then does the true answer in the book come just a moment previous to Tessa’s folding up of the family quilt?

Any minute now a grandchild will bring her a plate, and she won’t beg off and request just a sliver, as she has for years and years. She’ll take the thick slice they offer her and enjoy every bite.

Maybe the reason Tessa is not afraid is because she knows she’s dying, so now she can take the time to appreciate the whole, enjoy the moment, be in the fabric instead of the seams. She will eat every bit of that cake, because now it doesn’t matter. Eternity will deal with the rest. What is there to be afraid of? Her quilting days are finished.

Ah, but what about the reader? This persistent question, “Is it worth it?”, doesn’t give up so easily. The reader probably isn’t about to die of cancer. The reader, more likely, is still in the midst of her own seams and patches and will live a long while yet.

So the question keeps coming: is it worth it? Is life for the Mormon woman to be the quiltmaker, eternally dwelling in the seams? Or is there a way to stitch the seams and keep the thin spots patched while living in the fabric? As one such reader, looking at my own life quilt of ragged patches, awkward stitches, and loose seams, I think the answer of the book is “Sometimes, hopefully.”
VIRTUOUS VAMPIRES: CAN ABSTINENCE BE SEXY?

WHAT DO YOU GET WHEN YOU CROSS JANE Austen's chaste romances with Anne Rice's Interview with the Vampire? Some believe the answer is found in Mormon author Stephenie Meyer's work. Her novels about a sexually abstinent vampire have sold more than 40 million copies and have been translated into 37 languages.

It's not that Meyer's vampires are celibate. But unlike Anne Rice's pansexual vampires, who stand in a grand old tradition of vampire fiction as erotic thrillers, Meyer's Twilight series is peopled by chaste characters who play out traditional gender roles: Protagonist Bella is a dependent damsel in distress; vampire Edward is her knight in shining armor (a dark knight, anyway), and they do have sex—but not until the wedding bells toll approval in the fourth book of the series.

Remarkably, the Twilight series (four novels thus far) has gained a faithful following of Latter-day Saints who do not mind all the bloodsucking, as long as there is no heavy petting, and who were delighted last November when the adaptation of the first novel was released with a PG-13 rating—something almost unheard of for a vampire movie.

Perhaps even more remarkable is the explanation critics give for Meyer's success in the mainstream: that by delaying sex between Bella and Edward until after their marriage, Meyer is whipping up something even sexier than a sex scene—what author Lev Grossman calls in a Time magazine piece, "the erotics of abstinence."

"Their tension comes from prolonged, superhuman acts of self-restraint," Grossman says of Bella and Edward. "There's a scene midway through Twilight in which, for the first time, Edward leans in close and sniffs the aroma of Bella's exposed neck. 'Just because I'm resisting the wine doesn't mean I can't appreciate the bouquet,' he says. 'You have a very floral smell, like lavender . . . or freesia.' He barely touches her, but there's more sex in that one paragraph than in all the snogging in Harry Potter."

"Meyer deserves credit for achieving something next to impossible," echoes author Jennifer Hahn. "She makes abstinence sexy."

Deseret News columnist Jerry Johnston believes that the new film allows young girls "to handle their budding sexuality in a safe and symbolic way" but objects to the suggestion that Twilight is "smut for good girls." Johnston is also impressed by the positive portrayal of the vampire Edward, who "listens to classical music and always has his girlfriend's back whenever she dangles in danger."

"Fangs or no, that's the guy you wouldn't mind introducing to the folks," Johnston writes.

Is Edward a clean-cut hero or a wolf in sheep's clothing? Either way, the carefully curbed attraction that Edward feels for Bella's blood resonates with Mormons because they know only too well what it is like to curb one's sex drive. Were Edward to yield to temptation and suck Bella's blood, he would transform her into a vampire.

"The entire time Edward and Bella could barely touch or kiss for fear that Edward might get carried away and suck her blood in a fit of passion," a blogger who happens to be Meyer's cousin writes at NORMALMORMONS.COM. "Very similar to that of two young BYU/high school students who aren't yet married and can't touch each other for fear it will lead to sex. I'm sure it was easy for Stephenie to describe with first hand experiences."

After reading Grossman's piece, Mormon blogger William Morris concludes that the "erotics of abstinence" is good news because it points to an untapped potential among Mormon writers.

"Meyer has done . . . something that I have long thought would be a rewarding strand of Mormon literature," Morris writes at MOTLEYVISION.ORG. "That is, to explore how ab-
stinctness leads to a heavily charged play of small gestures among Mormon teenagers and young adults.”

Master of the macabre Stephen King has recently jumped into the discussion by observing that he understands why people, and young girls in particular, are attracted by Meyer’s novels. “A lot of the physical side of it is conveyed in things like the vampire will touch her forearm or run a hand over skin, and she just flushes all hot and cold,” King told USA Weekend. “And for girls, that’s a shorthand for all the feelings that they're not ready to deal with yet.”

However, in contrast to King’s assessment, who has been quoted as saying that “Meyer can’t write a darn,” Grossman showers Meyer with praise for her craft as a writer, which Grossman calls “virtuosic.”

And on top of that, there’s all that sizzling abstinence! “It’s never quite clear whether Edward wants to sleep with Bella or rip her throat out or both,” Grossman argues, “but he wants something, and he wants it bad, and you feel it all the more because he never gets it. That’s the power of the Twilight books: they’re squeaky, geeky clean on the surface, but right below it, they are absolutely, deliciously filthy.”

People

Critical. Of President Barack Obama, former presidential hopeful MITT ROMNEY, 61. In a recent speech, Romney told House Republicans that Obama answers to the “most extreme wing of the abortion lobby.” Romney added that the stimulus package proposed by the Democrats is a plan to “spend and borrow with reckless abandon.”

Charged. Developer WILLIAM J. HAMMONS, 64, for allegedly selling investments and taking commissions in what could be Utah’s largest-ever financial fraud. Hammons, who formerly served as an LDS bishop in Las Vegas, is believed to have helped run a Ponzi scheme bilking some 800 investors, many of them Mormons from Las Vegas and St. George, out of more than $180 million.

Convicted. JAMES BOUGHTON JR., 22, of killing LDS missionary Morgan W. Young and wounding his companion Joshua Heidbrink. The crimes occurred in Chesapeake, Virginia, on 2 January 2006. Boughton faces the possibility of life in prison.

Rescued. ANABELLE BRISTOL, 60, by two anonymous LDS missionaries who happened to pass by her burning home in St. Madeleine, Trinidad and Tobago. According to a story in the Trinidad Tobago Express, the two unnamed elders “became angels” when they rescued Bristol from a burning house.

Baptized Posthumously. Serial killer TED BUNDY. According to researcher Helen Radkey, Bundy was rebaptized and received his endowments in the Jordan River Temple last May. As soon as his rebaptism received media attention, the Church removed his record from the public database. It is widely believed that Bundy originally joined the Church while living in Utah circa 1975. Bundy, who raped and killed at least 29 women, was executed in 1989.

Appointed. Former Los Angeles Times publisher MARK HINCKLEY WILLES, 67, to Deseret Management Corp. As the new president and chief executive of Deseret Management, Willes will head the for-profit holding company that oversees commercial business attached to the LDS Church, including the Deseret News and KSL television. Willes, who was appointed to this position by the First Presidency, is the nephew of late President Gordon B. Hinckley.

Third Album. Released by pop/R&B artist JONNA PIRINEN, 26. Pirinen is well known in her native Finland, where her first album sold 14,000-shy of receiving a gold record designation. An LDS convert, Pirinen was baptized at the end of 2003.

Deceased. Correlation guru DANIEL H. LUDLOW, 84. After years teaching religion at BYU, Ludlow worked at Church headquarters, where he headed the correlation of all LDS publications. Ludlow also supervised the production of the annotated LDS edition of the King James Bible. As editor-in-chief of the 1992 Encyclopedia of Mormonism, Ludlow harnessed the creative energy of 750 authors, completing the project in five years.

Apologetic. Actor TOM HANKS, 52, after telling Fox News that Latter-day Saints are “un-American” for pushing through California’s Proposition 8. Hanks issued a statement clarifying that even though he believes Proposition 8 is “codified discrimination,” his Fox News statement creates “more division when the time calls for respectful disagreement.” “No one should use ‘un-American’ lightly or in haste,” he added. “I did. I should not have.”
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