APPROACHING THE FIRST VISION
SAGA by Stephen C. Taysom (p.12)

Noah Van Sciver illustrates THE BOOK OF MORMON'S ORIGINS (p.23)

Kenny Kemp on RETURNING TO THE MISSION FIELD (p.28)

SIX MORMON STAY-AT-HOME DADS TELL ALL (p.40)

Lisa Torcasso Downing on BURNING THE BEEF (p.51)

A SEASON IN THE WILDERNESS Fiction by Larry Menlove (p.56)

UPDATE
The extinction of young Mormon singles? Painting LDS politics, Mormons in the news; more . . .

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more info: sunstonemagazine.com/symposium/
FEATURES

12  Stephen C. Taysom ..................  APPROACHING THE FIRST VISION SAGA
23  Noah Van Sciver ....................  VAN SCIVER'S BOOK OF MORMON ORIGINS
28  Kenny Kemp .........................  THE RETURNING MISSIONARY: Only a Dream?
40  ...........................................  SOME SAHD STORIES
40  Ken Gerber .........................  RAISED BY ICE CREAM TRUCK DRIVERS
41  Stephen Carter .....................  PLAYDATE WITH PRESIDENT BENSON
44  John Gustav-Wrathall .............  GAY-AT-HOME DAD
45  Luke Smithson .....................  FIX IT!
47  Michael Stubbs ....................  STAYING AT HOME IN A DADDLY FASHION
49  A. Joseph West .....................  A STAY-AT-HOME DAD'S GUIDE TO FRENCH SOCIOLOGY
51  Lisa Torcasso Downing ............  THE SAGA OF BEEF GONE BAD
56  Larry Menlove ......................  A SEASON IN THE WILDERNESS: Fiction
76  Jeanette Atwood ...................  ALMA: A PROPHET FORMING

POETRY

62  David Lawrence ....................  MEMORABILIA
55  Mitchell Metz .......................  MAPLES

COLUMNS

CORNUCOPIA

4  Greg Moellmer .......................  MORMON MUSINGS: The Wedding Ring
4  Miriam A. Smith .....................  WARD STORIES: In Defense of Polygamy—Well, Sort Of...
6  Michael Vinson .....................  SCRIPTURE NOTES: Jesus and Nietzsche on “Becoming a Child”
7  Curt Bench .........................  ADVENTURES OF A MORMON
8  James P. Harris .....................  A PLACE FOR EVERY TRUTH: Calling an Apostle

TOUCHSTONES: Promised Land

10  Begnt Washburn ....................  Right Where We Stand
10  H. Wayne Schow ....................  Special Status
63  D. Jeff Burton ......................  BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .: Bits and Pieces From the Inbox
66  Michael Farnworth .................  THE FAMILY FORUM: The Kid: An Awakening Metaphor

NEWS

69  ...........................................  The plight of singles in the Church, the politically charged paintings of Jon McNaughton, Mormons in the news, more . . .
STILL ON THE PLAINS

WHAT A LOVELY SURPRISE to see a short piece from No More Goodbyes printed as “An Olive Leaf” in issue 162.

By way of synchronicity, the mail carrier who brought the magazine today took with him a copy of No More Goodbyes that I had signed and placed on my mailbox to go to one of our dear gay young people still “on the plains” in a harsh winter. This is the note I received via Facebook this morning:

I live in Utah . . . . I visit teach a woman who believes that she was told in general conference to kick her gay daughter to the curb. I did my best to dissuade her, but that mother believed she was doing God’s will, and now the daughter is in the hospital, stomach pumped, wrists and ankles tethered. I suppose this is a simple message to say, please keep speaking out in charity and kindness and love and acceptance and never stop. Thank you.

We Mormons will look back on this era with such shame. I ask that all of us do more than we are doing now. Speak to your bishop, to your stake president. Write to a general authority. Speak out in church. There is too much pain. In our “people church,” many are ready to accept our gay brothers and sisters as full members of our community. In our “institutional church,” the tiny steps forward are shamefully insufficient.

Blessings as you carry on your good work.

CAROL LYNN PEARSON
Walnut Creek, California

APP ROCKS

HEY, I DOWNLOADED SUNSTONE’s new app on my iPad, and I must say, it rocks! The color is stunning, the text is crisp, and I love the embedded video and links. You’ve just made a subscriber for life. My church activity has definitely increased since getting the app. No longer do I play Plants vs. Zombies when the lesson is boring. Instead, I righteously open the SUNSTONE app and do a bit of reading. Once, I even lifted a quote from an article to share during a class discussion. They were very impressed with its insight.

May the SUNSTONE app roll forth and fill the earth!

JON FENSTER
Tallahassee, Florida
Several years back, we thought it would be a grand idea to post some of our books (in their entirety) on a website. We assumed this would be useful for history researchers and readers of poetry and fiction. Now that we have, we want to advertise to Sunstoners, the only question being how to do so effectively. We met and talked about it and had pizza (which was really tasty), then met a few more times before we realized we had spent our budget on delicious cheese and pepperoni. So we decided we would just show you one of our pizzas and hope you understand. Ugh! www.signaturebookslibrary.org
THE WEDDING RING

ON A SUMMER EVENING IN 2001, I GOT ON ONE knee in a park near my parents’ home and asked a wonderful woman if she would marry me. She said yes, and in that moment, we were engaged. She intended to marry me, and I intended to marry her. I did not know what her preferences for a ring were, so I had not purchased one. I suggested that together we could pick something she liked. She said that would be fine.

The next day, she called several of her friends to tell them the news. A couple of friends asked, “Did he give you a ring?” She explained that we were going to purchase it later. “Well, then, your engagement isn’t official,” they replied. “You must have a ring, or it doesn’t count.”

She told me about this conversation, and we were both confused about why her friends would take the ring so literally. We both knew our commitment to each other was genuine. Why did we need a ring to make it “official?”

I bought her an engagement ring with the traditional diamond. We picked out my wedding band, which she gave to me at our marriage ceremony. I chose a plain yellow gold band because it was essentially identical to the band my dad wears. I remember my dad taking his ring off to let me play with it when I was little. Even at that young age, I knew the ring meant my mom and dad were married.

My wife and I have been married just over nine years now, and I still wear my ring every day. As I type, I can see it on my finger. It reminds me of my wife and how much I love her. It reminds me of the commitment I made to her and our children. When I work in the garden, it would sometimes be a little easier if I took the ring off, but I typically leave it on because I like it. One of the first times I scrubbed in for surgery, I forgot to take it off and caught an earful from the scrub tech and the surgeon. Now when I am in surgery, I tie the ring to the drawstring of my scrubs. Otherwise, it can be found on my left ring finger, just where my wife put it when we married.

As long as I can remember, I have known that the significance of the wedding ring is socially constructed. I imagine most people (some of my wife’s friends excepted) recognize this. In the years since my marriage, I have learned that the groom’s ring and the addition of a diamond to the engagement ring are largely the result of successful marketing by the jewelry industry. I have also learned about the ugly way some diamonds are procured.

If I decide I do not want to wear my ring anymore, I am not worried that it will keep me out of heaven. I am not afraid that my marriage will end. God will not be angry if I stop wearing my ring. Nevertheless, I continue to enjoy the symbolism of my wedding band. I wear it for me.

The LDS Church has many rich and meaningful symbols. These are expressed through various media: scripture, meetings, commandments, ordinances, garments, and temples. I continue to enjoy many of these symbols; they provide meaning to my life. Yet, as with the wedding ring, I have learned that these symbols have many more roots in human culture than I had previously imagined. Also, I have come to realize that just as a beautiful diamond can have an ugly history, so there are some disconcerting aspects of the Church’s origins and current practices. Instead of feeling a need to discard my faith tradition, however, these realizations have allowed me to enjoy the symbolism in the Church in new ways. I am not a slave to these symbols. I participate in the Church at the level that contributes the most meaning and joy to my life. I live the gospel for me.

I declare that the wedding ring is true. It is a symbol of commitment in marriage that is of benefit and meaning to me and many others. The Church is true in the same way.

GREG MOELLMER
Salt Lake City, Utah

Note: An earlier version of this essay appeared on the support forum: STAYLDS.COM.

IN DEFENSE OF POLYGAMY—WELL, SORT OF . . .

I WAS VERY SURPRISED. SISTER PRICE WAS KNOWN not only for her dynamic, superbly organized Relief Society lessons, she was also a voice of authority in the ward. People rarely questioned her on points of doctrine or opposed her opinions.

Sister Price meticulously prepared each lesson. Being a scriptorian and a Church history buff, she was an extremely confident instructor.
Nonetheless, her lesson on the Church’s earlier practice of polygamy wasn’t going over well. Despite Sister Price’s learned explanation that plural marriage had been sanctioned by God in Old and New Testament times as well as in the early days of this dispensation—and is perhaps destined to be part of the order of the hereafter—not one soul in our Relief Society seemed ready to embrace it today.

“Will is a good husband,” Eliza announced to the class, “but he can barely keep up with me. Besides, on this point I’m selfish. I don’t want to share him with anyone.” Heads bobbed in agreement.

Normally, I shy away from controversy. Today, however, I sensed Sister Price was headed for trouble and decided to help her cause as best I could.

“This may surprise many of you,” I offered, “but I can see some very good points to polygamy.” Before the shocked silence evaporated, I rushed to explain. “Polygamy meant that some wives were free to pursue careers while sister wives took care of the domestic responsibilities. And today single women in the Church far outnumber the men.”

The silence was slowly dissolving into whispers of concern. Undaunted, I continued.

“But like you, I would hate to share a husband with another wife. What I’m really in favor of is polyandry—you know, multiple husbands.”

“You see,” I explained, “One of the reasons I’m still single is that I can’t find the perfect man to marry. But if I had the option of marrying two half-perfect men, or four quarter-perfect . . . things would really open up.”

“Polyandry would certainly help me,” Kate said. “I just can’t decide between Don, Roy, and Lee. If I could just marry all three . . .”

The discomfort on Sister Price’s face was beginning to soften. This was a topic on which she was prepared to shed light. “It isn’t very well known,” she said, “but polyandry was practiced in a limited fashion when the Saints were in Nauvoo.”

“Several women who practiced polyandry remained with their first husband,” she continued. “Many of these women were plural wives to their second husband. Mary Elizabeth Rollins became a plural wife to Joseph Smith while she was married to a non-member, Adam Lightner. Nancy Marinda Johnson was married to both Orson Hyde and Joseph Smith. Zina D. Huntington was married to both Henry B. Jacobs and Joseph Smith. Henry didn’t mind too much as Zina continued to live with him. But on the way to Utah, Brigham Young sent Henry on a mission and decided Zina should join his plural wives. Henry was so heartbroken that I only hope he is with Zina in the hereafter. Sisters, can you imagine having a name as long as Zina’s? Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs Smith Young.”

Sister Price’s face saddened. “Overall, the practice of polyandry wasn’t very successful. Henry Jacobs and others suffered great emotional turmoil over sharing their wives with another man. One polyandrous husband, Hector McLean, actually murdered his wife Elenore’s other husband, Parley P. Pratt. It appears that Elenore intended to divorce Hector, but Hector took his anger out on Parley.”

“It may have been a signaling problem,” I suggested. “There needs to be a way for each husband to signal to the others that the home is occupied. I’ve read that in some Maserabi cultures, a husband leaves his spear outside the en-
trance to the dung hut.”

Jenny suddenly brightened up; she had recently taken an anthropology class on comparative marriage and family structure. “It’s true,” she said. “A spear or a shield outside the hut lets the other husbands know it’s best to find another place to sleep. In Central Asia, the Mimions tied their horse near the front door as a signal. The Hitmsams simply tethered a goat to fend off the other husbands.”

“Thank you, Jenny, I had no idea. Perhaps my next undertaking will be anthropology,” Sister Price said, smiling. “Unfortunately, I don’t think many of our husbands have access to spears, shields, horses, or goats.”

“Perhaps they could leave their scriptures or priesthood manual on the porch,” Eliza suggested.

“What about a tie?” Kate offered.

Beth had the best idea. “Car keys would work well,” she said. “That way while one is home the other could use the car. A Porsche would keep everyone happy,” she beamed.

“I can see the possibilities,” said Sarah. “Dan is a terrific provider and father, but sometimes I feel like I could use another husband who would go with me to the opera and ballet.”

Sister Price started to make a list on the blackboard. “Okay, sisters. One husband to provide financially, one who is good with kids, one for the arts . . . don’t make me write this list alone.”

Hands shot up. Everyone had something to offer. The number of husbands “needed” varied with each woman’s interests and activities.

“Someone handy around the house,” said Susan. “Two husbands would be plenty for me.”

“One who likes to travel,” Linda urged. “Perhaps one for each continent. Hmm, I guess seven or eight for me.”

Shauna suggested one husband who cooks and another who cleans.

“Are there men who truly enjoy shopping?” asked Eliza.

“Don’t forget religion,” Carolyn said. “One husband to go to church with; the others could be non-Mormons.”

That’s one of the benefits of polyandry I hadn’t fully considered. I could marry one of the reluctant, commitment-cautious Mormon men I know, who might well prefer a part-time marriage, then add a more suitable all-season mate from the world.

Polyandry would also be beneficial for our same-sex-attracted brethren in search of an understanding woman to marry. They are men whose creativity and sensitivity I adore, but I think many of our husbands have access to spears, shields, horses, or goats.”

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Polyandry would also be beneficial for our same-sex-attracted brethren in search of an understanding woman to marry. They are men whose creativity and sensitivity I adore, but for obvious reasons, would never consider for anything beyond friendship. A polyandrous marriage could ensure that the afflicted brother will qualify for exaltation without placing an undue burden on his wife.

By the time the lesson was over, it appeared that even though no one wanted another wife around the house, everyone recognized the advantages of having another husband or two. Especially if he were good at . . . aah . . . uhh . . . umm . . .

Sister Price was radiant by the end of the lesson. “Sisters,

I usually claim to learn more preparing a lesson than receiving one. But today, I learned a great deal teaching this one. Just to end on a scriptural note, it might seem that verse 63 of section 132 in the Doctrine and Covenants is a prohibition against polyandry. But, don’t forget, we do believe in continuing revelation.”

The smile on Sister Price’s face made me wonder just who she had in mind for her plural husbands. Only time will tell.

MIRIAM A. SMITH
San Francisco, California

NOTE: All names have been changed to protect the innocent. In fact, this lesson never actually took place—really, Bishop, I promise.

Scripture notes

In this regular column, Michael Vinson, a master’s graduate of the Divinity School of the University of Cambridge and a frequent devotional speaker at Sunstone symposiums, delves into personal and scholarly aspects of scripture.

JESUS AND NIETZSCHE ON “BECOMING A CHILD”

At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily, I say unto you, except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

—MATTHEW 18:1–3

WHEN I READ THIS VERSE, I MUST CONFESSION that the disciples’ question reminds me of active Latter-day Saints who aspire to worldly success, whether it is buying a larger home in a more prestigious neighborhood, career advancement and recognition, or a more visible or higher Church calling. I know most Mormons claim to have no ambition for Church callings, but I think many secretly view leadership callings as a visible manifestation of God’s pleasure with how they have conducted their lives. But is this practice of measuring the results of an active life in the Church what Jesus was actually preaching against?

In order to understand why Jesus taught about becoming as little children, and what the disciples might have thought of his admonition, it is helpful to look at the question in the context of the Roman world. Nothing was more important in the first-century Mediterranean culture than social rank and standing.

A man’s rank and social standing were immediately obvious to everyone through the boots or sandals he could afford, and the robe or toga he was dressed in. Many mornings, especially when they needed a favor, men of minor
status would go to the homes of socially superior patrons, where they would wait in the foyer to be called in (the order of their turn determined by their social standing compared to the others who were waiting). In return for a man’s political support, his patron might lend him money or help him obtain a position for a relative. Likewise, the seating arrangements in dining halls and banquets followed a strict order, the most privileged positions at the table closest to the host.

Even first-century Jews had rank and social standing in their religious world. Although we do not have any contemporary records from the Pharisees or Sadducees, we do have some from the Qumran sect, who left the Dead Sea Scrolls (and lived in the same century Jesus did). This sect annually re-evaluated the standing of each member, re-determining their rank in the congregation, their speaking order at meetings, and their hierarchy of seating in the banquet hall.

In this socially stratified world, it is no wonder that Jesus’s disciples were confused about their standing. In contrast to everything they had observed in other social situations, Jesus seemed to treat strangers as old friends and which of us pleases you the most. How surprising to them, then, when Jesus seemed to ignore their question and called a child into their midst. A child was among the least of individuals in the Roman world; even among Jews, children had a very low status. A child was among the least of individuals in the Roman world; even among Jews, children had a very low status. A child was among the least of individuals in the Roman world; even among Jews, children had a very low status.

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But at some point, the child desires to be free, and when it realizes that desire, it becomes a lion. The lion has but one quest: to find a dragon on whose every scale are written the words: “Thou Shalt,” a metaphor for the social and religious obligations placed on us by others. The lion must kill this dragon.

As it slays the dragon, the lion is transformed into a child.

But say, my brothers, what can the child do that even the lion cannot do? The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred Yes-saying.

Nietzsche explains that the sacred “Yes-saying” is needed because the spirit now can will its own will, which is a pre-cursor to conquering his own world.

What does Zarathustra’s child have in common with the child called by Jesus? I like to think that Jesus and Nietzsche both were trying to teach that we must become child-like not by abdicating responsibilities, but by abandoning our concern about the social expectations of others. We should learn to live our life according to our own expectations, not to attain social status or rank, and especially not to impress others.

Jesus taught his disciples, with a child as an object lesson, that instead of worrying about which calling we will advance to in the Church, and being secretly gratified that we have been chosen (thus giving us some earthly evidence of our heavenly rank), we need to “turn” from caring about our heavenly status. We need to abandon all desires for rank and social advancement, especially within the Church. Until we learn to be the child who can give the sacred “Yes” to life without caring about social position in the eyes of others, we will not even have a life worth living, much less be capable of attaining Jesus’s kingdom in heaven.

Michael Vinson
Star Valley, Wyoming

Mormon Musings

The Core of the Matter

Recently I heard a speaker in church say, “You can count the seeds in an apple, but you can’t count the apples in a seed.” The remark got me
thinking way beyond the intent of the truism (a bad habit of mine).

The aphorism does say something nice about a person’s potential and how big things can come from little ones. But after some thought, I realized that you can count the apples in most seeds: zero, nada. For one thing, seeds don’t turn into trees if you try to count the apples in them. Once you’ve looked inside a seed, it is dead and will never have an apple “inside” it. Furthermore, not one in a million seeds ever makes an apple. The most perfect apples go to market and are eaten, their seeds going down the drain. Good apples rarely have a chance to seed, mostly the rotten ones on the ground do. And that happens only with great luck, since most seeds don’t sprout, and those that do are often eaten by animals in the orchard or mowed or plucked out by the gardener who prefers to raise apple trees from grafts anyway. Even if you were to save an apple seed and try to grow it, you would need a great deal of luck, not to mention skill, to succeed. It would be an even longer shot to keep the tree alive long enough for it to produce apples.

Maybe that is why so few of us ever really reach our full potential. The chances against it are so great we can only get there by accepting assistance from the hand of God.

KIM BATEMAN
Spring City, Utah

Very Social Lives!

Being a Mormon Bookseller May Not Mean
I get regular paychecks, paid vacations, or a company-sponsored retirement plan, but I do get the ben-

Adventures of a Mormon Bookseller

In this regular Cornucopia column, Curt Bench, owner and operator of Benchmark Books (BENCHMARKBOOKS.COM), a specialty bookstore in Salt Lake City that focuses primarily on used and rare Mormon books, tells stories—both humorous and appalling—from his 35-plus years in the LDS book business.

Page 8 June 2011
invitations issued outside of Utah to a gentleman and “ladies,” but most read “and lady.”

One invitation (not pictured here) for a Mormon Battalion Anniversary Ball held in 1867 cost $5.00 per couple, with each additional lady being $1.00. The committee consisted of such polygamous luminaries as Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, John Taylor, George Q. Cannon, and Wilford Woodruff. The document advertises “refreshment saloons” that would be set up to furnish “tea, coffee, sandwiches, ice cream, pastry, &c, &c. to the guests.” Now there’s a Church party!

A place for every truth

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.”

CALLING AN APOSTLE

It is always fascinating to get a peek behind the scenes when a new member of the Twelve is called. What follows weaves together stories and reflections on the events leading to the 1919 call of Elder Melvin J. Ballard.

With the death of President Joseph F. Smith on 19 November 1918, Heber J. Grant became the seventh President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He soon called Anthon M. Lund and Charles W. Penrose as his counselors. One of President Grant’s other major tasks was filling the vacancy in the Quorum of Twelve left by President Smith’s death and Grant’s own elevation to prophet. According to President Grant’s biographer, Francis M. Gibbons, Grant intended to call General Richard Whitehead Young. Young was a distinguished military man, a grandson of Brigham Young, and a successful attorney who had served for a time as an Associate Justice of the Philippine Supreme Court. Young was a faithful Latter-day Saint and, by all accounts, worthy of consideration to this office.

According to Gibbons, President Grant spoke with his counselors, who also agreed with his choice. Grant wrote the name “Richard W. Young” on a piece of paper and intended to bring his name up for consideration in the 5 January 1919 meeting of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. “But for a reason he could never fully explain,” Gibbons writes, “he was unable to do so; instead, he presented the name of Melvin J. Ballard, president of the Northwestern States Mission, a man with whom he had very little personal contact.”¹

Of Elder Ballard’s calling and ordination, Elder James E. Talmage wrote the following in his journal entry for 7 January 1919:

At 10:30 a.m. the First Presidency and Twelve assembled in the Temple in their usual council room. In accordance with action taken on Sunday last [5 January], Elder Melvin Joseph Ballard, heretofore president of the Western States Mission, was ordained an Apostle and set apart as one of the Council of the Twelve. . . . President Heber J. Grant officiating in the ordination and setting apart.

We have a convincing testimony that Elder Ballard is the Lord’s choice for this place. He has been one of the best of our Mission Presidents, and the dominating theme in all his preaching has been that of the Christ as the Savior and Redeemer of mankind. His humility and affable personality have tended to endear him to the missionaries and resident saints in his Mission, as also to non-members of the Church. We are all profoundly grateful to have him numbered with us in the Council. His brief address of acceptance immediately prior to his ordination will not be forgotten by any one of those present.

One sad note that also perhaps reflects the wisdom of the choice of Melvin J. Ballard to this position is that Richard W. Young passed away from appendicitis less than a year later. Elder Melvin J. Ballard went on to serve in the Quorum for twenty-one years until his death on 30 July 1939. He is the grandfather of current apostle, M. Russell Ballard.

NOTE

TOUCHSTONES

PROMISED LAND

RIGHT WHERE WE STAND

During my childhood, family home evening was always a sporadic event that coincided with bursts of belief within my parents—not belief in the gospel, but belief in their own ability to actually establish some sort of household structure. During these optimistic times, they would schedule home teaching visits or family home evenings—fuelled by the same hope that makes the rest of the world buy new day-planners or join a gym.

The first few minutes of every Family Home Evening would be spent with the manual, but invariably our lessons would wander onto the topic of the Second Coming. I relished thinking of most other people in Mapleton, Utah, dying while some of my family and I made our way back to Missouri “along the rusty rail.” This fixation is probably because in my post-apocalyptic vision, one of the other survivors was always the latest “new girl” in our class. I always caught a crush on the new girl. In my daydreamed version of the apocalypse, the new girl and I would wander back to Missouri together, a little Adam and Eve with a commandment from God to have sex and loot whatever we wanted all along the way.

The Second Coming probably appealed to my mom because she was in charge of cleaning up after seven children. After the apocalypse, of course, all housework would stop. For her, the Millenium’s “promised land” meant no vacuuming, no dusting, no laundry. And if Jesus came within the year, she wouldn’t have to pack for an upcoming move to our new house across the street.

Fleeing to a new place for a do-over is a persistent and very attractive idea. Maybe it’s because so many of us want a do-over. But I wonder how many of us really need one? When the Israelites fled Egypt and spent forty years in the wilderness, they were in desperate need of a promised land. The parents, who had come out of slavery, wanted a place they could call their own. They had really needed to leave. In fleeing, they had actually given up their homes and—according to the definitions of many social activists of today—their “jobs.” After a few years of wandering, the children born in the wilderness wanted to settle down. Both old and young had a valid need for a promised land—a land of milk and honey. A place to call their own. A land where being unemployed could go from a blessing to a curse.

My Mormon ancestors were also separated from the herd—or maybe they separated themselves. But they weren’t running from slavery; they were running from the law. Their idea of a promised land had little to do with milk and honey, and everything to do with plural marriage and escaping legal jurisdiction.

In 2009, my wife was transferred to Germany, roughly six thousand miles from the promised land of my ancestors. I don’t know when I will return to their promised land—it seems like it will not be anytime soon. It’s not that I don’t think my ancestral home is a nice place; it’s just that lately I have grown to like wherever I am at the moment—as long as it’s a first-world country with modern dentistry and decent drinking water.

And frankly I’ve grown suspicious of first-world inhabitants who are too enraptured with the idea of a promised land. I have met too many people who want Jesus to come for all the wrong reasons. They pray for his swift return so that they can cancel their credit card debt, stop going to their awful jobs, or spice up their boring lives by making gloating phone calls to their unrepentant, unbelieving neighbors. The truth is, we first-world citizens have it great right where we stand. For this reason, yearning for a promised land has all the religious glow of praying over lottery ticket numbers. Sure, maybe God will still deliver people in their time of need, just maybe not in their time of want.

BENGT WASHBURN
Dettenhausen, Germany

SPECIAL STATUS

As a boy, I was puzzled (and disappointed) that God seemed to impose desert country on his chosen peoples. Palestine? That parched land hardly seemed like bargain real estate. The Great Basin? Who’d want that passed-over, sagebrushy parcel? Did the great Promiser-in-the-Sky think dry hardship would be desirable for those he loved most—or was he a con artist who perversely persuaded us to take the leftovers? Why couldn’t he offer his former-and-latter-day saints a bit of landscape lushness to confirm their choosiness?

Nevertheless, I accepted the notion that Americans—and Mormons in particular—had gotten the best possible land deal. Didn’t the Book of Mormon tell us that ours was “a land choice above all other lands”
and that this nation would be exceptional, with special Divine providence in its inception? Of course, where “this land” began and ended was not precisely clear. Did the promised choice land encompass the entirety of Central, North, and South America, or was it bounded by the 49th parallel and the Rio Grande? And did it really include Alaska and Hawaii?

In my youth, the notion of America’s and Mormonism’s promised status and reward was reinforced by the Article of Faith statement that Zion would be established on this continent, and even more specifically by Mormons in the mountain valleys of the West. That prophesied historical inevitability would show the “rest of them” that we chosen people must be taken seriously.

Then, about fifty years ago, things took an unexpected turn: Mormonism became a world church, and, accordingly, our leaders told Saints in distant missions to stay home, to forego immigration to Utah, and instead to build up “Zion” where they were.

Well, I have come to like the implications of that message. In the intervening years, I had traveled and lived in some other parts of the world, and I’d learned that quite a few other places compared favorably with America in natural beauty and resources, climate, fertility, good government, and cultural richness. I learned that people in some of those countries loved and appreciated their native land in ways similar to what I felt for Idaho and the United States. Increasingly, to be fixated on the notion we were somehow exceptional seemed both inaccurate and provincial. You can spend too much time contemplating your own navel.

So, are there better ways to view what it means to dwell in a “promised land”? I like the implications of this passage from Psalms: “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (24:1). Read that verse again! It indicates to me a more healthy way to look at things. The fullness of the earth is promised land to all of us who are fortunate enough to dwell on it; all the earth’s inhabitants are God’s, able to share His good gifts, wheresoever they find themselves. Didn’t Peter in a vision learn that same lesson? “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him” (Acts 10:34–35).

It’s easy to understand why the conjoined notions of special status and special promises have been prominent in religious discourse, including scripture. Claiming superiority on the basis of emphasized difference aids in forging religious group identity and loyalty, and these in turn can make external persecution easier to bear. But such discourse also encourages, however subtly, an “us-versus-them” mentality, the most likely fruits of which are exclusion, rejection, and dismissal. This language expressing feelings of specialness, chosenness, and dwelling-in-promised-landness tends away from respect, love, and cooperation, which seem central to the gospel Jesus taught. It encourages provinciality. It weakens the hope for a unified humanity. It obscures our responsibility for the health and integrity of the entire planet. Surely, that is unfortunate.

We need to grow beyond such language of privileged identity of special advantage. In today’s world, we need to focus more on what we share ideologically, socially, and ecologically, and less on what divides us—which is the bane of our current political climate. We need to be focused on what the Psalmist hints at, focused on how we can make the earth a land of promise for all. That is the best way forward.

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Joseph Smith's First Vision stories constitute a key element of contemporary Mormon self-conception. Anyone seeking to understand Mormonism will have to grapple with the complexities surrounding this event and the stories told about it. This essay introduces the reader to the narratives that represent the event and to their variations, particularly as they have played out from the late-twentieth century to the present.

The existence of multiple accounts of the First Vision has proved a stumbling block for some Latter-day Saints. Smith's first recounting describes a single heavenly being's appearance while in later accounts, two appear. In yet another, the two beings are accompanied by concourses of angels. These are just a few of the differences. Critics of the Church use these differences to argue that Joseph Smith fabricated the First Vision. Many other sticky corners exist in the First Vision narratives as well.

This essay is not meant to be a comprehensive historical survey of First Vision accounts. Rather, it focuses on the following questions: How did the multiple accounts originate? Where do their narratives match, and where don't they? How have apologists and critics responded to these differences? How does recent scholarship in anthropology, philosophy, literary studies, and myth studies affect these debates?

This essay also does not attempt to determine what “really happened” to Joseph Smith in the grove. On some level, the stories are more important anyway. As historian of religion Wendy Doniger observes, “More often than not we do not know precisely what happened in history, but we often know the stories people tell about it. In some ways, the stories are not only all that we have access to but all that people at the time, and later, had access to, and hence all that drove the events that followed. Real events and sentiments produce symbols, symbols produce real events and sentiments, and real and symbolic levels may be simultaneously present in a single text.” So it is with the stories narrating the First Vision.1

Theophany, Myth, and the First Vision Saga

Cultural artifacts that Westerners recognize as “religions” often trace their origins to events in which divinity communicates with a mortal. Mormonism follows in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic mode by beginning with a theophany—an encounter between a prophet and the divine. As one might easily imagine, reports of such events have generated strong reactions. People kill, willingly suffer death, sacrifice family and fortune, and engage in many other less dramatic activities on the strength of such stories. Though Joseph Smith's First Vision story is at home in the wider context of theophanic accounts, it originated during the era of the printing press, making the First Vision story especially vulnerable to contestation: a narrative that has tended to attract polarized reactions. For its most devoted promoters, the narrative carries the weight of transcendent truth; for its fiercest detractors, the story is a product of a frontier charlatan's cynical chicanery.

At this point, it is important to define a term I will be using in this essay to describe the First Vision story, a term that could set some teeth on edge: “myth.” My use of this term follows scholarly, rather than popular, usage to refer to a story that conveys important moral or symbolic truths. On one level, myths are the stories a culture tells about itself and “Others.” More profoundly, myths are the stories that make a culture by constructing, elaborating, validating, and inculcating ideas of self and Other. Bruce Lincoln sums up this definition of myth as “ideology in narrative form.”2 Since historians and scholars have no objective way to revisit or reconstruct the event itself, it is helpful to think of the myth of the First Vision as being separate from the event of the

Mapping Mormon Issues

APPROACHING THE FIRST VISION SAGA

By Stephen C. Taysom

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First Vision. We have access only to the mythology—to the various constructions and reconstructions of the narrative that emerged, as all myth does, in response to particular events and contexts. This constellation of accounts purporting to narrate the First Vision, I label “saga myths” in order to convey not only the mythological character of the stories, but also to suggest that each account is best understood as part of a larger collective body, or saga, of similar stories. This essay explores how the saga myths of the First Vision and the ongoing debates about their meaning continue to shape various expressions of Mormonism.

Because myths function as the foundation and legitimator of a culture, people invested in that culture will naturally want to somehow place their myths outside the reach of critique. Many ancient cultures accomplished this act by setting their myths in what the religious phenomenologist Mircea Eliade referred to as “in illo tempore,” Latin for “before history began” or “the dawn of the universe.” However, the First Vision myth has its roots in 1820—well after the dawn of the universe—and therefore requires a variant of this method of protection. Gordon B. Hinckley implicitly set the mythology of the First Vision in the in illo tempore category when writing that “in all of recorded religious history there is nothing to compare with it.” Essentially, his words are a taboo against subjecting the First Vision to analysis by comparative disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, and literary analysis. Hinckley is insisting that the story be treated as “myth”—that is, he is insisting that the story transcends any scholarly attempts to investigate it.

Despite this taboo, apologists and critics seem to share a basic assumption that the most important thing about the First Vision is whether or not it actually occurred. Most of their rhetorical volleys are launched from the cannon of historicity, and, accordingly, most published treatments of the subject have attempted to defend or debunk the First Vision as a purported event in history. However, while the apologetic/critic schema has dominated the literature, it is not the only way writers have treated the First Vision. Some writers—academics primarily—have tried to set aside the question of the First Vision’s historicity and have instead focused on the cultural significance of the First Vision’s mythology.

The remainder of this essay contains two related segments. The first segment I’ll call “What Happened?” where we survey the attempts that apologists and critics have made to prove or disprove the event of the First Vision. The second is titled “What Does It Mean?” where we focus on how the mythology of the First Vision has been debated. Nearly all debates surrounding the First Vision have focused on at least one—but usually both—of these interrelated questions.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Almost any LDS Church member in any branch or ward in the world today could tell an inquirer a strikingly similar account of the First Vision. Their narratives would be based on what has become the “official” version of the story set in the spring of 1820. On that day, the story goes, Smith went to a grove of trees on his family’s farm in western New York to pray about an issue that had been troubling him for some time. He wanted to know which church was “right.” Most recitations of the vision would probably mention Smith’s struggle with a demonic force that was dispelled only by the appearance of a “pillar of light.” Eventually, the light resolved itself into two separate beings, which the teller of the story would identify as God the Father and Jesus Christ. In the official version, Jesus does most of the talking, telling Smith that all the churches on earth have become corrupted and are devoid of authority and that Smith should join none of them.

More often than not we do not know precisely what happened in history, but we often know the stories people tell about it.
of the event. And today, readers can access a wide variety of internet resources that catalogue, debate, or harmonize the various versions.\textsuperscript{4}

1832

The earliest known written record of the First Vision story was penned by Smith's own hand in 1832.\textsuperscript{5} This version tells the story of a troubled young man who despairs of “the wickedness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind.” In this account, Smith claims that well before encountering God in the grove, he had concluded that the world “had apostatised from the true and living faith” and that “there was no society or denomination built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament.” Based on his reading of the Bible—although without mentioning any particularly inspiring text—Smith decides to pray to God for guidance and forgiveness. This version of the story climaxes with an encounter with one divine being, identified as Jesus Christ, who tells Smith that his sins are forgiven and then confirms Smith’s earlier suspicions about the corruption of Christianity. The vision abruptly closes, and Smith notes that “none would believe my heavenly vision.”

1835

In November 1835, three years after the first version had been written, a man claiming to be “Joshua the Jewish Minister” arrived in Kirtland, Ohio, seeking an audience with the Mormon prophet. “Joshua” was actually Robert Matthews, a religious charismatic who, like Smith, claimed to be a prophet and had taken the name Matthias during his days as leader of a mysterious sect in New York City. Having been charged with murder, among other crimes, Matthews had fled New York before making his way to Kirtland to meet with Smith. Smith eventually discerned the identity of the “Jewish Minister,” but not before offering him an account of the First Vision.\textsuperscript{6}

Smith said that as a young man—“about 14”—he'd been perplexed by the diversity of religious views that existed in his neighborhood. Based on two specific biblical passages—Matthew 7:7 and James 1:5—he had sought God's guidance. When telling the story to Matthews, Smith added a dramatic detail that he had not included in the 1832 version—an encounter with an invisible, malevolent force immediately preceding his conversation with God. First, he reported, his tongue became swollen, preventing him from praying aloud, and then he heard the sound of footsteps approaching. Hoping to find the source of the footfalls, he turned but saw no one. At precisely that instant, a “pillar of fire” descended, in which a divine being was visible. This being did not speak, but soon another being appeared who told Smith that his sins were forgiven and then “testified that Jesus Christ is the son of God.” Besides the two personages, Smith claimed that he also saw “many angels” on this occasion.

1838–1839

Joseph Smith dictated the most detailed and expository variant of the First Vision story in 1838.\textsuperscript{7} This version eventually became the canonical story included in the Pearl of Great Price and thus is the version most familiar to Latter-day Saints around the world.

Smith’s motive for recounting his story again was essentially defensive. He said he was attempting to counter the false rumors being spread about him and his church by “evil disposed and designing persons.” This account is extremely detailed, particularly in the attention it gives to the religious tensions that permeated Smith's environment—especially the atmosphere in the home he shared with his parents and siblings.

Smith's 1838 account details the “war of words and tumult of opinions” that pervaded the region during
the Second Great Awakening. A new evangelical mainstream, composed primarily of Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, had arisen in the first decades of the nineteenth century, overshadowing the Congregational mainstream that had dominated New England for almost two centuries. The new groups preached an Arminian theology, championing enthusiastic religious expression and, when choosing ministers, often prized charisma above education.

Smith reports that revivals swept through his home region again and again. These revivals were typically non-denominational evangelical affairs led by itinerant ministers. Those “saved” during camp meetings did not have to decide which church to lodge with permanently until after the revival was over and the spirit had had a chance to cool. So local evangelical leaders were often left with the task of convincing those camp meeting converts to join with their particular church.

Several members of Smith’s family, including his mother though not his father, had joined the Presbyterian Church. With a father disinterested in organized religion, and facing a rift between his own preferred denomination (Methodism) and that favored by his mother and siblings, young Joseph Smith felt a keen sense of anxiety and even crisis concerning which denomination to join. Joseph recounts in this version that a specific scriptural text, James 1:5, struck his heart and with unprecedented force and led him to seek God’s will on the matter.

Again, this version tells of Smith’s trek to the grove and, like the 1835 account, mentions an overpowering evil presence that binds his tongue. Smith does not mention spectral footsteps in this 1838 account, but he describes being violently “seized” by “some actual being from the unseen world” who refuses to relinquish him until the appearance of a pillar of light dispels it. The pillar contains two divine figures, one of whom introduces the other as “My Beloved Son” and enjoins Smith to “hear him!” The message Jesus delivers in this version of the story conveys disdain for Christendom, its creeds, said to be an “abomination,” and its “professors,” said to be “corrupt.” Smith is instructed to avoid all extant churches because they have no spiritual authority. Smith recounts that he was also told “many other things” which he was forbidden to write. He concludes by recalling that his eager recitation of these events drew the ire of the local “professors” of religion and incited a wave of “persecution” against him.

1842

The years between 1838 and 1842, when the next extant recitation of the First Vision story was written, were tumultuous for Smith and his followers. Smith spent many months in Missouri’s Liberty Jail. The Saints were forced to abandon settlements in Ohio and Missouri and started a new settlement along the banks of the Mississippi River in western Illinois. The new town, which Smith named Nauvoo, would be the last major settlement that Smith would organize before his murder in June 1844.

In 1842, Smith responded to Chicago newspaper editor John Wentworth’s request for information about the Mormon faith. In most respects, the Wentworth Letter’s version of the First Vision is a faithful abbreviation of the 1838 account.8 The most significant difference is Smith’s claim that, in addition to being told to join no existing sect, he was promised that “the fullness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.”

Accounts of the Vision by Others During Smith’s Lifetime

In addition to the four accounts that Smith himself gave, several other people published their own versions, which Smith never refuted. The most frequently cited of these reports are from apostles Orson Hyde and Orson Pratt, from a non-Mormon journalist who interviewed Smith, and from LDS convert Alexander Neibaur.

Orson Pratt’s version was originally published in Great Britain in 1840 and is, in fact, the first published account of the First Vision.9 It adheres very closely to the one Smith dictated in 1838–1839, which would become the Church’s official version. Although a Pratt biographer argues that the prose in this account is “simple and discursive,” Pratt employs an artistic narration that casts the theophany in deliberately mystical terms.10 For example, he describes Smith as experiencing a “peculiar sensation throughout his whole system,” feeling his mind being “caught away,” and finding himself “enwrapped in a heavenly vision” that caused him to lose contact with the “natural objects with which he was surrounded.”

Two years later, in 1842, Orson Hyde wrote an account in German of foundational events in Mormon history,11 publishing it in Frankfurt. Like Pratt’s, Hyde’s account is largely a retelling of the 1838–1839 version, but with one significant exception: Hyde recounts that before Smith’s vision, Smith had already concluded that “darkness was covering the earth” and that no church was in “possession of the pure and unadulterated truth.” In this detail, Hyde’s book is in line with Smith’s 1832 account.

In 1843, the editor of the Pittsburgh Gazette published an interview with Joseph Smith in which Smith offered a very brief recitation of his experience in the grove.12 Except for omitting several details, including the wrestle with the “unseen being,” the account is faithful to the 1838–1839 version.

Finally, there is an 1844 journal entry by Alexander Neibaur, containing his recollections of a conversation with Smith in May of that year. The first male Jewish convert to Mormonism—he joined in 1838—Neibaur acted as Joseph Smith’s German teacher.13 He records Smith as adding new details—including a more complete description of God’s appearance and clothing.14 According to Neibaur’s account, it was the Father, not the Son, who told Smith that “there is none who doeth good, not one.”
STEPHEN KING BEGINS his novella *The Mist* with a sentence he views as something akin to a “Zen incantation.” It reads, “This is how it happened.” King is correct about the mystical power of that sentence. Like a home built of stones that change color as the angle of the sun moves across its face, that sentence can take on a wide variety of nuances. One can easily tell how a narrator is approaching a story by the way he or she voices that initial sentence. The tone might be pedantic, aggressive, insulting, angry, melancholy, joyful, or perplexed.

“This is how it happened.” Just what does “it” refer to? When one recounts the First Vision saga (meaning the collection of myths that claim to narrate the experience), “it” might mean simply the event itself. Or “it” might mean the restoration of the one true faith after millennia of spiritual darkness, a restoration this event inaugurated. In the hands of another narrator, “it” might refer to the greatest hoax the world has ever known, or the silliest bit of frontier chicanery ever to wander out of a log cabin. For an academic, “it” might refer to the most important socio-religious expression of faith to come out of the turbulent period known as the Second Great Awakening. “It” might be the process of how a dreamer becomes convinced of his own dream to the point that he instantiates it through the thousands of others who agree to dream it with him and who will do so to their graves. Whatever the “it” refers to, we can be certain that the issue is heavily freighted with titanic arguments.

The existence of multiple accounts of the First Vision has provided a battlefield for fierce contestation not just over the particulars of the event, but also over the “authenticity” of Mormonism.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, scores of books and pamphlets have debated the same basic issues with regard to Joseph Smith's prophethood in general and the First Vision's authenticity in particular. The advent of the internet has fueled an increasingly vitriolic debate between critics and apologists. The following is a peek into the corner of the internet dedicated to all things “First Vision.”

A simple Google search for “Joseph Smith's First Vision” yields about 28,000 hits. (In contrast, a search for “Muhammad's vision” brings up just over 1,700 hits.) The first two items that appear are from official LDS sources. The third hit links to a Wikipedia article that is functionally objective and quite comprehensive. The fourth link takes the reader to a page dedicated to the First Vision on a web-
site run by Jeff Lindsay, an amateur Latter-day Saint apologist in Wisconsin, offering defenses against various criticisms of the First Vision. The fifth hit is the first openly critical of the First Vision’s authenticity. Run by the “Institute for Religious Research,” an evangelical Christian effort to deal with “competing truth claims,” the website reproduces an article entitled “New Light on Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” by the late Wesley Walters, a Presbyterian minister and one of the old guard of the modern anti-Mormon movement. The next hit links to the First Vision page on the website of Mormon Research Ministry, another evangelical group working full-time to discredit the LDS Church.

The counterparts to such websites are found in Mormon apologetic pages such as those run by the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR). Though FAIR is not officially associated with the LDS Church, its extensive network of contributors engages in a vigorous defense of traditional Mormon views on subjects such as the historicity of the Book of Mormon and the literal truth of the First Vision. In fact, FAIR’s First Vision web page is perhaps the most comprehensive collection of apologetic work dealing with that subject.

These websites are a cross-section of the various kinds of groups that publish about the First Vision: official sources, amateur Mormon apologists, evangelical anti-Mormons, and more or less “objective” treatments (i.e. encyclopedias).

POSITIVISM AND THE APOLOGETIC/CRITICAL DEBATES

The debate over the First Vision’s authenticity occurs largely in the arena of positivism, which I define as:

• The belief in the objective reality and unity of an externally existing object, idea, or event and

• The ability of human beings to comprehend, re-
construct, or understand said objects, ideas, or events based on agreed-upon methods of critical inquiry.

Positivism claims that the proper application of its methods will lead all persons to the same conclusions. In fact, positivistic investigations imply that they can determine whether or not something actually exists. On the issue of the First Vision’s historicity and the implications of that historicity, both apologists and critics operate on this epistemological plane.

LDS apologists and their (particularly ex-Mormon and evangelical) critics give great weight to the logical condition of the stories themselves. Both sides agree that the most important claim made by the First Vision saga is that some version of the event these sources describe actually happened. If it did, and if the myths can be used to either prove it, or to at least render the events plausible through the deployment of apparently logical defenses, then the entire Mormon worldview is validated. If the myths can be shown to be literally untrue, then, according to the logic of the positivist worldview, the entire Mormon project collapses. Note again that both apologists and critics share this worldview.

CRITICISM AND RESPONSE

WHILE HUNDREDS OF books, pamphlets, audio recordings, videos, and websites are dedicated to attacking the truth claims of Mormonism in general and the historicity of the First Vision in particular, I have chosen as representative one long-standing critical voice: Wesley P. Walters, a Presbyterian pastor who spent decades writing material critical of the LDS Church.

Walters identifies the following basic problems with Smith’s First Vision accounts:

• The story changes with each retelling, and the various versions offer mutually exclusive details.

• There is no evidence of a revival in the Palmyra area in 1820.

• Joseph Smith did not tell anyone about the story until the 1830s.

• Joseph Smith lied about being persecuted by the Methodists for narrating his vision.

Walters contends that all four problems raise “serious questions about the authenticity of Joseph Smith’s First Vision story” and justify “questioning both the person and the truthfulness of the story.”

If Joseph Smith actually had an experience with the divine, Walters argues, he would have narrated that experience and committed it to paper much earlier than 1835, and he would have told many more people about it. Historians on all sides of the debate agree that the First Vision “had little, if any, importance in the 1830s.” No published descriptions emerged during that time, and Mormon missionaries (who may not have been aware of the vision) apparently didn’t tell potential converts about it. To critics, this situation indicates that the story was Smith’s invention: he had not yet mentioned it because he had not yet constructed it.

Those who support Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims offer two main defenses. Historian Richard Bushman has speculated that the sacred nature of the experience might have disinclined Smith to speak of it “too openly” or frequently. Consistent with Bushman’s proposal is the fact that in some accounts, Smith claims that he was commanded to keep some information revealed during the vision secret. This motif of divinely mandated secrecy appears in the scriptures Smith later published, including the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses. That fact helps Smith’s defenders argue that God placed a similar restriction on Smith with regards to the First Vision, thus accounting for the relatively late appearance of the story in the historical record and the infrequency with which he recounted it. Bushman also argues that Joseph Smith was proud and “did not like to appear the fool.” Aware of the risible potential of his story, Smith decided to keep quiet.

A second defensive strategy argues that many Mormons during the 1830s knew of Smith’s experience in the grove and that missionaries actually did use it in their proselytizing efforts. But though oral accounts abounded, they were rarely recorded. Hugh Nibley, Mormonism’s most famous apologist, argues that his own ancestor, the aforementioned Alexander Neibaur, heard a detailed recitation of the First Vision from Smith himself but “seems never once to have referred to the wonderful things the Prophet told him” for the simple reason that it was a “sacred and privileged communication; it was never published to the world and never should be.”

This second defense appears to be a minority view among Mormon apologists, however. Bushman, for example, holds that “most early converts probably never heard of the 1820 vision.” James Allen and John Welch also agree that Joseph Smith “did not relate the account of his First Vision very widely”—something they attribute to the “hostile reactions of clergy and the violent opposition from neighbors” that Smith claimed accompanied his initial recitals of the vision in 1820.

ANOTHER COMMON CRITICISM holds that if the First Vision were an actual event, Joseph Smith’s reports of the experience would have been more uniform. This criticism rests on the idea that if one is crafting a narrative based on an actual event, the narrative’s contours will be shaped and limited primarily by the narrator’s memory of the event itself. But if a narrative is created without a historical referent, the teller will unconsciously allow him- or herself greater freedom to manipulate the story. It is a common maxim that
invented stories tend to get longer and more elaborate through the process of telling and retelling. Biblical scholars apply this maxim as part of the constellation of techniques they use to identify the earliest versions of individual texts—as well as entire books—of scripture. Critics of the First Vision work from a similar premise when they contend that Smith’s First Vision story grew more elaborate as he tried to accommodate new developments in Mormon theology.

Smith’s defenders have responded to these criticisms in a way that suggests they view the criticisms as “alien traditions”—which Edward Shils defines as external philosophical, sociological, theological, or ritual systems. For defenders of any given tradition, simply becoming “aware of the existence of alien traditions” can spark defensive action. An encounter with “alien traditions” can lead to a loss of faith for adherents who find the implicit or explicit critiques the alien traditions offer compelling.

This dynamic can be seen in some Mormons’ reactions to the discovery that there are multiple accounts of the First Vision. Consider, for example, a contributor to POSTMORMON.ORG who uses the name “Troubled Wife”: “I was totally TBM [True Believing Mormon] until I read unnerving and differing accounts of the first vision.”28 Or “Rainfeather” writing on EXMORMONFORUMS.COM: “The first thing which really took me by surprise was the different versions of the First Vision. I’d never even heard a rumor that there was more than one.”29

A tradition confronted by alien traditions may respond to the threat by becoming “more rigid than it had been previously.” Adherents “might also struggle to refute the alien tradition by rational arguments.” Or, alternatively, “the alien tradition may be assimilated by adaptation, with the assertion that implicitly the alien tradition was always contained within the challenged tradition.”30 Matthew B. Brown’s recent A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision, employs all of these strategies.

Of particular interest is the strategy of assimilating the alien traditions. Defenders of the First Vision often argue that all the accounts are describing the same event, each account containing some of the details while the 1838 account contains all (or most) of them. Though one cannot possibly argue that the accounts are uniform, it is possible to argue, as Brown does, that “instead of becoming more elaborate . . . over time just the opposite was true.” He explains that variations in detail are undeniable but that “the core elements of the story remained the same while there were many details that could be included at the discretion of the storyteller.”31

Brown’s defense raises another question, however. Who decides what these “core elements” are, and how? This line of apologetic defense is vulnerable to a charge of begging the question. Apologists want to argue that it is unimportant that some elements of the story have changed because those elements are not core; but apologists’ criterion for determining whether or not an element is core seems to be simply whether or not the element has changed.

A more sure-footed tack, one apologists adopted very early in the debate, is to focus on context. In a 1985 Ensign article, Milton Backman writes that “One can better understand and appreciate the different emphases in these testimonies by examining their individual historical setting.”32 In other words, it is logical to expect that a true story would change shape to fit the parameters of audience, location, time of day, and even the narrator’s mood. This approach neutralizes the charge that Smith provided varying narratives because he was concocting fiction.

Backman returns, however, to the least nuanced and most logically difficult apologetic defense: harmonization. Harmonization has long been a tactic employed by religiously conservative students of the New Testament who seek to solve the “synoptic problem”—the fact that there are three bundles of narratives describing Jesus’s life and actions that often rearrange the order of the events in ways that can be quite jarring for those who regard the Bible as being literally true.

Much like defenders of the First Vision, biblical harmonists argue that the authors of the Four Gospels are telling different parts of the same story. So, for example, if in one gospel Jesus cleanses the temple at the beginning of his ministry and in another gospel cleanses it at the end of his ministry, harmonists claim that Jesus cleansed the temple multiple times. This effort is driven by a theological presupposition that the Bible is not just a book, it is a repository of sacred power—an extension of God himself. As such, it simply cannot be contradictory. If the Bible is to function as God’s authoritative word, it cannot contain what critical scholars insist that it does contain: separate, impressionistic narratives spun out from imperfectly remembered events written—or even outright invented—for purposes that had more to do with the social context in which the narratives were crafted than with the earlier events they claim to describe.

Harmonizing the First Vision accounts seems to play a similar role for some Mormons: it aims to protect the saga from appearing disjointed and ad hoc. This must be done because apologists, like critics, adhere to the idea that a lack of uniformity among accounts usually indicates a lack of “truth.”

The most sophisticated harmonization of the First Vision accounts comes from James B. Allen and John W. Welch in a chapter from their 2005 compilation, Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844. Allen and Welch share the common apologetic premise that “the differences in the accounts may be grossly overemphasized,” that “no single account tells the whole story,” and that “all the details in each of the accounts add significantly to the entire picture.”33 Allen and Welch also insist that no one account is “incompatible with other accounts.”34 Unlike other apologetic harmonizations, however, Allen and Welch are very forthcoming about the way that a priori assumptions constrain the results of their work. “Latter-day Saints,” they write, “believe that Joseph Smith was telling the truth each time he related his experience.” A reader
who works from that belief, Allen and Welch maintain further, will inevitably find a great deal of “collective value and consistency” in the “composite story of Joseph’s sacred experience.”

As an example of the difficulties harmonization can raise, consider Backman’s assertion that even though Smith’s 1832 account mentions only one being, this “does not mean that in 1832 Joseph said that only one personage appeared or in any other way disclaimed the appearance of two personages” (emphasis added). Backman proposes, in other words, that even though Smith actually saw two beings, he chose to refer to only one. This approach certainly harmonizes the 1832 account with the others. The logical difficulty here is in offering compelling grounds for accepting Smith’s account of seeing two beings as “what really happened.” By the principle Backman has adopted for his harmonization, we would need to be prepared to read the canonical account of the First Vision, too, as partial and selective. In other words, we would need to accept the possibility that Smith actually saw beings ranging in number from three to infinity.

EPOCHÉ AND THE ACADEMIC VIEW

Although the apologetic/critical debates have dominated discussions of the First Vision’s authenticity, methods developed in the academic discipline of religious studies offer yet another approach to the historiography of the First Vision saga.

Traditionally, religions have been studied normatively—that is, either by insiders committed to the faith’s claims or by outsiders seeking to critique them. But in the mid-twentieth century, American universities began creating departments of religious studies—academic units designed to study religion as cultural objects created by human beings through the methodologies of history, anthropology, sociology, literary studies, feminist studies, and the like.

In this vein, many scholars of religion employ an approach called epoché, or “bracketing.” The aim is to set aside one’s opinions regarding religions’ distinctive truth claims in order to more fully examine the accessible dimensions of those traditions: to “understand religion without necessarily having to explain it, much less refute or promote it.” Epoché allows for “the devout theologian and the confirmed atheist [and everyone in between] to participate in religious studies, provided they are capable of ‘bracketing’ their personal positions when researching or reporting on their work.” This approach has detractors within the field but does function as the basic model for teaching religious studies in American college classrooms.

Practicing epoché in relation to the different accounts of the First Vision means asking questions about the First Vision’s “meaning,” rather than its historicity—to focus on what the First Vision narratives meant to those who heard them, or what sort of symbolic truths the narratives contain, not on the question of the accounts’ historical veracity.

Although epoché is intended to create a common ground for insiders and outsiders, believers and non-believers, scholars who apply the tools of epoché to the First Vision can still be easily divided into those who believe Joseph Smith actually experienced the divine and those who believe he probably did not. A representative example of the believing group is the late LDS Church Historian Leonard J. Arrington, who apparently applied this principle in his professional scholarship and personal life. He writes that he “was never preoccupied with the question of the historicity of the First Vision—though the evidence is overwhelming that it did occur. . . . I am prepared to accept [it] as historical or metaphorical, as symbolical or as precisely what happened. That [it conveys] religious truth is the essential issue, and of this I have never had any doubt.”

Arrington’s statement is representative of a subset of Mormons who value the First Vision stories primarily for their mythical components—for the moral meaning and ideology encoded within the narratives. For people in this category, the existence of different accounts of the vision is unimportant and perhaps completely irrelevant. Literary theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard argues that many thinkers believe religious myth must be “raised from the ruins to which it has been reduced by rational, demythologizing, and positivistic thought.” Arrington’s acceptance of Smith’s vision, “whether it is literally true or not,” would seem to comport with the goals Lyotard describes.

This mythical view differs substantially from the positivist critique of the First Vision already discussed in that it does not grant the last word to scientific rationality. It protects mythological truth claims by rendering them un-falsifiable. Hence, though Arrington mentions “overwhelming” rational evidence for the First Vision, he immediately suggests that such evidence is irrelevant. Utah State University professor of philosophy Richard Sherlock similarly suggests that those engaging in positivistic apologetics should ask themselves, “Is there any conceivable fact or set of facts that might be discovered about Joseph Smith that would cause one to lose faith in the church? If the answer to that question is yes, then I submit you have placed your faith in hock to the historian, that you are willing to believe the church is true to the extent that you have not found any human evidence to contradict it.”

Regarding the First Vision in particular, Sherlock argues that the canonized, 1838 account of the First Vision is the “one account [that] is true because it bears witness to the faith of the church better than any other.” Note that Sherlock is not saying that the 1838 account is the most accurate description of what happened in the grove. For Sherlock, calling the account “true” is not an assessment of the account’s literal veracity. Sherlock calls the account “true” because it is “better” than the other accounts at witnessing to the Church’s faith. By what criteria this account is “better” than the others, or what exactly Sherlock understands the Church’s faith to be, is not clear.
Jan Shipps, an eminent non-Mormon scholar of religion, wrote a now famous essay in which she carefully lays out all of the objections raised by positivist critics of the First Vision saga and observes that “if the foregoing conceptualization of the events in Joseph Smith’s youth which includes the visions as an integral part of his life is not completely congruent with what really happened, it does nevertheless assist us in understanding his complex personality.” Shipps seems relatively uninterested in what really did or did not happen. Instead she focuses on the story’s potential for further expanding her understanding of Smith’s intellect. Whether Smith saw divine beings in the grove is much less important than the stories Smith later told about that experience.

Hayden White, a theorist of historical narrative, went to great lengths to demonstrate how positivist historians fail to acknowledge the “literary, even mythical, truth” that attaches to historical narrative. White argues that “the dual conviction that truth must conform to the scientific [positivist] model or its commonsensical counterpart has led most analysts to ignore the specifically literary aspect of historical narrative and therewith whatever truth it may convey in figurative terms.” White’s critique echoes the sentiments expressed by scholars who employ epoché to study the First Vision saga from outside the positivist paradigm.

CONCLUSION

Joseph Smith claimed to have seen God, and that claim continues to drive the expansion of a demographically successful religious movement. The grandiosity of Smith’s claim
and the growth of Mormonism will ensure that the First Vision saga will continue to stir debate and scholarly analysis for the foreseeable future. While displaying ambivalence about the existence of multiple versions of the story, the LDS Church demonstrates continuing and absolute allegiance to the First Vision's historicity. The first chapter of the 2007 priesthood and Relief Society course manual deals entirely with the First Vision. Although the chapter contains only material from the canonical 1838 version, a chapter footnote states that “on several occasions the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote or dictated detailed accounts of the First Vision.” The manual emphasizes, however, that the 1838 account printed in the book “is the official scriptural account.”

Some details of the non-canonical narratives have proved irresistible, finding their way into even official Church productions. In the 2005 film, Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration, which was “produced under the direction of the First Presidency as part of the Church’s commemoration of the 200th anniversary of Joseph Smith’s birth,” and (shown in the Church’s Joseph Smith Memorial Building) one can hear the unmistakable sound of twigs snapping under malevolent feet just before evil forces set upon Joseph. Most of those who see this film will likely not recognize those footsteps as homage to the offi-

2. Bruce Lincoln, Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 147. Sounding a note that seems particularly appropriate to the present context, Lincoln also provides a helpful corrective to the modernist view of scholarship as qualitatively superior to particularly appropriate to the present context, Lincoln also provides a helpful corrective to the modernist view of scholarship as qualitatively superior to scholarship by humanists (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 147.
3. Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958, 1996), 32. The phrase is literally translated as “in that time.”
6. This account was dictated by Joseph Smith to his scribe Warren Parrish, who recorded it in Smith’s journal, Jessee, “Accounts,” 7–8.
7. This represents another interrupted attempt to record a history of the Church, which was begun in 1838 and finished in 1839 in the hand of James Mulholland. Jessee, “Accounts,” 12–17.
8. According to Jessee, the Wentworth Letter was published only in the LDS newspaper Times and Seasons, where it appeared on 1 March 1842. Jessee, “Accounts,” 17–18.
12. This version was also later republished in the New York Spectator magazine. Jessee, “Accounts,” 24–25.
15. The first of these, http://lds.org/library/display?4945,104,1-3-4,0,0.html simply provides the text of the 1838 account. The second, http://lds.org/l- dsg/v/index.jsp?viewmode=2345&c2=27&d0=01V VMCM1000000d8b2620aRCRD6t ocal=0&sourceId=33e65481a6b010VgnVCM100000d4b2620a programs, a chapter footnote states that “on several occasions the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote or dictated detailed accounts of the First Vision.” The manual emphasizes, however, that the 1838 account printed in the book “is the official scriptural account.”

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NOTES

2. Bruce Lincoln, Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 147. Sounding a note that seems particularly appropriate to the present context, Lincoln also provides a helpful corrective to the modernist view of scholarship as qualitatively superior to myth when he writes that “scholarship is myth with footnotes” (209).
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If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask God, that giveth to all men liberally, and it shall be given him.

- Epistle of James

first chapter and 5th verse

An early spring morning of 1820 in Palmyra, New York...

Dear Heavenly Father, it’s been suggested that I come to you for the truth.

God, deliver me out of this enemy which has seized upon me.
Joseph Smith, Jr.,
This is my beloved Son. HEAR HIM!

I come only
to inquire which
of the church
sects I should
join, which
one is right
and true?

You shall join none, for they are all
wrong. All their creeds are an ab-
omination in my sight, and are
corrupt.

They draw near to me with
their lips, but their hearts
are far from me.

They teach for doctrines
the commandments of men,
having a form of godliness,
but they deny the power
thereof.

Three years later...

Please forgive me of all of
my sins, and please, please,
please appear to me, Lord, and
let me know if my
standing with you
whether it is
good or bad.

And with that revelation God
and his son left Joseph.
Joseph Smith Jr.,
I am a messenger sent
from the Presence of God,
my name is Moroni.

God has work for you.
your name should be had
for good and evil among all
nations, kindreds and tongues.

There is a book deposited, written upon gold
plates, giving an account of the former
inhabitants of this continent, and the source
from whence they sprang.

The everlasting gospel is contained in
it, as delivered by the Savior to the
ancient inhabitants.

Also you shall find two stones in
silver bows - and these stones, fastened
to a breastplate, constitute what is
called the Urim and Thummim - deposited
with the plates; and the possession and use
of these stones were what constitute
"seers" in ancient times.

God has prepared them
for the purpose of translating
this book.

For behold,
the day cometh
that shall burn as an oven.
And all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly shall burn as stubble; for they that come shall burn them, saith the Lord of Hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming.

When you get the plates of which I have spoken, you should not show them to any person, neither the breastplate with the urim and thummim only those whom I shall command you to show.

If you do, you shall be destroyed.

It was at this time that a vision was put into Joseph's mind, and he could see where the plates were deposited.
The hill Cumorah in upstate NEW YORK.

Two Years later...

Yea, I make a record in the Language of my Father which consists of the learnings of the Jews and the Language of the Egyptians...

Joseph's friend Martin Harris acted as a scribe while Joseph translated the plates-

which were written in what Joseph called "Reformed Egyptian." "Only Joseph could read it. And only replacing the "Seer Stone" in his hat and reading the sentences that would form inside.

Behold! by COWIE

do pass. That I...

Martin's wife didn't approve of her husband's collaboration with Joseph. Martin asked Joseph if he could take the first 116 pages to show to his wife to convince her of Joseph's authenticity. Joseph praved, and agreed to allow it.

Soon after showing the manuscript to his wife, it vanished from his hand.

For this setback, Joseph used different scribes from then on, mainly Oliver Cowdery.

Although Martin continued to financially support Smith.

By mortgaging his farm Joseph guaranteed him in writing that he would share in any profits made from the book.

In the spring, Harris walked the streets of Palmer's trying to sell copies of The Book of Mormon to the townspeople.

The Book will not sell for nobody wants them.

Shortly after he reported to Joseph:

when the translation of the plates through the stones was complete Harris paid for its publication in 1830.

End Of Part One
I SERVED MY MISSION IN LATIN AMERICA IN THE 1970s, during Spencer W. Kimball’s “Lengthen Your Stride” campaign. In a June 1975 talk to new mission presidents he said:

Brethren, the spirit of this work is urgency, and we must imbue . . . our Saints with the spirit of now. NOW. We are not justified in waiting for the natural, slow process of bringing people into the Church. We must move rather hastily.

That hastiness led to pressure on missionaries to baptize more people. Kimball assigned numerical baptism goals that were multiples of current baptismal rates. In our region, we were instructed to baptize six people per companionship per month.

This was quite a challenge, considering that I passed my first three months in the mission field with just one baptism. But my companion and I were convinced of President Kimball's prophetic call. We dutifully pasted a large “6” on our pension wall and began praying and working to achieve that goal.

And we did. In a short period of time, my mission became one of the top baptizing in the world. The number six occupied all my thoughts and desires. As the end of a month approached, my stomach would churn, not only from the intestinal bugs I'd picked up, but from the overwhelming pressure to achieve this goal—a commandment we had been given by God's prophet. We dared not fail.

And we did not. My companionships achieved the goal every month, and the rewards followed: leadership callings, celebratory dinners, proud parents, and, most important, the unmatched joy of saving souls. Heady stuff.

I became known as a “closer.” I had the ability to meet with investigators, ascertain their objections to baptism, overcome them, and get them in the water. I rarely served in an area longer than three months. Once I had exhausted the current investigator list, I would be moved to another city, where I would apply my closing skills again. As a result, I rose quickly through the cursus honorum to zone leader. My success was inarguable—the numbers proved it. I had the respect of the other missionaries, my mission president, and, presumably, the Lord.

But it wasn't all about numbers: I tried to baptize people who were genuinely prepared. We were encouraged to baptize complete families, but Latin men are notorious philanderers, and we soon learned the double meaning of the word compromiso. It refers not only to an event one must attend, but also denotes marital infidelity. Thus, many fathers were unworthy of baptism, which left mothers and children as the only available candidates for Church membership.

But mostly, missionaries baptized children. I tried to resist this trend, but the fact that other companionships had no compunction about baptizing children as young as eight—with no parent or sibling to accompany them—made my resolve seem . . . unproductive.

These were not the “baseball baptisms” of England or the “soccer baptisms” of Brazil. Nevertheless, young American
men were an attraction to children—they flocked after us. We were an anomaly in the slums where we worked: healthy, educated, rich—a natural source of interest to sickly, uneducated, impoverished children who had few decent male role models. We thought we were merely sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. But after I came home, I began to reflect upon the unintended proselyting we had also done.

I had seen hundreds of people join the Church, the vast majority of whom I was and still am proud to have been a part of their conversions. But I also baptized people who were not really prepared. Oh, they knew the answers to the baptismal questions—we saw to that. They kept the Word of Wisdom (a few days was considered sufficient) and had promised to pay tithing. But I knew the chances of their remaining steadfast in the Kingdom were small. I assuaged my misgivings with the "free agency" argument: they knew what they were getting into.

What I did not comprehend then was that these people joined the Church for a myriad of reasons, only one of which was their belief that it was true. They also joined to please the missionaries; to become a part of an organization that promised American ideals; to become like us: rich, successful, happy, and special. No wonder we baptized so many people—the combination of the plan of salvation and the American success ethic is a potent enticement.

During my mission exit interview, I expressed concerns about the quality of the baptisms we had just discussed in zone leader meeting, where missionaries bragged about their huge numbers, showing no remorse about baptizing children without even a sibling accompanying them, much less a parent. The mission president asked me about my first baptism. I knew little about her other than her name; at that time I had only been in the country a couple of weeks and understood little Spanish. But I knew she was a soltera—a young single woman.

"Tell me about one of your recent baptisms," he asked.

"Just a few days ago," I said proudly, "we baptized a family: mom, dad, and a bunch of kids. We baptized Dad first, gave him the priesthood, then he baptized his wife and kids."

The mission president smiled. "Every missionary must learn first that he can baptize. Then he learns how to baptize quality."

Caught up as I was in salesmanship techniques, his answer sufficed. I wanted to believe his logic because I worshiped him. He was everything I wanted to be: educated, successful, and charismatic. He had a beautiful wife and great kids. My concerns were, in his corporate lingo, about "method" and not "structure."

But it was not long before his glib answer fell apart. I had done as he had taught me, so why did I feel ashamed? My companions felt the same way. At BYU after my mission, I ran into many of them. To a man, they regretted the pressure tactics and focus on numbers we had used. To a man.

As a result of this guilt, I generally avoided mission reunions. Fifteen years after my mission, I went to one and was stunned that the mission president had not changed at all—he was still preaching the use of social pressure to "lace" investigators into the Church and manipulations designed to put people into an emotional state where they would feel the Spirit. Surely, he seemed to argue, if God wanted my investigator in the Church, then I should do everything short of lying to them to achieve his will. Right?

Wrong again. I don't know many things for sure, but one thing I've learned is that God is patient. His timeline is not my timeline; so pressuring others to conform to my timeline is against his will, a transparent attempt to vitiate their free agency.

In short, combining the unequalled power of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the seductiveness of the American success gospel with these simple souls' lack of education and poverty, gives you a powerful product and an ignorant target—they will buy what you are selling.

But many had buyer's remorse. A missionary's worst fear is that their baptism will go inactive after we've gone. We had all seen it: most people lasted just a few weeks in the Church after "their" elder was transferred, notwithstanding our retention techniques. But it was relatively easy to put these concerns out of our minds. After all, we had been moved to a new town with a new companion and new baptismal goals. No one in our new area knew what we'd just done. Except us.

All these reasons—the age and family status of our baptisms, our cultural imperialism, manipulative pressure tactics, and the widespread conversion to missionaries and not the Church—led me to do what many missionaries do once I got home: I quietly put my mission behind me. Guilt is a powerful incentive to leave the past in the rearview mirror.

They remind me
Son, have you so soon forgotten?
Often as not it's rotten inside
And the mask soon slips away

Strange taste of a tropical fruit
Romantic language of the Portuguese
Melody on a wooden flute
Samba floating in the summer breeze

IT'S BEEN MORE than thirty years," he said, "and you haven't been back?"

"No," I said and let the silence trail out.

"You gotta go," he enthused. "It will change your life." I sighed. Elder Rawlins (not his real name) was a bishop, a corporate leader, and a committed family man. He'd been back to the mission field for the dedication of the temple.

"I'm not so sure," I said, but I was a little curious. Just because everyone else's baptisms went inactive didn't mean mine did. After all, they were special. They had been prepared. They had truly believed when they had been baptized.
“I am,” said Rawlins. “Come on. Let’s go see what the Lord has done.”

I was curious. I had never stopped thinking about the people I baptized. But I was afraid that they had been converted to me and not the Church, and that when I left, so did they. That would make my two years a pointless endeavor. I didn’t want to face that.

In the end, personal issues prevented Elder Rawlins from going, so I went alone. I had been invited on a film shoot to act as translator, and my mission field was on the way home. A week there should be enough to find out what had happened since I’d been there thirty-four years ago.

I ARRIVED IN mid-afternoon and was met by a young man I’d baptized (well, he had been young then). He and his family were the most golden investigators Elder Rawlins and I had ever taught. They were (almost) a complete family: a mother, three children, and grandma. Dad was working in the States. The young man I remembered had grown into a charismatic Church leader. He’d flown up the ladder of leadership callings and had recently completed three years as a mission president in a nearby country. He enveloped me in a fuerte abrazo, tears in his eyes. “I am so proud to have you back in our country,” he said. “Welcome home.”

I looked around. The airport was new: all glass and chrome. We walked across a polished terrazzo floor under stylish fluorescent lights. The parking lot was full of late model cars. The only thing I recognized was the humidity—it was, as it always had been, astonishing. My shirt was soaked before the car’s air conditioning got up to speed.

My friend (we’ll call him Carlos) smiled. “It’s not too hot today.”

Carlos was successful. The minivan he drove (he had a large family—six children—that magic number again) was new, clean, and had a CD player. He wore, even on a Saturday, a suit with a white shirt and tie. I wore a Hawaiian shirt and cargo shorts. I felt like a teenager whose dad was driving him home after the dance.

We took the freeway. I goggled. The last time I was here, there were no freeways or shopping malls or skyscrapers. The city was fairly clean, though crowded as ever. Billboards promoted McDonalds, Burger King, cell phones, Hollywood films, sexy fe-

I had never stopped thinking about the people I baptized. But I was afraid that they had been converted to me and not the Church, and that when I left, so did they. That would make my two years a pointless endeavor. I didn’t want to face that.
male attire, and cars.

When I was here last, there was one American-style fast food joint in the entire country: a palid knock-off called “Burger Quin.” We missionaries went there once and, severely disappointed, never returned. So we ate what the people ate: fried plátano, pineapple, spongy white cheese, rice, jerky-like beef, and potatoes. And we gained weight.

We went to Carlos’s house where I met his family. Five kids were still at home—the oldest was at BYU-Idaho—and they were remarkable. No sullenness. No snarkiness between siblings and no disgust at their parents or other adults. They were a poster family for LDS values. And it was not an act: there was love in that household. Carlos and his family had actually done it—they were living the gospel and reaping the rewards. The feeling in his home was better than in the home I’d grown up in, a home with five generations of LDS history, two returned-missionary parents, and an all-enveloping church culture informing it. They had done it in just one generation and in an environment so hostile to LDS values that their success was a true miracle.

A party was awaiting me at the mission president’s home. He had been an elder in one of my zones. He was still a quiet, unassuming man. He had married a sister from the mission, and here they were, back again, presiding.

When we entered the high-rise apartment, I reacquainted myself with a dozen men I had baptized. My companion and I had called them the “Sons of Helaman” and outfitted them with white shirts, ties, and teaching binders. They had brought scores of their friends to us to be baptized. I often received credit for baptizing people I had only met at the baptismal interview—because of the efforts of those young men, now graying and paunchy, surrounding me.

Now they were the leaders of the Church. They had all been bishops and stake leaders. One was a patriarch. Several taught Institute. One had been a regional representative. One was the temple recorder. Carlos had been a mission president.

We hugged amid tears of joy. Like me, they were older, but their lives had been hard—many looked tired and worn. They had given their youth to the building up of the Kingdom, and their faces showed the strain; yet they also glowed with happiness and pride.

We ate a traditional dinner. I sampled dishes I had not tasted in decades. I met their wives and heard stories about their children and grandchildren. We took photos, and I tasted in decades. I met their wives and heard stories about their children and grandchildren. We took photos, and I hummed.

THE NEXT MORNING, Carlos took me to church. During my mission, I never attended services in a real chapel—all we had were rented buildings. Carlos had proudly told me as he loaned me a suit, that in this city alone, there were over thirty chapels. I shook my head in wonder. Thirty chapels meant a dozen stakes, probably.

“And the temple,” he said proudly.

We entered the chapel and sat. Carlos’s family took up an entire row, just as mine had when I was a kid. I stood out like a sore thumb; the only gringo present. Everyone smiled, knowing intuitively that I was Carlos’s missionary.

I looked around. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that the tiny seeds we had sown would result in such a harvest. The bishopric sat on the stand. Priests occupied the sacrament table. A dozen deacons faced them on the first pew. All Latinos, all in white shirts and ties. The organist played the prelude on a real piano. The women wore modest dresses, as did their daughters. The air conditioning hummed.

Carlos had lent me a set of his scriptures. I opened them. A quadruple combination in Spanish—something I had not seen before.

It had been ten years since I’d attended church, twenty since I was really active. My own scriptures sat on a shelf at home between Mormon Origins and Journey of Souls. Apparently, I had come five thousand miles to be reactivated. I opened my mind and heart. Be here now, I whispered to myself. Let whatever wants in, in.

It was fast Sunday, and Carlos’s children bore their testimonies, each one thanking me for sharing the gospel with their father. Carlos’s wife did the same. Even his inactive brother bore testimony, looking at me directly and affirming that he knew the Church was true.

At that moment, I received a testimony: the gospel had indeed changed these people’s lives. The country was still poor, but those who had taken the Church seriously had apparently been blessed with prosperity. They were healthy. Their families were intact. They loved each other. And they loved me for being a conduit for all these wonderful things.

Throughout the meeting, I fought back tears. I took the sacrament, for though I was no longer an active Mormon, I was still a sincere follower of Jesus of Nazareth and was witnessing his most profound miracle: the changing of hearts.

Spiritually exhausted, we returned home for lunch and a family home evening with Carlos’s bunch. The kids relished the family time, and though Carlos tended to pontificate when he spoke, his self-deprecating humor softened the edge of his no-nonsense pronouncements. I admired him.

It’s all right; you can stay asleep
You can close your eyes
You can trust the people of paradise
To call your keeper and to tender your goodbyes

Oh, what a night!
Wonderful one in a million night
Frozen fire, Brazilian stars
Oh, holy Southern Cross

THAT EVENING, CARLOS and I attended a noche de hogar (family night) at the home of another family Elder Rawlins and I had baptized. The event was arranged by Amelia, who was just a toddler when her par-
ents and siblings joined the Church. In the decades since, they had been in and out of activity, but everyone still had fond memories of us, and Amelia had been instrumental in getting several of her siblings and cousins back into Church activity.

As always, gifts were given. I came unprepared, having spent the previous three weeks camping and hiking, but no one seemed concerned by my lack of reciprocity. It was enough, they said, that I was there with them.

We sang songs and ate and drank warm soda. The air conditioning struggled with so many people in the small cement house. Amelia's aunt, whom we also baptized, just sat on the couch and cried with joy. I was taken aback to be the object of so much love. But I knew it was not me they were thanking—it was God.

A FEW DAYS later, one of our Sons of Helaman took me to see the temple, which perched on a hill overlooking the city. It was the most beautiful building I had seen in the country. The spotless exterior, the perfectly manicured grounds, the beautiful lights—all seemed out of place here, especially given the fact that we had passed through a slum to get to it.

My guide proudly told me how the temple came to be in this location. It seems another site in another city had originally been chosen, but for various reasons, the temple had not been built there. When an apostle came down a few years ago, he did not like the location and began searching for another. He flew here alone and asked a taxi driver to show him around. They wound up on this empty hillside. The apostle got out of the taxi, went out onto the garbage-strewn slope, knelt, and prayed. He got an answer: the temple was to be built here.

The story continued: disgusted at the litter in the city, the apostle called up the city engineer, whom he apparently knew from college in the States, and demanded that before the Church built a temple here, they had to clean up the streets.

“That’s why the city is so clean now,” said my friend proudly.

I soon discovered that even though they lived thousands of miles from Salt Lake City, my friends here knew Church leaders quite well. Indeed, Carlos had apostles' phone numbers programmed into his cell phone.

It made sense. These were the frontline troops and when the generals came, they naturally spent time with the local commanders. It struck me as interesting that these men shared close friendships with the same Church leaders most Utahans would not approach at a local supermarket out of respect and awe.

That meant they would also know these leaders as men. By this time, they must have separated personalities from doctrine. Perhaps, instead of deflecting questions about my Church involvement, I could be honest about my spiritual journey. After all, it was honesty that brought me here three decades ago to share what I believed then.

This visit should be no different. I had what I considered “further light and knowledge” to share with them, though I was still unsure about their readiness.

Later on, take me way downtown in a tin can
I can’t come down from the bandstand
I’m never thrown for such a loss when they say:
Quando a nossa mãe acordar, andaremos ao sol
Quando a nossa mãe acordar, cantará pelo sertão
Quando a nossa mãe acordar, todos os fihos saberão
Todos os fihos saberão e regozijarão

CARLOS TOOK ME to his office at the Institute of Religion, an adjunct to a stake center building. Prior to his stint as a mission president, he had been in charge of the Institute program in the country. Now he was back, teaching classes and, I gathered, still drawing a paycheck from the Church—he even had a company car.

As time went by and I became reacquainted with more and more people I had known, a pattern started to materialize. Almost all of the Church leaders also worked in some capacity for the Church. Many were paid to run the temple.

It seems having a temple in your city is not just a spiritual blessing.

ONE OF THE main reasons I wanted to come back was to visit a small hamlet I helped open for the work. Nestled in the coastal mountains amidst sprawling coffee plantations and dense tropical forests, the town I remembered was a jumble of decrepit plaster and cane buildings, dirt streets, intermittent electricity, and undrinkable water. My companion and I lived in a tiny room at the rear of the rented building we used as a chapel. We bathed in rainwater collected off the corrugated tin roof. During our time together, we baptized just one woman, a school teacher.

I set out on a road trip with two friends, eager to see the changes. The forest still pressed in on the asphalt road, but the road itself was in good condition, filled with newer cars. The cramped, wooden buses had been replaced by immense, modern buses with high-backed seats and air conditioning.

The town itself now overflowed its natural bowl. Houses filled the surrounding hillsides. Streets were paved. There were two LDS chapels. I had my picture taken in front of one, grateful that the warm drizzle kept my tears from showing.

We tried to find the old rented chapel, but nothing looked familiar. The only recognizable structures were the yellow cathedral fronting the plaza and an old iron cupola in the park. Everything else had changed.

Except the campesinos—the country people. They looked the same. These poor workers lived out in the countryside and only came to town for purchases. Their clothing was just as old and tattered as I remembered, and they stood in sharp contrast to the stylish town-dwellers. Unlike the country I once knew, when there was basically one class of
people—the poor—now there were two: the poor and the indigent.

Something else had not changed. The ubiquitous military still manned the provincial borders, checking papers and looking sullen, though their vehicles and guns were new. The country had democratized after I left the mission, but had recently slipped back into social democracy with a president who enjoyed punishing the rich—the very people who employed the poor in the plantations surrounding this town. I also saw more glass shards topping compound walls than I remembered. Every building seemed to have bars on the windows.

I saw a child on a door stoop, watching us pass, huge eyes in a brown face, his baby teeth black with rot. I met his baleful gaze until we turned the corner and he disappeared. He still haunts me as I write this.

We traveled down a coastal highway along white sandy playas with phenomenal surf. We looked for the beach where I had once stood in the water, my slacks rolled up to my knees, gazing longingly at the perfect left break before me, without a surfboard.

“Don’t do it, Elder,” my companion had said, laughing.

“I had no idea how committed I was until this moment,” I said as I returned to shore. “This is killing me. Let’s go.”

Now, traveling along those same beaches, I saw hotels, beach umbrellas, and vendors pedaling giant tricycles of wares on the hard sand. Same sun, same sand, same water, but now filled with tourists. Gringos lounged in cafés. Others carried surfboards toward pristine beaches.

After dark, we entered a poor village where a parade was in progress, celebrating the area’s patron saint. At the ratty central park, dignitaries sat stiffly on a raised wooden dais. Children in costumes paraded in front of their parents. We watched as a tuneless band marched by, followed by the boys’ drum corps—a cacophony of discordant sound.

But these were campesinos too, and their poverty belied their smiles. I started out photographing the children, but soon took to snapping shots of their mothers and fathers, tired people who were grateful for brief respite from their difficult lives. The men’s pants were patched, the women’s blouses stained. Only the children felt no lack. Tonight, with face paint and sateen costumes, they were rich.

It had been ten years since I’d attended church, twenty since I was really active. Apparently, I had come five thousand miles to be reactivated. I opened my mind and heart. Be here now, I whispered to myself. Let whatever wants in, in.
We arrived at the country's poshest beach resort, a town made up almost entirely of high-rise condos overlooking sandy beaches. We sat under an umbrella sipping sodas and munching coconut shards. And after thirty-four years of suspense, I swam in an ocean as warm as a bathtub. I floated on my back, looking up at the clouds that always gathered in the late morning, promising a muggy afternoon. But at this moment, everything was perfect.

CARLOS ASKED ME to speak to the students at the Institute of Religion. A large group gathered to listen to me discuss education. I was, after all, the recipient of more than my fair share of higher learning. This was my opportunity to warn them of the trap.

I spoke of finding one’s passion in life to children whose parents had never even considered such a thing. Historically, life was hard here—how could it also be fulfilling? But how quickly things change. Prosperity yields leisure; leisure yields self-examination; self-examination yields doubt; doubt yields a yearning for answers. In one short generation, their questions had gone from, “Will I have dinner?” to “Will I be happy?” And what a can of worms that question opens.

I expected at least a few questions about the collision of the Church and modern life, but got none. There was no evidence that any of them questioned the answers they were receiving from their lesson manuals.

As we drove home afterward, I asked Carlos if the Mark Hofman debacle was common knowledge here. He shook his head. How about the Lamanite DNA controversy? No. The Hofman debacle was common knowledge here. He shook his head. How about the Lamanite DNA controversy? No. Church history issues? Nothing. “What about Church influence on politics?”

He looked at me, perplexed. “What influence?”

Caught in the rays of the rising sun  
On the run from the soldier’s gun  
Shouting out loud from the angry crowd  
The mild, the wild and the hungry child

THE MASK BEGAN to slip. Certainly, Church members who adopted traditional “gringo” qualities such as arriving on time, doing a full day’s work, personal honesty, and respect for the law—all imports that had piggybacked on the gospel message we taught—excelled in a culture of sloth and dishonesty.

If they did not work for the Church, the LDS adults I met were invariably professionals, stand-outs in their personal and public lives. But none engaged in politics, a calling that in American culture often follows financial security. Generally, once you have enough to eat, you then look around to see if everyone else has food.

My friends had spent their lives sacrificing for the Church. They had also spent their lives seeking financial security. But in a country with such startling divisions between the haves and the have-nots, where governmental corruption cried out for courageous, honest public servants, none of these capable people had answered the call.

Several flatly rejected the idea, saying the system was impossibly corrupt; they were better off just caring for those they loved. In other words, they had become like most Americans: politics was a job someone else would do.

But their country was not America, a nation basically on auto-pilot because of our core values. In the U.S., when we hear about someone finding and returning a wallet, complete with cash, to the owner, we yawn. But my Latino friends scoffed. “Never happens,” said one. “Who can afford a wallet?” laughed another.

I sighed. We Americans can afford to be lazy; our system is not yet teetering on the brink of moral collapse. But their nascent democracy is just emerging from the jungle of totalitarianism and could be reclaimed unless brave people give as much energy to it as our forefathers did to ours. But these people were focusing on their families. Oh, and moving to the United States whenever possible—preferably Utah.

I asked about the ubiquitous poverty. Wasn’t it depressing to see it everywhere? Wasn’t it sad that having broken glass atop their walls and bars on their windows was the norm?

Everyone shrugged. They are fond of quoting Jesus: “The poor you shall always have with you” (Matthew 26:11). When I said that was a comment specific to an individual wishing to do a kindness to Jesus and not a ratification of poverty, the point was lost on them.

“I am poor,” said one man. “Compared to you.”

When everyone is poor, no one is rich, so no one feels obligated to help another.

This tentative discussion led us to talking about our spiritual journeys. I still held back, but they talked openly about their experiences with the Church. It was eye-opening.

It seemed everyone had either been inactive for a period of years or had been excommunicated and later re-baptized. Of course, everyone I saw on my visit was currently active, but I was told that it was not uncommon for people to come and go in the Church with regularity. Active members did not judge those who were currently outside the Church, for they themselves had been there. Even my friend Carlos, the former mission president, confided that he had been inactive for five years after his mission. My jaw dropped. “Why?” I asked, expecting his issues with the Church to be doctrinal, like mine were.

“I was alone,” he said. “I was depressed. But then I met my wife and got back on track.”

Carlos’s issues with the Church had nothing to do with the gospel; like many formerly inactive Mormons, he believed the doctrine but at that time was simply unwilling or unable to live it. Its truthfulness was never in question, as it has been for me for decades.

I opted for silence. The time was still not right for me to share my experiences.
Were they still seeking greater light and truth? Of course. No one can be active in the Church without realizing the imperative of self-improvement. Were they on the right path? Of course they were—they were on the exact path God had designed for them, precisely where they were supposed to be; and they would remain on that path until the time was right for change.

The mission president, also a gringo, said, “So they don’t rot in a jail down here for the rest of their lives!” They parted ways. Juan went to the hospital and advanced the girl’s father money so she could be treated. For a few days, the father balked at signing the release, and the Church dutifully paid for her treatments. But when he finally signed the document, all Church payments stopped. As far as Juan knew, no one from the Church had ever followed up on her condition. The elders were never held accountable for their actions.


“Kind of,” said Juan. “I see her around. She’s really messed up. That’s why I left the Church. I saw what was really in thepredictable sort.

Reading my mind, Juan stiffened. “I have never been unfaithful. To anyone.” By that, I understood that he included the Lord in that assertion.

“Go on,” I said.

Juan then told me one of the most disheartening stories I have ever heard. While serving as a regional representative, he was awakened late one night by a phone call from Salt Lake. He was to get over to the mission home immediately. When he arrived, he found the mission president and two gringo elders in a panic. Shortly before, the elders, driving the mission van, had accidently run over a young girl they had not seen in the darkness, nearly killing her. But instead of helping her, they had fled the scene of the accident on foot. It was only a matter of time before the police would arrive at the mission home to arrest them.

On the phone again with Salt Lake, Juan asked what to do. He was instructed to go to the hospital where the girl had been taken. He was to tell the girl’s father that the Church would take care of all her medical bills if he would sign a legal release exonerating the Church and the elders from liability.

Juan hung up the phone and asked the mission president to accompany him to the hospital. The president declined, saying he was taking the elders to the airport. “Why?” asked Juan.

Her younger son, Juan, now in his fifties, had served in many Church positions, ending up as a regional representative, after which—he told me without a trace of embarrassment—he had gone inactive for fifteen years. He had only recently returned to the Church with his second wife and two young children. He didn’t disclose much about his first marriage, and I imagined his problems had been of the unpredictable sort.

WE MET ANOTHER old friend. Way back when, the elders had lived with his family. His mother was the kindest landlady I ever had. We called her “Mamita,” and coming home after a long day of proselyting was like . . . coming home. She treated us like sons, dispensing appropriate portions of support and castigation.

Their path was on the right track. They saw God’s light and truth, and they honored that light and truth. But God’s path was also a hard path, and their problems were predictable.

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hearts of the leaders. I didn't go back for fifteen years.”

He told me his marriage broke up after this experience, and many people believed that was why he had left. “But I never cheated on her,” he said flatly. “I left because of what I’d seen.”

“But why return, then?”

“Because I got married again and my new wife, who was not a Mormon, wanted to baptize our child in the Catholic Church. I couldn’t do that, so I started going back to our church.”

Leaving the Church because of the weaknesses of its leaders was something I’d been inoculated against as a child. Of course men made mistakes. Moses’ pride prevented him from entering Canaan. Peter denied Jesus. Oliver Cowdery betrayed Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith was unfaithful to Emma. What’s new?

When I asked Juan about the Church itself, he affirmed that it was true.

Later, I asked Carlos about Juan’s story, hoping he could verify it. “It’s true,” he said. “But everyone thought he got kicked out of the Church because of a compromiso. Only a few of us knew the truth.”

“Did his experience call your own beliefs into question?” I asked.

Carlos shook his head. “The Church is true. The leaders, sometimes, are not.”

This opened the door to a deeper discussion I had wanted to have with Carlos. I respected his intelligence and wanted to share my spiritual journey with him. When we were alone for a couple of hours, I opened up. “I never came back to visit because I was ashamed,” I said.

“Ashamed? Why?”

“Because of the way we baptized. The pressure and manipulation. The numbers game. That’s also why I didn’t come to visit you while you were a mission president. My mission president was the MTC president in the same city where you were serving. It was inevitable that we would meet, and I knew I’d speak my mind. Or worse.” I paused. “I was angry at him because he should have known better. We were kids; he was an adult. He pressured us for numbers because his superiors pressured him, and back then he was running for general authority. After all, his best friend was a Seventy—why not him?”

“He is also ashamed,” said Carlos. I looked up, surprised. Carlos continued. “Once we were with him, and someone reported a positive thing about his time as mission president. His wife said, ‘See? Something good did come out of our time there!’” Carlos looked at me. “If you talk to him, I think he will admit his mistakes. I know he feels bad about what he did.”

I’ll tell you
It's more than a dream in Rio
I was there on the very day
And my heart came back alive

A FRIEND TOOK me to the country’s proudest recent accomplishment, a new bayside embarcadero with beautiful shops, restaurants, and sculpture that extended several kilometers along the once filthy and dangerous portside docks. It was now clean and safe, becoming a popular evening stroll for locals and visitors alike.

At the eastern end of the malecon rose a hill, atop which stood an old lighthouse. Several hundred numbered steps wound up the steep hillside, crowded on either side by brightly painted jumbles of homes, shops, and restaurants.

We scaled the steps, enjoying the pretty facades. I knew, however, that just behind those colorful walls lived people barely scratching out an existence. But they kept their doors closed so as not to scare the tourists away.

Standing on the lighthouse summit, we had a spectacular view of the city, a city I now recognized only by its surrounding hills. The downtown boasted many glass and steel skyscrapers. City lights sparkled in the humid dusk. The streets were cleaner, thanks to an LDS apostle.

I looked north, toward an area we called Las Afueras—the Outlands—back then an endless, flat barrio of mud streets and cane shacks where the missionaries baptized thousands.

I remember walking through a ghetto like it in another town with my senior companion. He was close to going home; I was still full of naive enthusiasm. As I surveyed the heartbreaking poverty, I was filled with righteous indignation. “Elder,” I said, noting a man snoring just outside his hovel, the stench of cheap gin emanating from him like heat from a fire, “these people really need the gospel.”

My companion nodded. “Yes. But first they need a revolution.”

ON MY FINAL day in the country, Juan came over to Carlos’s home to pick me up for a service project. I agreed, happy to be of help. But Juan was reluctant to tell me what kind of service we were projecting.

He had no car, so we began walking. Gaping potholes in the sidewalks and streets were receptacles for garbage, a kind of natural accretion that eventually minimized the damage to axle or ankle. Smoking diesel busses passed, jammed with people. The sky was a flat panel of gray humidity.

We approached a good-sized hill that was cluttered with tin-roofed cane shacks. I spent most of my two years in neighborhoods just like this. We were greeted by the sounds of chickens crowing and dogs barking. The smells of fried banana and human sweat activated old memories, good and bad, filling me with nostalgia and regret.

We stopped before a wreck of a home. It looked like it would slide off the steep hill at any moment. Juan introduced me to the owner, a woman, probably in her mid-thirties, but looking closer to my age. She had a couple of children. As usual, there was no husband.

“We are here to tear down a house,” said Juan, leading me
to the backyard, where we saw the remnants of another one-
room shack that truly had one foot in the demolition pile.
The roof and three walls were missing, and there was a great
hole in the sloping floor. The floorboards were black with
decades of traffic and cooking grease. With one hammer and
an old crowbar, we were supposed to take it apart.

As we began prying boards loose, sci-fi-sized cock-
roaches scurried back into the shadows. Clusters of im-
mensely snails nestled in the cool wet earth around the sup-
port pillars. The woman had us gather up the snails—she
had a medicinal use for them. I did not inquire as to what
that use might be.

Juan and I labored all morning. The owner brought us
lemonade, but beyond that she and her teenage son merely
watched us work. The many rusty nails made me glad for at
least one of my travel inoculations. I had left the world of
hand sanitizers and had entered a hot zone of dangerous mi-
crobes. I had no gloves.

As the woodpile grew, I asked the woman what she was
going to do with it. She said they would drag it down to an
open area at the base of the hill and burn it. Who would do
that? I asked. Some neighborhood boys, she replied. I said
I'd give her some money to buy the boys Cokes for their ef-
forts.

By mid-afternoon we were finished. The woman was rude
to me as we left, and I was perplexed. We had served her all
day; why was she acting like this?

On our way back to Carlos's home, we stopped in the
shade of a small park. It was incredibly humid, and we were
both soaked with sweat. Juan turned to me. “You offended
her,” he said.

I’d done everything I could to not offend anyone on this
trip. “What did I do?”

“You promised her money for the boys, and then you
didn’t give it to her.”

I took out my wallet and counted out several bills. “Tell
her I’m sorry. I forgot.”

He took the money with such disgust that my embarrass-
ment at my minor infraction vanished and was replaced by
memories of hundreds of like situations from my mission.
Someone here always had a hand out, expecting the rich
gringos to fill it. We almost always did. But the flat expecta-
tion of charity, which did not bother me thirty years ago, an-
gered me now. I set my jaw, looking at Juan as he casually
opened a hole in the sloping floor. The floorboards were black with
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I did not begrudge her that. I only wished that just once,
someone would ask if there was something they could do for
me in return for the money they demanded I give them. But
no, I owed them generosity because fate had made them
poor and worthy and me rich and unworthy.

I did not say any of this to Juan. I just told him I hoped
the money helped.

Revolution indeed.

There was more
More than the singing voices
More than the upturned faces
More than the shining eyes

But it’s more than the shining eyes
More than the steaming breeze
More than the hidden breeze
More than the concrete Christ

MY FLIGHT HOME left at 11:00 P.M. Carlos and
Juan took me to the airport. We had more than an
hour to spare, and I knew it was now or never. All
week, they had told me about their experiences and beliefs.
Their generosity of spirit had deeply humbled me, and I
wanted to reciprocate. I had sidestepped any discussions
about my own life, but now it was time to ante up.

“T’m not in the Church,” I said. “I left some time ago. For
many years, I was angry about what the Church was not—
how it failed to live up to its promise, both doctrinally and in
practice.”

I had difficulty explaining these subtleties in my rusty
Spanish, but I pressed on. “Although I was ashamed, even
on my mission, at how we manipulated and pressured
people into joining the Church, I was even more upset by
the bigotry I saw in Church doctrine.”

I went on to tell my friends about a seminal experience I
had early in my mission, where I sat in the home of a won-
derful black man. We had just finished telling him that he
would not be able to hold the priesthood because of his lin-
eage. With tears in his eyes, he said, “I don’t know what I did
to offend God, but if you will let me join the Church, I
promise I will repent for the rest of my life.”

After the discussion ended and we were walking home, I
turned to my companion. “Elder,” I said bitterly, “this is
wrong. That man is more righteous than the two of us put

together, and yet now he thinks God is angry at him.”

“It’s a true principle,” said my companion.

“No,” I barked. “It’s a policy. And it’s wrong.”

Six months after my mission, they changed the “prin-
ciple,” but not before I was required to teach this lie to hun-
dreds of people. It made me ill. Many years later, Spencer
Kimball’s son revealed that his father admitted even then
that it was a policy and that it was wrong.3

I looked at my two friends in the airport. “Over time, I
saw many examples of bigotry in the Church. The way we

treated females. The poor. The uneducated. Those not
American. Everyone, it seemed, was a suspect class, except
people like me: rich, white, educated, American men. We
ran the Church and would likely run it for the foreseeable
future. It was a boys’ club.”

My friends listened, but they were confused. I spoke
frankly about the tepid progress the Church had made in
battling bigotry. There were no Latino apostles, even though
Latinos made up more than half of the membership of the
Church. I do not believe in affirmative action, but the com-
plete lack of Latino leadership in the Church at the general level meant great numbers of members would have to trust that their “gringo brothers” (Carlos’s words) would care for them. It was condescending. The apostles these men were such good friends with, I pointed out, considered them underlings. I reminded Juan of his experiences as a regional representative and told Carlos that it was unlikely he would ever be called as a Seventy, as I knew he desired.

“They’re not overtly racist,” I said, seeing the hurt in both men’s eyes. “But they were raised in an isolated culture. Many of the Church leaders cannot count a single person of color as a friend growing up, and so they are simply uncomfortable with the differences and prefer instead to deal with what and who they know. You’re their little brown brothers,” I said. “They will not willingly allow you into the highest echelons of Church leadership. And that is a total violation of 2 Nephi 26:33,” which I then quoted from memory:

[A]nd he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.

I told them how angry bigotry made me—how the Church accepted their service and tithes, but excluded them from its leadership councils. I did not see progress—I saw retrenchment.

My friends were shocked. They knew little of white culture or its odd subset, Utah LDS culture. “I was one of those angry guys on the back row of Gospel Doctrine class,” I said. “Well, you don’t see them here. If they’re angry here, they stay home. But tradition is hard to break. After all, where does one go after Mormonism? How can you leave the Church that taught you who you are? So I stayed semi-active for many years, frustrated, and spiritually dying.”

“But your spirit is whole,” said Carlos. “I saw how you were touched in Church on Sunday.”

“Yes, the Spirit touched me,” I replied. “It often does. But it also warns you of error, and I see much of that in the Church. But when I pointed out such errors, I was shunned. Mormons don’t want to hear how they are failing; they want to be congratulated on their successes. So I finally stopped going.”

I then told my two brothers how I’d discovered some interesting truths about the spirit world, where we spend our time between our lives on earth—yes, about reincarnation, wisdom that had richly resonated in my soul and released me from the hurt I felt about the betrayal of the promise of Mormonism. I came to realize that my native religion is a step on a stairway, not a destination. Yet it is such a large step that it sometimes seems like a destination. It is not, and if you explore it completely, it will reveal its boundaries.

“I think I have found the next step,” I said. “That’s why I came back—to share it with you.”

Their defenses immediately shot up. Instead of hearing out my belief that the plan of salvation was still largely true, they key'd in on the doctrines I had discarded as unbelievable and faith-demoting. I used Noah's Ark as an example. I maintained that it was a metaphor for the principle of obedience. They said it was an actual boat, and Noah indeed placed two of every kind of animal in it. I scoffed. They were offended. What about the Garden of Eden? they asked. “Metaphor,” I replied. “Unless you deny the fossil record.”

“And Jesus Christ?” asked Carlos indignantly, eyes narrowed.

“Complex,” I said. “An unexcelled teacher who was likely a bodhisattva sent to guide the world to the next spiritual plane. Did he die for my sins? Why should he? How could he? Am I not suffering for my sins? And if I repent, isn’t it the person I’ve offended who is empowered to give me absolution, the way I hope you’ll forgive me for offending you tonight?” I smiled, trying to alleviate some of the tension of the last few minutes.

“If you repent,” said Carlos with a trace of a smile. “But you must repent,” said Juan sternly.

“I have,” I said. “I repented of being Mormon.”

They looked at me with sadness in their eyes.

MY FLIGHT LEFT soon thereafter, and we parted with the customary abrazo, but my heart was heavy. I had failed to share my beliefs in a way my friends could understand. I had focused too much on doctrine and too little on the joy my new beliefs had given me. I had failed to help them see that I knew I was going in the right direction when the Spirit took my anger from me, a sure sign that I had not so much left the Church, but was heading toward greater light and knowledge.

I had asked them to read a couple of books, which they flatly refused to do. I had challenged them to study all of Church history, not just the homogenized version found in its manuals. They had declined, saying the Church had counseled against heeding “discordant voices.” I had begged them to consider whether God, being perfect, would condemn even one of his children to an eternity without his presence (D&C 76:112). They shrugged. “But if they reject God . . .”

“But forever?” I said.

“God loves His obedient children more than those who disobey Him,” said Carlos flatly.

THIRTY-FOUR YEARS ago, these two men had opened their hearts to truth. Why not now?

Because they are not looking for truth anymore—they have found it, and their search is over.

But the greater truth was that my Latin friends were still muy católico, as we missionaries described hide-bound investigators who would not budge from tradition. Indeed, the very term “Catholic” connotes a comprehensive, unswerving belief system.

Mormonism has also become muy católico, a sort of Rubik’s Cube with its own enticing internal logic which re-
SUNSTONE

solves many traditional Christian doctrinal failings: child baptism, the Trinity, heaven and hell.

But while Mormonism improves on its older siblings in a myriad of ways, it still finds itself in the same doctrinal cul-de-sac: The Fall of Man, the Hebrews’ chosen status, the atonement of Christ, the final judgment, the same rutted sin-punishment road. The same limited God.

I had made a mistake. When my friends told me about their spiritual travails, I thought they might be open to questioning the core doctrines that had set them up for such difficulties. A parent-child relationship will remain intact unless the child grows up. So long as we see other mortals as our parents/leaders, we will remain children/followers.

Except that was not what Jesus had in mind. At the Last Supper, he calmed his disciples’ fears about his imminent demise by promising them the Holy Ghost, which would teach them “all things” (John 14:26). With God himself whispering in your ear, what need have you of mortal guides?

The truth was that even though my friends were graying at the temples, they were still children, still followers, Mormons who treated Thomas Monson with the same kind of adulation early Mormons felt for Joseph Smith. Those who have not fully realized that they can rely on the guidance of the Holy Ghost look to mortal leaders instead, and I cannot help but believe this grieves God.

Obedience, whether it is to a spiritual leader holding the keys to the Kingdom, or to the soldier with the gun, is ostensibly the same: an act of self-preservation and a shortcut to peace, though not to peace of mind. “You want religion, do you?” asks Satan in the temple endowment. “I shall have ministers here shortly.”

ON MY MIDNIGHT flight home, as my mind wound down toward sleep, perspective slowly returned. I mentally thumbed through the memory snapshots of the last week: the much-improved standard of living, the generosity of spirit my long-lost friends had shown me, and the love they daily showed each other.

Were they still seeking greater light and truth? Of course. No one can be active in the Church without realizing the imperative of self-improvement. Were they on the right path? Of course they were—they were on the exact path God had designed for them, precisely where they were supposed to be; and they would remain on that path until the time was right for change.

We grow where we’re planted.

I certainly had. Born in mid-twentieth century America, I was gifted with a sense of spiritual possibility, which begged the question: What are my responsibilities?

To learn, then to share. Thirty-four years ago, I shared what I had learned with people in a country thousands of miles from my own. Many of them heard something in my words that encouraged them to ask questions and then change their lives according to the answers they received. What a miracle, that young missionaries, so alien in back-ground from their listeners, could effect such changes! I was filled with emotion at the inarguable evidence that God had used us to deliver further light and truth to His children.

So what if it wasn’t ultimate truth? It was next-level truth, designed to draw each of us closer to the next step on our journey. So what if the changes I saw then—and still see—were incremental? So what if change takes longer than we want it to? Didn’t I say that God was patient?

So I thank God for patiently waiting for us to accept the changes he presents us with. For the pagan world, the change was the monotheism of Abraham. For the Jews in Jesus’ time, it was his astonishing Logos. For the confused Catholics I baptized, it was Mormonism.

For Mormons, it is . . .

More than a distant land
Over a shining sea
More than a hungry child
More like another time
Born of a million years
More than a million years

NOTES
1. All lyrics from “Only a Dream” in Rio by James Taylor © 1985 Country Road Music.
Raised By Ice Cream
Truck Drivers
by Ken Gerber

KEN GERBER has been the primary caregiver and househusband for 16 foster children and two sons.

RIGHT HERE AT THE BEGINNING, I NEED TO testify that when I started dating, I was not looking for someone who could keep me in the manner to which I had become accustomed. I come from your average home where dad worked and mom stayed at home. My dad was a detective for the Los Angeles Police Department for 18 years. Often he would come home after I had gone to bed and leave before I woke up. That is, if he came home at all. Sometimes instead of driving the hour-and-a-half home, he would just go the police academy and catch a few hours’ sleep before his next job. My mom ran the household. She did a good job, even though I think she hated every minute of it. I think she wished she could go out and work in the world.

I’m the oldest of seven children, one girl and six boys, so chores were not divided up the way they are in other houses. We didn’t have guys’ chores and girls’ chores. Thus, I ended up changing many diapers before I got married and had my own kids. Cleaning the kitchen, scrubbing the bathroom, and vacuuming the floors were all part of my life.

After a mission and four years in the Marine Corps, I enrolled at Southern Utah University, which is a great place to
go if you want to get a few dates. But I did not run an ad reading, “man seeking a woman who will support him and their children—and buy him toys.” The stay-at-home-dad shhtick wasn't the dream I sold my wife or myself. I planned to be a normal working dad, and she had set out to be a stay-at-home mom. She's very talented and has all the skills a stay-at-home mom needs.

I got a running start on being a stay-at-home dad when I volunteered to do foster care. We had 16 kids come through our home, most of them between 14 and 18 and living with us anywhere from six months to a year. They had all been court-ordered into a drug and alcohol program. I was the one who met them when they got back from school and took them to their drug and alcohol meetings.

But what really turned me into a stay-at-home dad was managing a retail ice cream outlet. Okay, I ran an ice cream truck—the kind that drives through your neighborhood playing the same three bars of music over and over and over. One day our child care provider called up and said, “I can't do it anymore.” So I decided, “Well, until I find somebody else, I'll just take the tyke to work with me.”

We had it all set up. I stuck his potty chair in the back, and he would play around while we tooled through the neighborhoods. He got all the free ice cream he could eat, and became one of my best sales people; when the kids would come up, he would point out the ice cream he liked. And the ladies would say, “Oh, he's so cute. Can I buy your son an ice cream?” I didn't argue. We did that for about 18 months, eight or nine hours a day.

At one point, I almost got the male provider thing right and was delivering for Schwan's 12 to 14 hours a day. My wife and son would often meet me at a park in the area I was working, and we'd have dinner together for half an hour before I went back to work.

Eventually, we realized that we could make more money if we went back to school. We decided to live in my in-laws' basement while my wife went to the University of Utah. I worked for a few months at the beginning, but one day I was sitting at my desk and then suddenly woke up lying on my back staring at the ceiling. I had no idea what had happened. I was rushed to the hospital, where they decided that I'd had a seizure. They didn't know why I'd had it or if I'd have any more, so they sent me home. We had driven just a few miles before I had another seizure right there in the car. So my wife U-turned and took me straight back to the hospital.

Two-and-a-half months later, our second son was born. Because I was still recovering at home, I ended up being the stay-at-home dad. I also started assisting another family that had just lost their mother. Dad had five kids and was working full time, so he hired me to bring his two boys over and take care of his house and kids. My wife would come over after work, we'd all have dinner together, and I'd take my family home. So I was caring for two households. My wife has been very supportive through all this. Many times she has said she would put her husband up against any housewife she's ever met.

We've met plenty of challenges along the way, including bias from co-workers, acquaintances, and even some relatives. They've made remarks such as, “She should be home with the kids, not in the workforce.” Even the people on the bus to the university assumed she was going to school so that she could be a teacher, since that's obviously the only reason a woman would be studying chemistry and biology. She had actually planned to go to med school. That changed, and she's now a lab technician. Even though my wife's employer works hard at making everything equitable, there's still evidence of women being paid less than men for doing the same job. We've lived in Oregon and Utah and have had similar issues in both places.

When my youngest son was about three, he started wearing his mom's shoes around the house. It was really cute. When we asked him what his footwear choice was about, he said, “Well, I want to be a mommy because I want to go to work. I don't want to stay at home like Daddy.” We explained to him that in most families, daddies are the ones who go to work—and he quit cross-dressing.

Sometimes people accuse me of being a slacker. But, you know, I've tried everything to make things different. I've prayed, fasted, gone to the temple, gotten priesthood blessings, applied for jobs, and started several businesses hoping for a different life experience. The experience didn't change, so I decided I would. I just ignore the fact that what I'm doing is not normal or accepted. I figure if this is a sin, well, party on! I'll go to hell knowing I was the best father I could be and that I filled the needs of my family to the best of my ability. If my family role is the biggest problem my boys have to complain about, they're probably getting off easy.

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Playdate with President Benson
by Stephen Carter

I, I'M STEPHEN, AND I'M A STAY-AT-HOME DAD. “Hi, Stephen.” I never thought I'd be in this position. My father set a good example for me, working outside the home to support his family of nine children. My mother dutifully—happily even—stayed at home to raise them. But now look at me: home all day while my wife goes to her job. Who's changing my daughter's diaper? I am. Who's singing along to Bear in the Big Blue House? That would be me. Who dances the Funky Chicken with Baby? Her very own stay-at-home father.
Every day, the ghost of Spencer W. Kimball stops by the house to give me his trademark compassionately withering stare. “Only in an emergency,” he intones. Then Ezra Taft Benson stops by and calls through the window: “Adam, not Eve, was instructed to earn the bread by the sweat of his brow.”

How did I get here? How did I wander so far down the path of darkness? It started like this: I got a degree in English. A small enough sin, it seems. But I’m here to tell you, brothers and sisters, computer science, business, and accounting are the only paths to righteousness. All else is vanity. Pursue the love of literature at your own risk, for you will likely find yourself quoting the Bard as you stock shelves at Wal-Mart to support your new baby.

A few months after our first baby was born, both my wife and I were working. However, hers was a technical writing gig that could be done from home. This point seemed very important; one that I repeated to myself whenever I listened to General Conference. Besides, I was still working outside the home. And that’s what counts, right?

I did manage to be the (mostly) sole provider for my family for one year—the year I held down three jobs. I never saw my children. Or my wife. Just the mortgage and credit card bills. But I was a real man then, and a prime candidate for an ulcer the size of Mt. Saint Helens—an ulcer that spewed righteousness.

But I still felt guilty because now I was hearing Conference talks about how fathers need to spend quality time with their families. President Uchtdorf once said, “Do you think [God] will care how packed our schedule was or how many important meetings we attended? Do you suppose that our success in filling our days with appointments will serve as an excuse for failure to spend time with our wife and family?”

A few paragraphs later, he follows up with an example of a righteous husband and father: John Rowe Moyle, who worked for years as a stonecutter on the Salt Lake Temple. “Every Monday John left home at two o’clock in the morning and walked six hours in order to be at his post on time. On Friday he would leave his work at five o’clock in the morning and walked six hours in order to be at his post on time.”

I admit that during these years, I got used to taking care of my children. I made them breakfast in the morning. I read to them. I brushed their teeth at night and fought off the toilet monster. I even . . . enjoyed it. For five years, I lived this strange lifestyle until I could no longer see its strangeness.

After we graduated, I swung back toward righteousness for two years. Both our boys were in school, so it seemed all right for both of us to work as schoolteachers. But during this time, strange thoughts began shuffling through my head. I started getting the feeling that some misguided spirit was filling out the paperwork to come into our family. The thought was frightening because we knew that if we had a baby, one of us would have to stay home to take care of her, effectively cutting our income in half. We weren’t sure we could live on that.

I started going a little crazy, sometimes blurting out things like, “Tell you what. If you get me a decent publishing contract for my novel about polygamist ghosts so that I can work at home, you can send someone else to our family.”

Who was I speaking to? I don’t know. But the summer of 2008, I was hired as the editor of SUNSTONE, and almost immediately, my wife and I unwittingly initiated the reproductive process. True, I didn’t have a publishing contract, but the Sunstone gig was likely more lucrative. And, by gum, I could work from home.

So, here I am, a stay-at-home dad. I play with my baby by day while my wife works outside the home, and I edit SUNSTONE by night.

What would President Benson think of this arrangement? Would he have any encouraging words for me and other stay-at-home dads? For inspiration, I looked through his famous speech “To the Mothers in Zion,” and this quote from President Kimball jumped out at me. With a simple switch of the gendered nouns and pronouns, it seemed very applicable:

No career approaches in importance that of [husband], homemaker, [father]—cooking meals, washing dishes, making beds for one’s precious [wife] and children. Come home, [husbands], to your [wives]. Make home a heaven for them. Come home, [husbands], to your children, born and unborn. Wrap the [fatherly] cloak about you and, unembarrassed, help in a major role to create the bodies for the immortal souls who anxiously await.

Can I be unembarrassed about being a stay-at-home dad? Might my inherent abilities as a male actually help in the raising of my children? What would I have to do to be successful? Though I really didn’t expect to find much help from the Church with these questions (go ahead, type “stay-at-home dad” in the LDS.ORG search engine), lo and behold, President Benson came to my rescue again! Look at this list...
for successful child-rearing he gave to mothers:

- Be at the Crossroads [of your children’s lives].
- Be a Real Friend.
- Read to Your Children.
- Pray with Your Children.
- Have Weekly Home Evenings.
- Be Together at Meal times.
- Read Scriptures Daily.
- Do Things as a Family.
- Teach Your Children.
- Truly Love Your Children. 6

That’s the whole kit and caboodle. I didn’t leave one thing out. That list contains everything President Benson thinks parents need to do in order to raise children well. Did you notice that not one of those requirements is gender-specific, that a male is entirely capable of carrying out every one of them? (As long as no one minds if I read Mad Magazine to my children.)

I hold out one more bit of hope to any man finding himself in the shoes of a stay-at-home dad. Benson makes much of Hannah giving birth to the baby Samuel. “For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him: therefore also I have lent him to the Lord: as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:27–28). “Isn’t that beautiful?” Benson asks, “A mother praying to bear a child and then giving him to the Lord.” 7

And to whom was she inspired to give her young son? Eli—a man. Admittedly, Eli hadn’t done a really great job raising his own sons, but he did all right with Samuel, who turned out to be one of the Old Testament’s most vigorous and interesting prophets.

Who knows, maybe one bright and glorious day, we will hear a general authority wax eloquent in General Conference about the incomparable influence his stay-at-home dad had on his spiritual and temporal well being. Maybe a new song will be added to the Primary Songbook: “I’m So Glad When Daddy Stays Home.”

But I’m not holding my breath. The other day, our home teacher came over. This guy is so dedicated he visited us for the first time even before he had officially been called. This time, he asked me how my job was going, and I said I was working on a collection of articles about stay-at-home dads. “Wellllllllllllllll!” he crowed as if I had just told him that Democrats aren’t all communists. My elders’ quorum president worries because I spend more time in nursery with my baby than I do in priesthood meeting.

It’s a lonely business staying at home to care for your children—no matter what your gender. But hey, when was the last time you built a fort with your clients, or buried plastic dinosaurs in the sand during lunch break, or chased a co-worker through the halls while waving a diaper?

Bummer.

O NE DAY, A few months after our family moved back to Utah, a friend emailed to see if I wanted to join him and some others for lunch. I wanted to go, but it hurt. But there was no way my beautiful, energetic toddler would have let me carry on a conversation with them, much less eat. It would have been a wrestling match, and I would have lost. So I asked my wife if she would be willing to come home during her lunch break that day to tend.

She kindly arranged it, and I skipped off to the first social activity I’d attended in weeks. I ate a hamburger and sweet potato french fries. I talked with grownups. I didn’t have to jump up to save a toddler thirteen times. I also didn’t notice my cell phone vibrating again and again in my pocket.

I had overstayed my allotted time, even though I thought I had kept track of it. When I realized this, I jumped into the car and sped home. I reached the house to see my wife waiting at the door. She strode toward the car, got in, and took off—late for a design meeting.

I looked back through the text messages on my phone. “Coming soon?” “It’s almost time.” “Where are you?” Each message made my gut clench because, as I initially thought, I regretted making my wife late. But then I realized that I was feeling something else, too: anger and humiliation.

Where did these feelings come from? My wife had gone out of her way to accommodate me. I was the one who had messed up our arrangement. I should have felt grateful to her. Instead, I was raging. It took some thought, but soon I understood. The very fact that I had to ask my wife to rearrange her work so I could do anything other than be at home with the family meant that my time wasn’t as important as hers. It had become my job to arrange my life and my work around hers simply because I was the stay-at-home parent. Because I was the one attached to the children.

I understand that this time I have with my kids is priceless, that when I’m old, I’ll remember these years as being the most nourishing of my life. But for the next several years, my life comes in second because I am the stay-at-home parent.

Years ago, when I had three jobs, there was no way for me to take time off so my wife could do anything other than take care of our children—and she had no car. I came home very late sometimes. I was always doing important, money-making things. Her life came second.

I blithely expected that sacrifice of her. I shouldn’t have.

NOTES

2. Ezra Taft Benson, “To the Mothers in Zion.”
4. Ibid.
5. Kimball, fireside address, in Benson, “To the Mothers in Zion.”
6. Benson, “To the Mothers In Zion.”
7. Ibid.
Gay-At-Home Dad
by John Gustav-Wrathall

JOHN GUSTAV-WRATHALL, in addition to working at a law firm and being a parent, is author of Take the Young Stranger by the Hand: Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA (University of Chicago Press, 1998), and teaches American religious history at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities.

WHEN I WAS COMING TO TERMS WITH BEING gay, I went through a grieving process when I realized that I would likely never be a father—something I’d always thought I would be really good at. But being in a relationship with a woman in a context where I could create my own children wasn’t really going to work, so I had to re-think the future. I finally reached the point where I was willing to say, “Well, not everybody in the world has to reproduce. I can put my time and energy into other important things. And I can be a good uncle.” I had pretty much written fatherhood out of my life.

I was excommunicated from the LDS Church in 1986 at my own request, shortly after I almost committed suicide. But a few years ago, I had a spiritual experience at a Sunstone symposium that brought me back to the LDS Church, and while remaining committed to my husband, I started attending church regularly.

While visiting Utah and attending church with my parents, I felt the Spirit telling me in a very clear and discernable way that I needed to open myself up to the possibility of parenting. I had no idea how that was going to work. But about six months later, a friend introduced me to a social worker who was also Mormon and worked with a foster care agency. One day she phoned me and said, “You know, I think you and your partner would make really good parents. Have you ever thought of foster parenting?”

The moment she asked me the question, I thought, “Okay, I need to be open to this.” So I talked to my husband about it. We were concerned about the financial and time issues. We agreed that somebody would have to be at home to care for our foster kids. We talked with many foster parents, and from time to time 1’d look at Göran and say, “Well, what do you think? Should we become foster parents or not?”

He’d say, “Well, I’m ninety percent sure.”

Then a week later, he’d ask me, and I’d say, “I think I’m ninety-five percent sure.”

Finally we got to the point of both being one hundred percent sure.

When we made this decision, I went to the law firm I work at as a paralegal to see if we could broker a deal. Even though it’s a Minneapolis-based firm, we manage all of our cases online because we have attorneys in California, Ohio, Florida, Washington, and other places. So, technically employees don’t have to be in the office to do the work.

“Is there any way that I could work from home?” I asked.

They resisted, saying the attorneys really like to have a physical person handing out papers to sign. But later my firm switched to a paperless system; it was all email and electronic signatures. The day after the switch, I sat all by myself all alone in the office all day, never seeing another human being. So I went back to the officers and said, “Now may I please work from home?”

They were still reluctant, arguing that if I were allowed to work from home, everyone else would want to as well. Finally, by offering to do after-hours services for the firm, I obtained permission.

We received Glen, our first placement, almost four years ago. His father had died when Glen was thirteen, and we were asked to act as parents until he could transition into independent living.

Being able to work from home has enabled me to be a more effective father. Some days Glen would come home from school feeling pretty discouraged or even in tears, and he’d want to talk about things. I was glad to be right there, right when he needed me. And since he’s a teenager, pushing boundaries and trying to be more independent, I’ve had the time and presence to guide him away from choices that could have messed up his life. I think my always being at home has meant a lot to both of us.

Becoming a foster dad has transformed my self-perception and worldview. From the moment Glen became a part of our home, all our efforts became focused on his needs, trying to provide the most nurturing, supportive environment possible. I’d expected to have difficulties making the personal sacrifices parents must make, but they don’t feel like sacrifices anymore. I feel as if I’m doing one of the most important things I will ever do.

My perspective on the world is changing, too. I’m much more concerned about improving our community and making the world more family-friendly. Suddenly I’m concerned about all the junk on TV. I look at my neighborhood in tactical terms, deciding what’s safe and what isn’t. I’m concerned about the quality of education in the local schools; I’m concerned about teachers. And of course I have a new awareness of the political and fiscal issues related to the foster care system and the resources provided to kids before and after they “age out” of the system.

My husband Göran has envied my position, wishing he could be a stay-at-home dad, too. I’ve had to work extra hard to communicate with him frequently, sometimes calling him right away when something comes up in order to include him in the decision-making process, so that he doesn’t feel left out of anything. It has also meant having more frequent family councils and really working to make sure that we do everything by consensus.

I’ve paid a price at work, though. If you’re not in the office, some folks will perceive you as being less serious. I’ve seen some female attorneys pay the same price for trying to work from home too much. Some attorneys have actually pulled work away from me. Fortunately, my supervisor
helps by transferring work to me from attorneys who don't mind my working at home. I've had to have faith that the Lord will provide for us. Because I believe that my decision to work from home was the right one for our family, I feel good about asking the Lord to help maintain it.

When I first told my bishop that Göran and I were foster parents, he looked appalled and offended—though he's never actually said anything. But most ward members (especially the younger ones) seem to treat us just as they do any other family. The first Fathers' Day after Glen was placed with us, the young women gave chocolates to all the dads, and the daughter of a friend of mine who knew that Göran and I had just received a foster son made a point of coming over to give me a chocolate. Apart from my being a chocoholic, that little gesture meant everything to me.

Glen is on the edge of independence now, about to start at the University of Minnesota. We're not sure how much longer we'll formally be his foster parents, but we're definitely going to open our home to other kids when he moves on. Even though I'm called a foster dad, I think my feelings for Glen are fundamentally the same as those a biological father would have. For me, family is the most important thing. So being the guardian of the hearth makes me feel like my life is prioritized correctly. I'm where I belong.

Fix It!

by Luke Smithson

LUKE SMITHSON runs his deli, grows squash, and paints in order to stay sane. He and his wife live in Salt Lake City and share 8 children and 5 grandchildren. His favorite movies are Stalker and Wings of Desire. His favorite television show: Community. He is currently reading Biocentrism and Funny Times.

I MUST ADMIT THAT WHEN STEPHEN CARTER FIRST asked me to write about being a stay-at-home dad, my gut response was “NO! Don't do it!” Following is my more nuanced answer.

I had my first encounter with gender roles at about age fourteen when we were having a family meeting about duties around the house. My five sisters were arguing that Dad didn't do enough housework. I countered that it was unfair to expect him to work all day at school without any help from us and then expect him to do more work when he got home. Besides that, my sisters' sense of “fairness” didn't seem to motivate them to help me, the only boy, shovel snow, take the garbage out, chop wood, or do any of the other gender-related jobs that I was saddled with. But at least we were questioning some cultural expectations about gender.

When I married my first wife, she made it perfectly clear that she needed to earn a living. During our first three years of marriage, we both worked part-time and had the first two of four children. Then she got a full-time job, which meant I stayed at home with the kids. I brought most of the money into the marriage through an inheritance, investments, and various projects. During the summers she wasn't working, I built two homes and four cabins—and I painted occasionally. Those were the only times I felt any sense of accomplishment or self-validation, mostly because my efforts produced tangible results. The rest of the time I felt as if I were constantly being interrupted to deal with children. I saw them as a distraction and failed to appreciate the blessings of raising kids. I failed to optimize what was the best opportunity of my life to enjoy my children's youth. I genuinely ache for the moments I can no longer have with my children, and I mourn.
When one person breaks the marriage covenant, child support and alimony are an attempt to address this injustice. There are also many cultural and social supports for women in this situation. However, our current laws and cultural institutions do not support men raising children. Until our laws and society improve, male homemakers are actually more vulnerable than women in a similar situation.

But even if those things change, there’s a more fundamental disconnect here. Everyone needs to belong and feel useful. Men specifically have a need to provide; to do something; to fix something. When women communicate a problem, what do men want to do? Fix it! Whether this is a social construct or genetic, I don’t know. But I do know that as I lived in that stay-at-home-dad situation, I became a less powerful and capable person. Not because I was a stay-at-home dad, but because my position made it much more difficult for me to create ways to validate myself. At the end of a day of changing diapers and wiping runny noses, it’s hard enough for women to feel a sense of self-worth and accomplishment. But they at least have a cultural expectation and support system. Men who stay home to raise their children do not have that support. They are alone and suspect. My in-laws thought I was lazy. No one respected me; neither did I. My children did not and still don’t respect me as a provider.

If a man cannot fix something or provide, he is useless. I’m now married to someone who enjoys being a mother and grandmother. She finds joy and validation in that role. She counts on me to be a righteous priesthood holder, to be a provider, a leader. She tells me this, and I am honored to live up to her expectations. And when I do so, I do not feel as if I’m better than she is in any way. Rather, I feel more powerful as a person and feel respect for myself. Both of us were the economically vulnerable person in our previous marriages—the homemaker. Now the two of us are working harder together every day, in and out of the house, than we ever did in our previous marriages. This is mainly the result of having to make up financially for all those lost years when we were out of the workplace.

We both put in extremely long hours running our gelato business. Sometimes I get to make art. But none of that brings me the satisfaction I get from having a good relationship with Elizabeth and our children, both mine and hers.

So, to those men contemplating similar situations in your marriage, proceed with caution; be aware of the kind of dynamic you are creating. You are making yourself vulnerable in ways that our culture and our legal system do not support. And you need to be a very strong person to deal with that.

But despite the legal and cultural pitfalls of being a stay-at-home dad, if you ever have a chance to postpone your career in order to raise kids while your spouse works, DO IT! Anyone who pursues a career instead of raising children is a fool. Though you will work as hard as the professional person and experience as many disappointments, you will find more joy and satisfaction in life through raising children. No amount of freedom, uninterrupted sex, or vacations in Italy or the Bahamas will be as rewarding as
spending Thanksgiving with your dysfunctional family and ungrateful children. Nothing is more rewarding than the moment your children stop being ungrateful and say, in one way or another, “Thanks, Dad, for everything you did for me.” The greatest joy in life comes from having a child in college who calls you up just to tell you about his or her week. Why would anyone want to give that up just to make money or have a career?

Staying at Home in a Daddly Fashion
by Michael Stubbs

MICHAEL STUBBS has been a long-time student of literature, a wildland firefighter, a mountain climber, and a stay-at-home dad. Currently, he teaches English at Idaho State University.

ONE SUNDAY, OUR SON CAME HOME FROM Primary clutching a strip of white paper. On it was the line he was supposed to memorize and repeat in the upcoming Primary program. It read, “A father’s role is to provide. My father works to provide for our family.” I recognized it as a variation on the words and ideas in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” which reads, “Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs.” Although the Proclamation does not say in so many words that the father should go out to work while the mother stays at home, I have heard prophets, bishops, and advisors say this explicitly. That had certainly happened in my family of origin. As long as my experience had fit this prescription, I hadn’t worried about it, but now the words recognized it as a variation on the words and ideas in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” which reads, “Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs.” Although the Proclamation does not say in so many words that the father should go out to work while the mother stays at home, I have heard prophets, bishops, and advisors say this explicitly. That had certainly happened in my family of origin. As long as my experience had fit this prescription, I hadn’t worried about it, but now the words bothered me. I was a stay-at-home dad.

“Why did he get this line?” I asked my wife, who was in the Primary presidency.

“I don’t even know what his line is,” she replied. She’d walked into the calling midterm and wasn’t in charge of the program. She read the strip of paper and said, “So what?”

“So what?” I repeated. “How come the son of the only stay-at-home dad in the ward gets this line?” I was getting angry, but I didn’t have anyone to be angry with. I just didn’t want to feel like my church was criticizing me.

“It’s no big deal,” she assured me.

“It is a big deal,” I snapped. “Somebody gave our boy that specific line to say. Somebody is trying to make a point.”

“It’s just something the prophets have said,” she replied as if this was supposed to make it seem less significant.

“Yeah, I know,” I told her, “and someone is directing it at me.”

My wife told me to not be so sensitive, but it was hard not to be. Either I listened to my son say the line while telling myself that the words I heard in church didn’t apply to me personally, or I ignored the words I heard in church. Neither seemed right. Of course the other option was to get a job and start providing for my family in the traditional way.

It wasn’t that simple for me. Two years of scouring the employment section of the Chronicle of Higher Education and filing more than 80 job applications had yielded nothing more than the seasonal firefighting job that I had used to pay my way through college. And I’d quit that when my wife found a job as a dietitian. Better pay, better hours, and health benefits meant she was our best option for the breadwinner role. I would be a stay-at-home dad.

It turned out that the line had been randomly assigned. After my wife had told the Primary president how I felt, she phoned and apologized to me. She assured me that I was providing and working for my kids, just in a way that was . . . different.

I felt out of place in my new-found role, but I tried to make “different” good. I towed my son to kindergarten in a bike trailer, then rode a few miles around town while my daughter napped in the trailer. The bike ride helped me feel that even though I was a stay-at-home guy, I was a tough one. I was fit. I was doing things my own way. The bike trailer gave me a healthy distance from the children who constantly pawed at me and clung to my legs every other minute of the day. And riding a bike was slower than driving. It passed the time. This was good because, sometimes, staying at home was simply passing the time.

I picked my son up after school and biked the kids to story hour at the library, where I sat in a room full of young mothers and three-year-olds who were singing and clapping along with the librarian. I sat my kids on the colored squares of the library rug and found a chair in the back. Most of the time, I sat alone. Most mothers sat at least two chairs away. When their toddlers wandered too close to me, they yanked them back. Was it because I wasn’t singing along or clapping my hands? Was it my long hair and beard? Maybe it was because I smelled like a man who’d been towing kids around on his bike all afternoon. Maybe it was because I was the only man in the room. I don’t know, but I saw these things, and felt the rejection.

Things improved some when I volunteered at my son’s kindergarten each week. There I was greeted with enthusiastic hugs from many five-year-old girls and high fives from the boys. They called me “Ian’s dad” like it was a cool name by itself and said they couldn’t wait to see me on my bike after school. The teacher was also excited to have a dad in class. She slugged me in the shoulder whenever she made a joke. She winked at me and nodded as she explained the assignments I would help the kids complete. She confided that the girls who hugged me were the girls who didn’t have dads at home. I was a constant, reliable man in a world through which their mothers’ boyfriends periodically came and went. In kindergarten, I was abnormal, but that was cool. I was needed.

But one day, my son asked me to stop biking him to school. He didn’t want the attention. He’d rather ride the bus like everyone else. I gave up and let him ride. Then, on my
first assigned kindergarten snack day, I really put my foot in it. I spent all morning peeling thirty tiny mandarin oranges which I could barely stuff into two large Tupperware canisters that barely fit into my son's small backpack. The weight of the oranges nearly pulled him backward down the steps of the bus and so displaced him physically that he barely fit his butt onto the seat. He didn't smile out the window at me on the way to school that day, and he didn't smile when he came home with a backpack still full of oranges and explained that the kids didn't eat them because “no one wants fruit for a snack at school.” Brooke's mom had made popsicles with fruit, juice, and a real popsicle stick frozen in a paper cup, and Mason's mom had made cookies with faces on them. I was a stay-at-home who was no good in the kitchen. The kids saw this. So did their mothers. I was not invited to bring food to the school parties as the stay-at-home mothers were. Fortunately, I had support. A friend from my college days was also a stay-at-home dad, with a boy and a girl. His wife, like mine, worked in the health care profession and made more money than he could. We were both looking for a job that would take us into the traditional world from which chance and circumstance had excluded us, but we also embraced our roles in daddly fashion. Not only did we go to story hour, we also took our kids rock climbing. We pushed our kids on the swing set at the park and also pushed them up mountains, nudging the older kids ahead, their pockets filling with rocks and acorns, while we carried the younger ones on our backs in external frame backpacks. We carried diapers, wipes, snacks, and toys, and we did it in Kelty, Black Diamond, Trek, and North Face bikes, packs, bags, and jackets. This gear made it all OK. These names provided a manly place for our kids to fish out fruit chews and an abrasive shoulder on which to wipe their noses.

On cold days, we met at the mall playground, where we let our kids push each other down the slide. Sometimes our wives worked late, and we met after dinner. On these occasions, we brought the kids' pajamas so they could put them on and fall asleep in the car, and we wouldn't have to feel bad about putting them to bed in their dirty clothes. We were dads familiar with our children's patterns and habits. We knew secrets that usually only moms knew. However, we also knew that meeting at the mall playground meant that neither one of us owned a home, that we were poor, that our wives were off working to provide for our families while we were not.

But we were doing the best we could. Our kids were healthy and happy. Having a dad at home was a good thing even if it meant we had failed to find a “real” job, even if it meant we were swimming against church traditions. On our way out of the mall, we joked that we'd better not catch the other dad brushing his kids' teeth at the J.C. Penney's drinking fountain. In the parking lot, we tried not to let each other hear the swear words we used to get the kids into the car when their mothers weren't around to help.

I'd come to the stay-at-home gig after four years of fighting wildfires for the Bureau of Land Management and after three years of graduate school in a dying English doctorate program. I was already a frustrated man before two kids spent their days crying at me and telling me that Mom could do it all better than I could. I was transitioning from running a chainsaw in a burning forest to braiding a three-year-old's hair. And I was trying to braid this hair as the girl jumped up and down in tears while her brother stood watching cartoons rather than tying his shoes to go to school.

On Sundays, I would wrestle the same children through an exhausting sacrament meeting where I lis-
tended to people testify of the recharging power of church. I didn't believe them. Church was more exhausting than home was. Others bore witness of their knowledge of their divine roles at work or at home. I heard these people more sharply than I'd ever heard them before. I told myself that they weren't criticizing me but still wondered, "Why else are they standing up there proclaiming that women should be at home and men out at work? Am I doing such a bad job? Is there anyone else in this situation at all?"

Even though the testimonies and comments seemed to arise more often as time went by, my wife and I learned to let them slide. We were doing what was right for our family, and we were the best judges of our circumstances. Church structure was against us, though. All of the meetings required for her calling came during the day when she was at work. All the meetings required for mine took place evenings and weekends—the only time I could be with my wife. We asked people to adjust meetings for us, but clearly less adjustment was required for the members in traditional roles. When other men were taking time off from work to attend Scout camp, I was finding babysitters and planning meals. My situation was so unusual to some people that I regularly had to explain that I was a stay-at-home dad and my responsibilities were different. The constant need to explain to the same people made me feel as if I were being rejected over and over again for my decision to stay at home with my children while my wife worked.

In August of 2010, I was offered a job teaching English at Idaho State University. This new job paid less than my wife's did and it kept us in a town we did not like, but I had spent so many nights praying for a job that I didn't feel like I could get down on my knees and say, "No thanks. Try again." Though I had finally trained our ward member and neighbors to work with me as the stay-at-home, I was desperate to make sense of the ten years I had spent in college. I also worried, as many stay-at-homes do, that the growing blank space on my resume would be harder and harder to overcome.

The decision for me to go back to work and for her to be a part-time consultant was not a pleasant one, but we made it knowing that for every three years it took me to get a job with my English degree, my wife could get a better one in three weeks. We also knew that if we needed to, we could successfully change places again.

So, suddenly I wasn't at home with my kids anymore. I'd made many mistakes during the time I had spent at home with the kids. I'd forgotten play dates, made the wrong snacks, taught the kids too many swear words, or let them get too muddy at the creek, but I never felt I wasn't doing my job as a father. In fact, I bragged to myself that I'd already spent more time with my children in their youth than most dads have spent with their children by the time they reach eighteen.

But now, while I was at work, I felt like a terrible father. I constantly asked myself, "Who will feed the kids lunch? Who will make them eat some fruits and vegetables? Who will make sure that they spend enough time playing outside?" These were things I had become good at doing. I knew my kids—their wants, likes, and needs, and I could deliver. I felt as if I'd become irreplaceable in their lives, and I'd liked that feeling. Now I'm learning to deal with the feeling that I'm just like every other dad out there, and I'm having a hard time adjusting.

A Stay-At-Home Dad's Guide to French Sociology
by A. Joseph West

A. JOSEPH WEST is father of two children, A.J. and Claire, and husband and lover of their mother, Jessica. He is a graduate student in the department of sociology at the University of Arizona.

THE LAST TIME I HAD A "REAL" JOB WAS IN JULY 2005. That was the month my wife Jessica gave birth to our second child. We had decided that when the baby came, I would quit my job and stay home full time with both children. We continued with that arrangement until August 2008, when we moved to Tucson for my graduate studies. When we made our decision, we thought of ourselves as a relatively liberated young couple who could easily cast off the gender dispositions our religious culture had instilled within us. But it didn't take very long to realize that things would not be so easy. What we had been raised to believe about gender roles still had a profound effect on our experience. Things quickly became difficult, especially for the first several months.

The difficulties had nothing to do with the actual day-to-day activities of stay-at-home fatherhood, which I actually found to be very rewarding and satisfying—from watching one of my children actually learn something I had tried to teach, to feeding them, or giving them a bath, or getting them into their pajamas. I often wish I could have continued in that role. I think I could have done it for another 20 years. The difficult part was figuring out how to recast my sense of identity and understand where I belonged in my community.

Some feminists and gender scholars understand gender as a function of performance.1 In other words, femininity and masculinity aren't so much what we are, as what we do. But though Jessica and I formally changed roles, our gender expectations still clung tenaciously on. For example, though I was responsible for keeping the house clean, Jess was the one who felt shame if the house was messy. Similarly, as much as I enjoyed the day-to-day tasks of domestic work, it was still difficult for me to come to terms with the fact that I didn't have a wage-paying job. Intellectually, I was fine with
it, but I couldn't shake off the norms and values of masculinity overnight. Adding to the difficulty was that Jess still felt compelled to direct home affairs. But eventually I learned to make my new job my own, and she learned to let go. I started to develop my own routines, set my own goals for the house, and eventually learned how to be satisfied on my own terms with what I was doing.

Incidentally, for the past two years, Jess has been the stay-at-home parent and I think that the house is generally cleaner under her direction; but the kitchen specifically stayed cleaner under mine. A clean kitchen was just something I needed. In some ways, our kids ate a healthier, more regimented diet when I was in charge. But with Jessica, they're probably learning an appreciation for a wider variety of healthy foods.

Recasting our personal identities wasn't our only struggle. There were social struggles as well, beginning with the awkward interactions that would ensue when I would tell family or friends that I had quit my job to become a stay-at-home dad. Though people rarely disapproved of or overly criticized our choice, they didn't seem to know how to respond. Everyday interaction is comfortable when people can rely on the social scripts they've spent their lives learning. But when those scripts break down, interaction becomes difficult. Again and again, I had to endure an awkward silence, or a subtle glance, or some other indication that I had socially paralyzed someone.

Sometime during the first two years of my stay-at-home parenthood, I taught a lesson on fatherhood in elders quorum. I decided to share some academic literature I had come across about “nurturing fatherhood” and relate it to my own experience. I shared some basic findings and statistics about the importance of nurturing fatherhood for particular developmental outcomes. I felt that the lesson was well received, but at the conclusion of the meeting, the member of the elders quorum presidency who was conducting—and who had remained silent throughout the lesson—got up, thanked me, and then said something to the effect of, “We all know that the proper role of the father is that of provider and protector. While it’s okay to temporarily rearrange roles in a family if the husband can’t work, there’s a model that we’ve been taught to follow, and we all know what that is. We’re blessed when we follow that model.” Perhaps at the time I was overly sensitive, and I’m not sure what I expected to happen, but I can vividly remember the sting of listening to this priesthood leader blatantly discount my current life’s work.

Though there were plenty of individual church members who were supportive of us, this experience in elders quorum is indicative of how the Church as a whole has responded to the domestic choices of families like ours. The institution that promised to strengthen our family seemed to be working to undermine it. This was not something Jessica and I had expected, and it took a long time before we felt like we understood this response. It was, in part, this experience of confusion and exploration that eventually led me to graduate school and a career in the social sciences.

According to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, there is statistical regularity to the ways material resources are stratified—most often along the lines of race, ethnicity, religion, education, and perhaps most obviously, gender. Bourdieu calls the justification and maintenance of this inequality “sociodicy,” a play on theodicy (which is the act of trying to justify faith in God despite the presence of evil in the world). Similarly, Bourdieu describes how culture is used to justify inequality. He points to what he calls “symbolic violence” as the main culprit. He describes symbolic violence as “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through purely symbolic channels of communication, cognition recognition (more precisely misrecognition), or even feeling.”

For Bourdieu, masculine domination is the example par excellence of symbolic violence. In all patriarchal cultures, there exist myths and structures that show why men should be socially privileged over women. When an individual or group, such as stay-at-home dads or same-sex couples, stray from this symbolic order, they encounter resistance because their behavior threatens the accepted sociodicy and thereby the status quo power structure. It is in this light that I have come to understand my own experience as a stay-at-home dad in the United States and the LDS Church. The resistance Jessica and I felt because of the choices we were making together wasn’t about an institution trying to oppress us or undermine the strength of our family; it was about the fact that our behavior challenged our culture's symbolic order.

For example, my experience as a stay-at-home dad has forever debunked the “pedestal argument” in my mind. Mothers are often rhetorically placed upon a pedestal because of the difficulty and thanklessness of the domestic work they do. In my experience, domestic work was neither overly difficult nor thankless. On the contrary, in some ways it was far more satisfying work than what I’m doing now as a graduate student. This discourse that raises women above men in the domestic sphere also serves to justify a power structure in which men exclusively lead.

While the Church was not as supportive of our domestic choices as I would have liked, I think it is important to recognize that we never encountered overt coercion. This is an important point in the Church's favor. Authoritarian institutions, by their very nature, have few options besides repression when faced with acts of revolt (however small) against the prevailing symbolic order. The absence of such repressive tactics implies that, even if the pace is glacial, improvement is coming.

NOTES
I COOKED ROAST BEEF TODAY, EVEN THOUGH I knew no one would be around to eat it. And I’m not talking my usual roast beef, which is nothing more than a slab of cheap rump roast dropped into an old Crock-pot and set to simmer. No, today I really cooked.

First, I sautéed mushrooms, onions, and green peppers in olive oil. As they sizzled, I picked up the bacon press I’d purchased at a garage sale a few years back but had never used. The truth is, when I slipped my two quarters into the seller’s palm, I didn’t even know what the thing was for. I liked the cute little pig stamped into the cast iron and thought it’d bring a folksy charm to my kitchen. So I brought it home and set it atop my breadbox where it’s lived a life of leisure ever since. But today . . . Today I introduced Porky to the concept of work.

With my vegetables browned and their aroma filling the kitchen, I placed my expensive cut of beef into the sauté pan and slammed that pig’s face as hard as I could against the flank of that cow. I pushed so hard, in fact, that I worried I might break my ceramic range top. But I didn’t relent until each side of the roast was seared to perfection. Only then did I place it in the roasting pan. (I paid retail for it.)

With the drippings and vegetables in the skillet, I made gravy—a rather pale and unappetizing mixture I poured over the beef. Setting the lid on, I slipped the roaster into the oven, set at 325 degrees Fahrenheit, fully confident that, when finished, that roast and gravy would be the most succulent meal made today on planet earth.

I started on laundry. Two hours later, I pulled the roaster from the oven and uncovered it, a cloud of savory scents rising toward the light. Next, I took a serrated knife and sliced deeply into the meat, letting the fat and juice flow into the pan. Then I drained the liquid and made a second gravy—a deep, dark sauce—which I poured back over the roast, widening the slits I’d cut with the tines of a fork so the gravy slid deep into the crevices. I repeated this process two hours later. So yes, today, I really cooked a roast beef, even though no one would be around to eat it.

I have three children and one husband. I knew that tonight my husband planned to take our youngest, age six, to the grand opening celebration of the town’s new 24 Hour Fitness. There’d be games and balloons and granola bars for the kids. This is what my husband told me this morning, as I pulled out my cookbook. They’d be gone from around six until eight-thirty p.m. Maybe later.

And by the time I poured a dollop of olive oil into the pan, I knew my older children wouldn’t be home either. My eighteen-year-old son would be on stage, playing young Scrooge in a community theater production. And my sixteen-year-old daughter would be attending a friend’s birthday dinner before spending the night at yet another friend’s home.

It wasn’t that I thought, “Well, my family can eat the leftovers.” It wasn’t that I wanted the roast all to myself. And it certainly wasn’t a stubborn streak that compelled me to create the greatest roast beef dinner of my existence even though no one would be around to eat it.

Call it a wild hair. But something inside me needed to cook that roast. I am a busy woman. I run the house; I teach freshman composition part-time; I do some editing work and keep slogging away at my own written words. I attend soccer and football and baseball games. I’m on the artistic committee for the community theater and a regular participant in an area writers’ workshop. Necessity has made me a Crock-pot mom.

Heating frozen lasagna is as close as I usually come to genuine culinary adventure. I even slice my cookie dough from a tube. So I should’ve rejoiced at the opportunity to take a night off from meal creation. I should’ve stretched out...
on the couch with a chocolate Slim Fast and a bag of apple cinnamon rice cakes. I should've put my feet up on the coffee table and read the latest SUNSTONE. I should've called my mother in California or my brother who has cancer. Instead, I cooked a roast no one would be home to eat. Maybe not even me.

I JUST RECEIVED a text message from my daughter. Apparently she and the sleep-over friend have decided to meet at the movie theater across the lake in thirty minutes—could I please come pick her up and drive her there?

I glanced at the oven door. The clock read 5:51 p.m. The roast should be removed just after seven.

I can practically hear my husband's voice telling me that these kids need to learn that they are not the center of the universe. But my daughter is sixteen, and her brother, eighteen. Only a few intangible months stand between this moment and their leaving us. As I inhale the aroma of beef and onion, I swell with the knowledge that time flies and children do, too. What my husband doesn't understand is that our children are—that they have always been—the center of our universe, a universe that is breaking apart despite the promise of eternity together. “Together,” I am learning, does not necessarily mean “with.” So I told my daughter not to worry; I'll get her there on time. It's just a roast.

I called my husband on his way home from work and asked him to please swing by the restaurant where our daughter waited. After I hung up, I pulled the roast out once again and used a spoon to bathe it in gravy. Then I arranged four, pre-formed chicken nuggets on the roaster lid and slid it all back in. My husband could grab a slice of bread on his way to the gym and eat the roast later, but our little guy needed nourishment before they left.

I checked the local news station for traffic and weather. The drive across the lake takes at least thirty minutes in pleasant weather and free-flowing traffic. But tonight the darkening sky churned with heavy, black clouds, and the plummeting temperature left me fearful that the water in the overstuffed bellies overhead would fall as sleet. The prediction was for a wet Christmas, five days away.

Complications. The roast should come out in sixty-five minutes. My husband would be here and gone before thirty had clicked away. If my daughter and I left as soon as he arrived with her, I still wouldn't be back to take the roast out for about an hour and a half. I'd be back sooner, but the area we were going into was one that demanded a mother walk her daughter into the theater and physically connect her to her friend's family. I turned the knob, lowering the temperature of the oven.

When my husband showed up with our daughter, she hurriedly collected her overnight necessities and I hunted up the SUV keys. I paused in the garage doorway as she loaded her stuff. Still in his Public Health Uniform, my hus-
band put his head into the oven, looking like a man peering into the mouth of a lion. He inhaled, his eyes closed.

“Never mind the roast,” I told him. “It’s not done; I’ll take it out when I get home. Have a nice time at the gym.”

I glanced over the kitchen island into the family room.

“And David’s all ready to go.”

The boy slumped on the couch, staring at Sponge Bob Squarepants—a position he often assumes while the rest of us whirl around him, trying to get here, to get there, to get it all done, all in, all over so we can slump onto the couch and watch TV.

“He ate some chicken nuggets, so he shouldn’t be hungry.”

The boy’s face swung slowly toward me. His blond hair has grown past the tops of his ears and his glasses ride the tip of his nose.

“I’ll be back in forty-five minutes.” I said it like a promise, but I knew I lied.

“Sure smells good,” my husband said as he closed the oven door.

But I was gone.

When we were newlyweds, we had a little apartment in San Antonio where he attended dental school. On the back wall hung a sheet of mirror stretching from floor to ceiling—a decorative element that was supposed to make the pint-sized place appear larger than it was. But we were poor and had little furniture, so it didn’t much matter. In those days, I had a desire to cook for my husband, to please him with food. I remember the way he’d roll away from the textbooks spread across the floor and call to me in the kitchen, “Whatcha making? Sure smells good.”

I backed the Yukon out of the garage and into a cold, pouring rain. My daughter’s cotton candy perfume filled the cab.

“Did you have fun?” I asked. She grunted, which meant yes. I grunted back, which meant good.

And then I took a wrong turn out of the subdivision. I was three miles down Farm Road 549, nearly to the high school, before it occurred to me that I was driving on autopilot again.

The roast.

My misdirection couldn’t be righted for another mile, so I re-calculated the time it would take me to make the round trip and added another ten minutes.

I merged into I-30’s rush hour traffic. The rain punished my windshield while my frail wipers slapped back. Traffic crawled across the lake bridge as the wind made sheets of the precipitation. Flashes of lightening littered the world like brilliant confetti; thunder swept up afterward. As I drove, carefully following the red taillights of a UPS truck ahead, my daughter’s thumbs flew over her cell phone keys in a text-message frenzy.

“What do uw2c?” I imagined her friend asking. “IDK,” the response.

Clear of the bridge bottleneck, we next braved what we in Texas call a Mixmaster, also known as a highway interchange. This particular one feeds cars from two merging highways directly into the only exit for the only mall in eastern Dallas county. The roadway is always congested, so the area was undergoing heavy construction—road extensions and improvements—all in the hope of e-ven-tu-al-ly improving the traffic flow.

But tonight, in the storm of the season and with the ultimate roast in my oven, the overpass linking I-30 East with 635 South was perilously slow, thanks to the engineering genius who’d crafted a spectacular zig and a stupendous zag to the single-lane, backside slope, and hemmed it all up with two unforgiving concrete barriers.

As I moved along at school-zone speed, those barriers gleamed in my headlights like wet clay on a potter’s wheel. Bullets of rain fired against my windshield, and my daughter flipped from one country station to another, naively thinking she’d find a commercial-free program during rush hour. The heater raged, blowing cracks into the skin on my hands.

At the bottom of the overpass, a two-story wall of concrete, the base of the new section of overpass, confronted me, its wet fangs of rebar jutting from its upper lip. My daughter glanced up from the radio and squealed, thinking, I suppose, that I planned to end it all at fifteen miles per hour. Instead, I maneuvered right and took the mall exit. She laughed, her phone vibrated, and I’d lost her again.

The light at the intersection turned yellow. The car ahead stopped and so did I. I watched as the brake lights seemingly transformed the clear rivulets on my windshield into a sort of spirit blood.

Once upon a time, I used to cook chicken cordon bleu. I bought whole breasts, fresh, and skinned them with my bare hands, dug the fat out from under my fingernails with the edge of a fork. I flattened the breasts with a wooden mallet, part of a cutlery set I’d received at a bridal shower. I filled each breast with cheese and ham slices and folded them. Finally, I knitted the edges together with toothpicks. I dipped each into milk, then salted flour, then egg, and finally seasoned bread crumbs. I baked them, and, if I was lucky, the cheese didn’t bubble out onto the baking sheet.

When the light turned, my daughter twisted in her seat and looked behind us at the construction. She said she couldn’t figure out how this “new bridge thingy” was going to fit into the grand scheme of the highway redesign. “It doesn’t look like it’s going anywhere.”

I glanced into the rear-view mirror. I saw headlights glare and streetlights reflect off the dripping bodies of cars. I saw neon signs shout through the rain.

When my husband and I had hosted other student couples for dinner, he always asked me to please serve my chicken cordon bleu. I served it when the Densleys came, and the Clarks, and the Wallaces. I remember showing my chicken cordon bleu. I served it when the Densleys came,
Every social meal, chicken cordon bleu . . . and always with sweet corn, the only vegetable my husband eats.

“How is the new bridge going to connect up?”

Everything with sweet corn.

I shrugged. “I haven’t got a clue.”

Chicken cordon bleu with corn, enchiladas with corn, eggplant parmesan with corn. Right now, there in my freezer, sat a bag, waiting to be simmered to accompany tonight’s roast beef.

She settled back, folded her arms. Her phone vibrated again, but she ignored it. “You’re supposed to know everything,” she quipped. “You’re old.”

“You’re right.”

I followed the access road past North Mesquite High School, past the car dealership and the furniture store.

“Where’s the theater?” she asked, reading the miniature screen on her Blackberry.

“We’ll make it.”

“The movie is about to start, and Katie wants to know if she should buy me a ticket.”

“Tell her no. We’re almost there.” The sweep of my windshield wiper seemed to follow the precise arch of the theater’s neon rainbow. “We’ll be there in two minutes.”

I glanced at the clock. I’d left the house—left the roast—more than forty minutes earlier.

My daughter’s fingers worked the keys. “You should drive faster,” she told me, but I didn’t respond. Traffic had thinned, and I could actually see the slick asphalt beneath my low beams. Oddly, I’d never really noticed before—or hadn’t thought it through—but in the dark, when it’s just your headlights showing the way, a lined asphalt road can appear both black and white—both deep and dark; and glistening and clear—all at the same time.

I pulled into the busy theater lot and parked.

“You’re not going to leave me alone,” she said, and I found that interesting, since she was the one leaving the car.

I pulled the keys from the ignition. “No.”

The winter rain soaked quickly through my Keds as I walked with my sixteen-year-old to the ticket carousel and purchased a ticket. The police officer standing beside the ticket taker permitted me to accompany my daughter to the specific theater to make sure she met her friend’s family.

I thanked the officer, both grateful he was there and sad, so sad, that he had to be.

Next I drove through our old neighborhood so that I could drop off my daughter’s pillow and backpack at her friend’s house. Despite the waiting roast, I went the long way, down the street we’d moved from three years before, curious to see the old house and discover if our family’s imprint remained.

A single mother and her two young children had bought the house from us. As I drove slowly up to the brick house, I saw she’d painted the door a peach color I disliked and had pulled out the flower bed. Other than that, she’d changed very little about the place. One light shone through the darkness: an upstairs light. Our daughter’s old bedroom, a room where some other child now received good-night kisses.

I stopped. I could see the wallpaper, the white clouds floating against a summer-blue sky. I’d hung it myself. Though I couldn’t see, I knew the bottom of the wall would...
still be bordered with a wallpaper strip of tall grass, and that in that grass an array of creatures hid—a puppy, a bunny, a duck, and even a small pig.

A shadow flitted along the lower panes. I dropped my head against the headrest.

I ARRIVED HOME and found my husband descending the stairs. He’d just finished helping our little guy brush his teeth and say his prayers. He went to change, and I headed for the oven.

The house held quiet as I slid the roaster from the oven. Steam rolled up as I lifted the lid. What I found inside was a charred lump set in a tar pit of dehydrated gravy. Shriveled mushrooms clung to the side of the roast. I pronged the thing and tried to lift it from the pan; it stuck; I shook it until the pan clattered free, falling onto the countertop.

Then I lowered the forked remains onto a platter.

As I stared at my petrified good intentions, I felt my husband’s hand slip around my waist.

“I cooked a roast for you,” I whispered.

He kissed my ear. “I told you I wouldn’t be home to eat it.”

“Would you like some?” I handed him the carving knife.

I thought he’d laugh or scoff, but instead he accepted it.

“Hey, I’m just grateful to have it,” he said, moving around me. “We never got roast when I was a kid.” He sawed back and forth. “Well, Mom made it some Sundays, but there were so many of us that I never got my fill.”

“You can have your fill tonight.” I smiled.

His bicep flexed as he poked the serrated tip through the charred outer layer. “Can you pour us something to drink?”

I groaned, then pulled two soda cans from the second refrigerator in the laundry room. When I returned, I found him sliding blocks of meat onto two plates.

“I didn’t have time to make the corn.”

“Why ruin corn?” He smiled.

I watched him carry both plates to the kitchen table. I followed him. “You don’t have to eat that.” I moved someone’s history textbook and sat. “I thought if I turned the temperature down, it’d be all right.” I popped the tab on my soda and handed him his. “I should’ve added more water.”

“You can have your fill tonight.” I smiled.

“I didn’t have time to make the corn.”

“Why ruin corn?” He smiled.

I watched him carry both plates to the kitchen table. I followed him. “You don’t have to eat that.” I moved someone’s history textbook and sat. “I thought if I turned the temperature down, it’d be all right.” I popped the tab on my soda and handed him his. “I should’ve added more water.”

“It’s fine,” he shrugged. “But tonight I’ll offer a blessing.”

I shouldn’t have laughed—and I did not to—but somehow a series of snickers escaped me and skipped across the thick silence of our house like a flat stone on smooth water.

He waited for me to regain my composure. Then, smiling, he bowed his head. I closed my eyes and listened along, my lips rolled between my teeth.

“Bless this food for our nourishment and strength.”

And I lost it. It all seemed so funny, so stupid, so typical, so avoidable, so perfect.

My husband progressed immediately to the Amen and then grabbed his fork. Knowing he had an audience, he stabbed his supper like a caveman attacking some ice age rodent. Then he put the whole slice to his mouth. With his teeth, he tore free a hunk and chewed, canine-style.

He choked out, “Delicious,” before knocking back his Diet Coke.

I laughed as I watched this man I’d lived with for twenty years saw off another jaw-breaking mouthful; this man who’d fathered my three children, who’d cheered them around bases and toward goals and basketball hoops, who’d held the back seat of their two-wheelers until their balance came, this man who’d grown crinkly before my eyes and had begun to sprout white hair. I watched this man eat a roast beef that jerky manufacturers would reject—and I realized this may well be the tenderest meal we’d ever shared.

The kitchen faucet dripped, a sound like a tick, tick. I took a bite and began gnawing.

Because today, I cooked a roast beef that I knew no one would be around to eat.

MAPLES

Out front the strong-armed sugar
lobs shadow to the lawn’s mitt,

canopies kids at play
on the lazy lap of noon.

Trunked true, it preaches permanence
to its credulous flock. Meanwhile,

I stumble out back at midnight
among heretic silvers that shed skin,

lose limbs, surge sloppy toward destruction.
This one, already strung tight by futile cable,

will further splay its split trunk, bleed sap,
ache itself apart toward some vegetable bliss
until it breaks
and crushes the swing-set.

Tomorrow I’ll patrol the yard,
rake up all it lost last night,
pledge to stanch its wounds
with a tree fort.

—Mitchell Metz
THE DAY IT BEGAN, I ATE THE BRAN MUFFIN, plain yogurt, and apple slices my wife had graciously put out for my breakfast, kissed her cheek, and left for work. I got in my Toyota Corolla and drove into the office. It was a day like all the others. Maybe the church suit hanging on the dry cleaning hook over my shoulder was a detail out of the ordinary, but it wasn't too atypical. I am the bishop of the Spanish Fork Pinion Ward—have been for six long years. I was meeting Sister Mecham at the church directly after work. I would not have time to go all the way home and change and still make the meeting with her on time, so I would change at the office.

By vocation I am a CPA. My office is in the bowels of the third tallest building in Provo, Utah. I crunch the numbers for my company and make the bottom line for the investors look as black as possible. That day, the numbers were decidedly deep in the red, and this had not pleased my immediate supervisor. Later he pointed out my “mistake,” and I corrected it. Then I changed into my church suit, turned off the light in my office, and left the building in an itchy state of unease.

When I arrived at the church, Sister Mecham sat alone in her husband's tall truck in the vacant parking lot directly in front of the church doors. I parked two spaces away from the truck. She looked up and smiled from inside the cab, gave me a shy wave that I shyly returned.

I sat there in my little car, busying myself with nothing in particular—nothing but thoughts and fears meant to delay this. My meeting with Sister Mecham was not the first.

I glanced over at the truck. She sat there as well, her head down as though absorbed with something in her lap. The truck was absurd, really. So tall.

I recalled what her husband had confessed to me just two weeks before: He was attracted to men. He had said that he could not resist the temptation to drive to the park on his lunch breaks and pull up next to the other men alone in their vehicles. He said he'd hang his elbow out and smile at them. Most times the men would smile back. Brother Mecham had wanted to tell me—confess, he said—to the actions that he and “three, maybe five” of these random men had engaged in.

I had listened.

I have also listened to Sister Mecham in my office. I have listened to her on the phone. At the service station and the post office. And one time last summer at the swimming pool, when she was wearing a dark-blue, one-piece suit, cut very high and very low. Since then, I haven't needed to work very hard to imagine the finer curves and contours of Sister Mecham's figure. Right down to her red-painted toenails.

I do not care to admit the fact that Sister Mecham has a crush on me, but, since I am detailing the facts as I see them, that disclosure must be made. And I suppose it is only fair, and obvious, to admit that I, too, have an unhealthy desire for Sister Mecham.

So the day it began was maybe not this day, this warm spring day in May. I may not speak for Sister Mecham, though I believe she would agree. It really began two years ago when the Mechams moved into our ward and I shook her small hand in the front of the chapel. It was the look she gave me then: a coquettish tilt of her chin, and the dimpled cheeks of her nervous, charming smile. It was unmistakable. And mutual.

Above and well beyond my calling as bishop of the Pinion Ward, I am a man. There is no getting around that. Some things cannot be explained, but I know when lightning strikes, be it ever so humble as the telling twinkle in a pretty woman's eye.

She climbed down from the truck when I got out of the Corolla and we met on the sidewalk. I should have said that I was sorry, that we couldn't conduct this meeting tonight. I
should have told her that my clerk could not be there, and we were not adhering to guidelines set forth to protect both her and me. But I didn't.

We went up the stairs, I unlocked the church doors, and we went in. In silence we walked down the short hall to my office. I closed the door behind us, and she sat down in one of the two straight-backed but quite comfortable chairs in front of my desk. I sat down in an even more comfortable chair behind the desk. I believe we were both uncomfortable.

"Sister Mecham," I said.
"Bishop."
She sat there in her tight shirt, her bosom, so . . . so lovely. She stood up. I stood up. She turned away and strode to the closed office door. I looked at her bottom clad in tight jeans with a flourish of flower on the hip pockets. I thought she was leaving, unnerved. I slid from behind my desk—to what? Stop her?

She sighed and turned to face me. "When was the last time you and your wife made love?"
We had talked about this before.
"Months," I said.
She slid her bare arms beneath her breasts and clutched her elbows in her hands.
"Why?"

I had no answer for that. There was only the overpow-ering longing for this woman, her question hanging there unanswerable between her lips and mine.
"I know if you were my husband . . ." She moved closer to the desk, to me. "I would."

So it happened. Her arms were around my neck, and she pushed me back against my desk, the edge pressing against the back of my thighs. With her slight mass against my frame, she quickly proved the point that, above and well beyond my calling as bishop of the Spanish Fork Pinion Ward, I am a man. She began to sway and ever so humbly thrust her hips against me. And her lips were on my chin, her tongue on the five o'clock shadow of my neck, teeth at my four-in-hand-knotted blue tie. I placed my hands on her hips, and she moaned with such carnal pleasure at my touch I felt like a god. Her mouth was on mine, her tongue snaking in between my teeth, probing for what I knew not, and I pushed past her teeth with my own. Never had I kissed like this. Our hands and bodies were everywhere, clutching, squeezing, caressing, and I slowly began to hear my own groans: low guttural oh's and en's, rhythmical sounds coming from someone not me. Not me. Not me until, like waking from a dream, it was me, and I somehow transformed those moans into no's, no's, no, no, no, no.
“No.”

Sister Mecham backed away. I stood there amazed, breathless. “I think we should pray.”

She did not look at me. But she sat down and bowed her head.

I shuffled back to my chair and I prayed out loud. I cannot in faith recall what my prayer was. I stood; she stood; we shook hands, and she left the ward house. After a time of reflection behind my desk, I locked the office door, the front doors, and left the church as well.

A half-mile from home on an empty stretch of road, in a desperate state of need, I unzipped my trousers, could not get at it, unbuckled my seatbelt, hit a chuckhole, and drove my automobile off the pavement, through a barbed wire fence and into a ditch. My forehead smashed smartly into the windshield, leaving a spider web of cracked safety glass to the left of the rearview mirror. Though my head throbbed, I was otherwise uninjured. I zipped up my pants, opened the car door, and stepped into the brackish water meandering along in the ditch.

I came up out of the water and stood to look at my disabled and stuck Corolla, trunk lid popped, rear wheel lifted and still rotating slowly in the tall weeds. I looked down at my crotch and my diminished need and shook my head. I felt so far from home.

I began to walk in my squelching, squeaking shoes. The robins perching above me on the power lines mocked me with their bright chirps. I was in no mood for this or them, and I threw a rock at the birds and swore. Away they flew.

Just as I was about to curse my luck that there was no one driving on this road to help me, I came across a ten-speed bike propped against a fencepost. I looked around, strained my sight over the fallow field and vacant lots to the south and west, to the subdivision where I lived, the roofs poking up over the slight hill. I looked across another empty field to Highway 6 and watched cars go by in a mad rush of fluid sound—semis and campers, commuters. I looked up and down this little old farm road I was on and saw no one.

So I mounted the bike and pedaled on.

As I rode, I thought of my wife and Sister Mecham. Myself. My family’s salvation. And I could not go straight home. I pressed the brakes on the bicycle around the bend from my house and got off. My wet shoes still gurgling, I wheeled the bike into the abandoned yard of Brother and Sister Gallegos. I walked around to the overgrown backyard and wedged the bike between a large bush and the foundation. Over my shoulder, the sun set on a beautiful early-May evening, though I did not care.

Such an injustice the state had perpetrated on the Gallegos. Life-long residents of this piece of property; they’d always been set off from the subdivision where most of the ward lived. And then the declaration of eminent domain to widen Highway 6 had pitched them off their land and settled them in a two-bedroom condo in a new development across town. I saw them at the grocery store a while back. Old Brother Gallegos had gone through a treatment of teeth whitening. He smiled more than I thought prudent for having been forced off his land and moved out of the Pinion Ward.

The state hadn’t begun construction yet on the new highway, so the Gallegos house stood abandoned. The lawn was tall, and weeds had taken up squatter’s rights. Raucous starlings flew from the roof to the ash tree off the south corner. A sturdy, roofless tree hut sat in the ash’s lower branches. The Gallegos children must have pounded the structure together decades ago.

Intent on finding an abandoned towel to at least dry my feet, I tried the back door of the house. Locked. I tried the front door. Locked. I slipped through a broken basement window and stood on green shag carpeting in an empty, dim room. I explored the basement rooms and found very little other than a half-dozen wrinkled yellow condoms scattered in a corner. I crept up the stairs and came to the kitchen. The light coming through the slightly parted curtains in the front room window was fading fast. I went from room to room, and then I returned to the front room window with its floor-length curtain. Balanced on one foot, I wrapped the drapery around my wet shoe and squeezed.

That’s when I heard the first siren.

I unlocked the front door and went out onto the porch. Through the darkening night, I saw flashes of police lights across the fields. I do believe the siren squawked off right in the vicinity of my car. I felt a jump of fright in my chest. Of course my fear was that I had become a common criminal of the sort who would delight in pre-adulterous shenanigans, leave the scene of an accident, and steal a ten-speed bicycle.

There was a slight rise and, atop it, a row of bramble bushes blocking my view from the porch, so I climbed up to the tree hut. Six secure boards were nailed into the trunk of the ash tree. The bark had grown around these ladder rungs. The last board was broken and hanging by one nail, so I had to hitch myself up the last bit to the floor of the hut. I stooped there, listening to the fading wheeze of my squishy shoes. I peered over the hut wall and could clearly see the police cruiser’s rotating lights. The trunk lid of the Corolla was lit up in spotlight. Three people stood in the lights gawking at my car. The officer, his gun belt shining, casually walked along the ditch, playing the beam of his long flashlight through the weeds, presumably searching for the driver of this abandoned car who was, in fact, hunkered down in a tree hut a half mile away, stricken with an odd and sudden sense of calm.

I could simply fall from my own life like a sunset, couldn’t I? Let this night of discontent hide me whole? I was just a fixture in my home, an underutilized body to make meals for, a paycheck that could be easily circumvented if Nelly, my wife, took the full-time work that the firm in Orem had been offering her. Our only daughter, Michelle, would graduate from high school in a week, and she had a boyfriend returning from a mission in the fall. They had plans to marry. The two boys, Mike and Jacob,
were grown, starting families of their own. My job did not matter. CPAs could fall from the sky.

And what of the ward? I obviously was not fit for ecclesiastical leadership anymore. I was supposed to be helping Sister Mecham see her way through a tough time in her life, not spurting her on to pelvic thrusts against her spiritual leader.

Couldn't I just run away into the night like a scolded child?

I stared at the trifling commotion going on across the field—where the Corolla sat, trunk up, jammed in a ditch—thinking of logistics: Where would I go? How would I live? Would a change of identity be in order? All these things I would have to take the time to ponder.

Then my cell phone buzzed in the breast pocket of my suit jacket. I saw that it was Nelly calling, and, with the pull of something like a compass in my heart, I looked across the stretch of vacant lots to the street I lived on. I could see my house clearly over the back fence and see that the kitchen light was on and the blinds were not pulled down. The house was only about half a football field away, and I was shocked at the clear view. We never pulled that kitchen blind down. Did the Gallegos family watch us? Of course, nothing beyond cooking and praying and eating ever happened in the kitchen. Or any other room of the house, for that matter. But then, as I stood there feeling the buzz of my phone in my palm and watching the yellow glow of the kitchen in my house, Nelly stepped into view through the window.

She was so far away, this tiny figure in the night. I let the phone buzz, and I watched Nelly pace in the kitchen light. I knew what she smelled: the peppered chicken in the crock-pot with diced carrots, onions, potatoes, garlic, and the zucchini she'd most likely just added about the time the Corolla veered off into the ditch. It was the usual Thursday night dinner. Nelly worked at the Benson, Benson, and Crawley law firm on Thursday afternoons, had been doing their books for three straight years. The crock-pot dinner on Thursday nights was like Sunday's roast and potatoes: unerring, constant, like some religious tenet—an act of faithful commitment. I was suddenly starving for more than just nourishment there in the Gallegos' tree hut. So close to home. But I didn't answer Nelly's call, and the phone stopped buzzing.

Then I watched Nelly standing at the kitchen window across the way, talking into her phone, her free-hand lifting, dropping, lifting again. Soon there came a single extended buzz from my own phone, signifying a voicemail message.

I never listened to that message, never punched in the PIN to listen. I knew what she had said, and I didn't need to hear it in a message that had been recorded and sent out over wires and satellites and routers miles from here. She was just across that vacant lot, and I knew what she had said: Those three words, or some variation that I did not deserve. Not now. She knew my car was in the ditch. She knew I was not at home. She knew I had an appointment with Sister Mecham that night. She knew I would never do anything to hurt her. She knew she knew nothing.

THE SEARCH PARTIES came—three or four in the weeks after I piled the Toyota into the ditch. They searched the Gallegos' erstwhile home inside and out. Not once, however, did anyone consider checking the tree hut. I took this as a testament of my miserable adulthood. Why would a man go up a tree?

And so I took up residence in the Gallegos' abandoned house. There were no basic amenities: electricity, water, food. I had a piece of cardboard and a strip of wall insulation I found in the weeds for a bed. I went back and forth between house and tree hut: my lookout post. I even ventured off the site. Most of my reconnaissance movements were confined to soldier-stumped creeping through weeds and rabbitbrush to the fence of my backyard.

When I observed from the tree hut that both Nelly and Michelle were out of the house, I would enter my home and eat small bits of everything, a grape here, a slice of sandwich meat, a piece of bread from deep in a loaf. I would snake a single peach wedge from an opened bottle of preserves. I was like a field mouse, taking imperceptible amounts of sustenance. I shivered rarely, drip drying my thinning frame or using paper towels I could throw away. I shat, and I shaved using my razor that I carefully cleaned and returned to its rightful place, a place that did not change until the end of August when the razor was just gone.

But that was a long way off yet. That first night, in the Gallegos' old tree hut, the odd siren and concerned voices in the neighborhood drifted across the vacant lot to my ears, and I slept fitfully on improvised bedding that left me itching and stiff come the dawn of a new, unknown day.

ONE MIGHT THINK that the wife of a man who has gone missing might act hysterically—run up and down the streets tearing at her hair, pulling at her clothing, crying out. I suppose that was really something I wished to see, something I was waiting to see, something that kept me in that tree hut. But Nelly, from my vantage point, did not change in the least. Not even that first night. I saw no sign of horrible duress or alarm, no passion whatsoever. In a couple of weeks, she must have accepted that job at the Orem firm, because with the regularity of the sun and moon she began to rise and leave in the morning and return in the afternoon just as I had done. She even drove the Corolla, which had been pulled from the ditch and, after a windshield and bumper replacement, parked in the driveway. I watched her leave from the front window of the Gallegos' home. I watched her come home. I watched her in the kitchen window across the way from the tree hut. I watched her. I watched Michelle. I watched my grown boys drop in with their families. I became a faithful observer of my own life, free of me.

Michelle took a summer job with unpredictable hours.
Judging from the odor clinging to her clothes in the hamper, she was a waitress. I could detect food—pedestrian food—grease, coffee, perhaps beer? These clothes were always black or white, depending on the shift she worked. I sniffed Nelly's clothes too.

Michelle nearly caught me at home one day; must've been around mid-June because the Russian olive trees were done blossoming. My church suit was in tatters, knees worn through from crawling, white shirt gone hoary, shoes overrun with ecosystems of putrid bacteria. I decided to risk finding an outfit in the back of my closet somewhere, something that would go unnoticed. As far as I could observe, nothing that was mine had even been touched. All my temple garments were still folded and lying next to Nelly's in the underwear drawer. My extra suits still hung under dry-cleaner paper. I decided to take a suit and hang the hanger back up, empty beneath its paper shroud. I found a pair of old tennis shoes forgotten in the deep back corner of the closet. From my drawer, I took an old T-shirt, a pair of socks and some jockey-shorts that I had used for sports. All this I rolled into a handy cache under my arm and started down the upstairs hall feeling like a giddy burglar.

I heard the back door open. I froze in the hall, a dirty vagabond with long, greasy hair, standing in a church suit that was stained with the muck and wear of a month's hard living. I heard Michelle speaking on her cell phone as she walked into the kitchen, her heels clacking on the linoleum.

"My dad? No, nothing new." This spurred me into movement, and I slipped back down the hall and into my bedroom. I lay prone beside the far side of the bed, clutching my clean clothes, squirming under the dust ruffle. I lay there, listening to Michelle talk. She paced back and forth in the hallway outside my room. I caught fragments that meant nothing: "He's coming in the . . . Oh . . . whatever you call those . . . in that case, I was thinking . . . “ She listened, then laughed, full and true, and my heart ached. "We can only hope . . . yeah, he's been calling her a lot . . . " Her heels stopped clacking on the floor, and she sighed. "I don't know. She's confused. We all are. I just want her to be happy."

While my daughter spoke on the phone, I opened my eyes and looked into the half-light underneath the bed. There was a small dark lump under there. I reached out and put my hand around it. My tie. The green and blue one I had used to blindfold Nelly during the last Christmas holidays. I felt a flutter of blood in my pitiable manhood. Was that the last time? The last time we had lain as man and wife? I had blindfolded her and led her to the bedroom, where I told her to stand at the footboard. I took off all my clothes and lay on
the coverlet with nothing but a rose between my teeth. She had been surprised and almost, I think, turned on by the mild monkey business I had wangled her into. She had dropped the blindfold to the floor, and somehow it had been pushed under the bed. We had made perfectly acceptable love that afternoon, and then I had left for a bishop’s meeting wearing my red Christmas tie.

Michelle eventually wandered into her own room, giving me the chance to slink out of my home with my clothes and the tie. I hurried across the backyard, over the fence, through the tall weeds of the vacant lot, and crawled in the basement bedroom window of the Gallegos house. I went out into the hallway and strolled to the staircase, where I came upon two high-school teenagers from my ward, lying at the top of the steps, locked in a tight battle of sexual congress.

For the second time in less than fifteen minutes, I froze, a dirty man standing in a hall with a clean church suit rolled under his arm—a tragic, filthy thieving hobo.

The two, in their shockingly eager ministrations upon one another, did not notice me, and I slipped into an open room near the stairway, whereupon I noticed the young man and young woman’s clothing in a heap on the floor next to the woeful crumpled condoms. I peeked out around the doorway, was assailed by moans and oaths, quick-stepped across the basement and climbed back out the broken window.

I hid in the tree hut fighting off the image of these two young souls. Their flesh. Their need and desire. The boy’s taut, pistoning bottom between the girl’s long thin legs, toes circling, pointed fervently toward heaven. I peeked through the wood slats at them when they emerged through the window like spelunkers from a cave, blinking in the sunshine of the real world. They were again the young man and young woman I knew and had counseled, in their lives.

The boards beneath me shifted and creaked. I froze as the boy looked up at me through the hole in the wall. Our eyes met and held, and I saw the appreciation of our shared but separate predicaments cultivate in his eyes, on his cheeks, and in the slight upturn at the corners of his mouth. He held my gaze for a few steps, and then he winked at me, turned to the girl and kissed her hard. He grabbed her breast and then took up her hand and walked with her down the Gallegos drive. He did not look back.

So I was no longer alone in my self-imposed exile. I had an accomplice of sorts. So it should be. What great harm in that? A trust that could hold. His great sin was merely fornication.

That word. I despised it more than ever, sitting there in the hut, clutching my dry-cleaned suit. What a word for that act. At least it was tangible, what they were doing, their young admiration, that touch between palms as they walked away from me. But my sin? Abandonment. Now there was a word I had not fully understood until now. At this moment, it was a world apart from any expression of love. I felt our pact—the boy’s and mine—was weighted much in his favor. But it would hold for a while, the summer at least. Maybe even for ten years or more, until he became a man and would someday tell his buddy or his wife a story about a bishop lost in a tree. He would keep that contract—the one he signed with a wink.

AND THE SUMMER skulked along with me and my self-imposed affliction. I watched fireworks from the hut on the Fourth of July. Huge manifestations of light and noise filled the sky over the roof of my house. I thought I would starve that night. I had no food reserves built up, and Nelly and Michelle never left the house. Mike and Jacob brought their wives and my grandkids home for a backyard barbecue in the late afternoon. Such good boys, my sons. I knew that one or the other had taken over my duties at the grill. I heard their voices. They were grown, and I wondered: When did that happen? I sat in the heat of the tree hut as the meat roasted, giving off tantalizing smoke that came to my downwind nose. I heard laughter over the fence; saw a baby, Jake Jr., my grandson, fly straight up and back down with a giggle; saw Nelly in the kitchen window making a pitcher of ice-water. I wanted it all back, and I felt I was in danger of drifting like dander in a breeze. I had to lie down flat with my back against the wood floor and my arms spread, fingernails in the grain, looking up through the tree branches at the spots of blue that jangled there between the leaves.

When the fireworks began, I knew I had a chance. My family would be in the front yard watching the show. I came down from the hut, ran across the lot, leaped the fence, and plopped into my yard, crouching like a suburban ninja. It was dark with the occasional glow of phosphorescent red, blue, and gold. I walked to the barbecue and lifted the lid on its squeaky hinges. I inserted the first hot dog into my mouth and chomped my way through it in three bites. I stuffed two more cold ones in my front pants pocket, lifted a hamburger from the grill and dropped it into a half-empty sack of tortilla chips from the picnic table. Then I bolted for the fence, but I stopped and looked back. The pitcher of water sat there on the table, ice cubes skimming the surface. I had a water jug that I kept filled at the Gallegos’, but it was always warm. Maybe I was being careless, but I went back and lifted the pitcher to my lips and drank until rivulets flowed down both sides of my mouth and off my chin.

I crept into the breezeway of the carport and looked at my family sitting there in the driveway watching fireworks. I drank from the pitcher again and wiped my face with my sleeve. Then I belched. It came between firework mortar blasts, and its deep resonance seemed to silence the oohs and ahs at the front of the house. I heard Michelle—or was it Nelly?—say, “What was that?” I fled under the flash and horrible crash above me.
MY HAIR WAS growing. I had lost twenty pounds. I looked like one of the more liberal kids in the ward. I tried to find some sense in all this. I spoke out loud in the Gallegos house as if someone else were there. As if there were a hundred people there. I preached up and down the stairs. I stood at the front room window, reciting poetry and scripture to the setting sun. I chanted strange mantras in the cool mornings as the sun rose in the east. I shrank into the back corners of rooms looking at paint, trying to raise words from the brush strokes, the dust, and the spider webs. I prayed. I spoke to the Lord. I was quiet. I listened.

Is it a surprise what finally made me walk through the front door of my house one dry August night and say, “Nelly, I’m home”? I have examined the narrow path I wore between the Gallegos’ old house, the tree hut, and my own home that summer, and there is no illumination, no revelatory lesson. There was my long unkempt hair, the lost twenty pounds of body fat. There were two suits, one navy, the other gray pinstripe, each rendered shabby shadows of their original cut. There were those two young people with their promising love that I would grow to covet and hunger for. There was the reminiscence of dear sweet Sister Mecham, vulnerable and alone in her need. Her embrace. Her tears. There was no holy place here for me day after day while I lurked on the edge of my life, my family. A season in the wilderness. Though I fasted, though I suffered, there was no great redemption given unto me.

There was simply Nelly in the kitchen window that Saturday night, her hair done up nice, makeup—a new blouse? She stood there looking out at the space, the dusk, my tree hut. I thought she was praying in some open-eyed way. On her lips there were the words I could not hear, but craved like warm bread. And then a man I did not know appeared in the kitchen behind her.

I would have wanted to be unsoiled, to have shaved, but my razor was gone, and I stank like the beggar I was. Even so, I came down those barked-over slats to the ground, and with my green and blue tie tucked in my back-pocket, I extracted the ten-speed bike from behind the bush and rode to my street. I got off the bike and dropped it on the lawn next to the strange car in the driveway. I stood tall for the first time in years, in an eternity, walked to my front door and put my hand on the knob to take my place. To show that above and well beyond all in this life I have wronged and all I may right, in this home at least, I am a man.

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**MEMORABILIA**

The river falls from the ladle and the sky is spooning down salmon.
The kite is about to lift me from the rocks
But the string breaks and
It flies away.
If I could catch up to my longings,
I wouldn't be let down on the bank.
The past
Is somewhere back by the dam
And tomorrow
Is the water in the lungs of the drowned.
The tourists park in the lot and hope to capture a piece of summer.
They have brought their wallets to take remnants home in their pockets.
I am part of the scenery when the landmarks have been hung on the walls.

*DAVID LAWRENCE*
BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

BITS AND PIECES FROM THE INBOX

by D. Jeff Burton

THE PAST FEW Borderlands columns have elicited some particularly worthwhile comments, some of which I want to share with you. Of course I’ve changed the writers’ names to shelter their identities.

Email from Barbara responding to recent columns about those struggling to “find a suitable mate” or to manage relationship issues:

BARBARA: When my husband and I began our relationship, he was a true believer. I was a convert who, though holding strong reservations about organized religion, felt drawn to the Church by its new and intellectually stimulating ideas. Our differing perspectives have caused some heated and intellectually stimulating ideas. Our differing perspectives have caused some heated and interesting debates that started during our dating years and have continued on through our marriage to date. But our differing outlooks have been a blessing in many ways.

• Richard Poll’s talk about Liahona Saints and Iron Rod Saints helped us to agree that a stumbling block. Several things are different from another’s. We acknowledge that each has strengths that can help us in our relationship.

• We try not to let our egos and pride get in the way. We don’t try to prove the other person wrong. We respect each other’s integrity.

• We recognize that one person’s gifts, spiritual and otherwise, are different from another’s. We acknowledge that each has strengths that can help us in our relationship.

• Being trained in the sciences, we try to use the scientific method in our search for truth. For example, we observe how others practice a principle in order to ascertain how effective it is. If the principle works well in most cases, we usually feel good about adopting it also.

• When we pray and get answers, we recognize that the answer is for the one asking and perhaps not for someone else. We allow the other the liberty of asking and receiving answers that make sense for him or her.

• We recognize that the joy of life is the journey and that journeys are better with a companion. Life would be very boring if we had no direct responses from the official Church to my Borderland columns. But over the years, two of my stake presidents have called me in to ask about things I have written. Though I was under the impression that the call-ins were of local origin, both stake presidents stated that someone had called them from “down-town” to look into things. In the first incident, I was released from the stake high council. In the most recent case, the stake president just seemed to be ascertaining my support of the Church—kind of like a temple recommend interview. I left the meeting in good stead, I think. I have since served a mission. I do my home teaching every month and serve as our ward’s neighborhood emergency preparation coordinator. But, I am considered (by myself and by ward members) to be on the fringes or in the borderline emergency preparation coordinator. But, I am considered (by myself and by ward members) to be on the fringes or in the borderlands of the Church. This status makes it harder for me to be close to other ward members, but I’ve seen that even true...

Are any of your writers or editors concerned about the possibility of being “called on the carpet” by Church leaders for stepping too far out of the mainstream? Do you follow any guidelines in this respect?

JEFF: Glad you like the magazine. I think you’re right about there being “many other versions” of Mormonism out there. Some may think we’re in lock-step, but my guess is that out of any two million active Mormons, you would find about two million slightly or significantly different versions of Mormonism. Think about your own ward members or even your family. Each has a differing view of Mormonism and what it requires of them.

In this column and my books, I’ve suggested that each of us naturally develops a personal relationship with our Father in Heaven—and a personal religion. For most of us in the Borderlands, our personal religion is based on the fundamentals of Christianity and Mormonism. It’s in our DNA, as they say.

As for following guidelines, yes, we at SUNSTONE follow some informal guidelines, e.g., responsible scholarship, honesty, and no attacks on Church leaders, doctrine, or scripture. What you see in SUNSTONE are thoughts about Mormon experience, policy, and practice, especially as they affect the local scene—the people in the wards and stakes—as my column does.

I haven’t sensed much worry about “being called on the carpet.” Church leaders likely have more important concerns.

I’ve had no direct responses from the official Church to my Borderland columns. But over the years, two of my stake presidents have called me in to ask about things I have written. Though I was under the impression that the call-ins were of local origin, both stake presidents stated that someone had called them from “down-town” to look into things. In the first incident, I was released from the stake high council. In the most recent case, the stake president just seemed to be ascertaining my support of the Church—kind of like a temple recommend interview. I left the meeting in good stead, I think. I have since served a mission. I do my home teaching every month and serve as our ward’s neighborhood emergency preparation coordinator. But, I am considered (by myself and by ward members) to be on the fringes or in the borderlands of the Church. This status makes it harder for me to be close to other ward members, but I’ve seen that even true...
believers can have that same difficulty. We may see our fellow ward members on Sunday for three hours and get to know them through our callings, but we rarely know what’s really going on “behind the front door” of most homes, or behind the foreheads of most ward members.

Email from Travis who, with his wife, agonized for years over their relationship with the Church and their status as Borderlanders. His experience of moving into Group 3 status picks up here. This may be instructive for those contemplating leaving the Borderlands:

TRAVIS: We’d leave the ward parking lot each Sunday, and either my wife or I would ask, “Why do we come? We don’t belong here anymore.”

For a long time, we pondered the best way of dropping out, but nothing seemed feasible. The problem was solved when I became ill and couldn’t go to church for several months. When I did go back, I found I hadn’t missed it a bit; I haven’t been back regularly since then. That was two years ago. My wife still serves as a family history consultant and works one day each week in the Family History Center. Otherwise, we’re not really active anymore.

Our relationship with our children has not been affected much. Their love for us doesn’t seem dependent on our level of activity in the Church. Our son long ago moved to Group 3, and our youngest daughter is a frequent flyer between Groups 2 and 3. Our oldest daughter married a returned missionary who later became a bishop. She’s an ex-Relief Society president who teaches seminary. She’ll live happily ever after in Group 1. Our decision to leave activity hurt her, but she expresses her love and affection as freely as she did as a child.

Though most members of the ward have essentially shunned us, our hometeacher has stuck close. He’d be here in a minute if he wasn’t busy working out for him to come into our home for a while. Our bishop eventually called him on a mission and then encouraged him to go to BYU. There he met a pretty girl who had grown up a standard Mormon. They prayed for guidance, became engaged, and set a date.

Since he had no family in the Church, our young man asked us to accompany him to the temple wedding. We traveled a few hundred miles to get there, but after our arrival, we noticed some strange actions that suggested trouble. That night at midnight, he knocked on our motel door and said he didn’t think the marriage was going to happen, and sure enough, it didn’t.

He was brokenhearted, of course. She was confused about God’s will for her and shortly thereafter went on a mission, telling people that that was what God had in mind for her all along. He continued at BYU and eventually met and married a talented, self-assured, competent girl with a beautiful spirit. She was just right for him and still is. So things worked out for him, despite what he thought God might have wanted for him earlier.

Nothing can guarantee that what we might think or assume is God’s will is absolute and unchanging. Our human nature might be clouding the picture or warping our perceptions. Or maybe God is okay with several solutions to a problem.

Email from Ron:

RON: Though I miss some of the perks of being in Group 1, I count myself mostly in the Borderlands. I can’t go back without changes—in me or in the Church. What do you think would make it easier for me to move back into Group 1 status?

JEFF: That is a complex and very personal question. It would certainly make things easier if Group 1 members accepted Borderlanders as they are. And I agree that by making certain policy and practice changes, the Church could expand the borders to perhaps include many of us. I once compiled a list of “inspirations” that, if I were God, I would broadcast to Mormons at local levels in hopes of preparing a few changes in policy and practice. Here’s a sample of my wish list of “inspirations.” (Add a dash of MSG to these, please.)

• Living a life based on Christian principles is at least as important as going to church meetings or to the temple. A religious life based on faith is as valuable as one based on testimony.

• Instead of Cheerios, mothers may issue Mrs. Cavanaugh’s chocolates to their children (and also to those sitting nearby).

• It is okay to expand temple covenants to include more Jesus-like behaviors such as love, kindness, patience, thoughtfulness, sharing, caring, humility and honesty.

• It is also acceptable to open temple marriage ceremonies to immediate family members, whether they hold temple recommendations or not.

• Let’s minimize secrets. Secrets worth keeping are mainly those that protect the personal privacy of individual members.

• Based on the inspiration above, it is okay to provide more information to members about, for example, how tithing money is spent or activity statistics.

• Likewise, Church business meetings can be open to members, and the minutes of such meetings may be made widely available.

• Explanations of how policy decisions come about—who was involved, why the issue arose, and how the discussion proceeded—may be shared with members. It is acceptable to glean information and ideas from members before policy decisions are rendered.

• It would be useful if ward and stake members had a hand in selecting their local leaders.
• In some cases, it is fine to de-emphasize proselytizing missions and instead encourage youth to go on service-oriented missions.

• Let’s try allowing members to partially designate the destination of their tithing donations, e.g., “50% to mission work.”

• Church magazine articles for adults can offer competing viewpoints on an issue without causing disastrous consequences.

• Non-members who are expert in some religious topic can be invited to speak at Church meetings.

• When appropriate, the bishop is allowed to stand up and announce, “It’s such a nice day; let’s cancel the meeting and have a ward picnic instead.”

• On some Sundays, it is okay for the bishopric and high councilmen to sit with their children in the audience while their wives sit on the stand.

• It won’t hurt if teachers are free to use any factual source of information that sheds light on topics covered in classes.

RON: Okay, I see what you mean. One more thought: It isn’t only God who inspires people; people themselves sometimes inspire other people. But moving on, for your first “inspiration,” what “Christian principles” are you talking about?

JEFF: I’m referring to the principles that guide the way we treat others. Once, for a home teaching lesson, I compiled a list of words that reflect “Christian traits and approaches for living.” For me, these terms represent the attitudes and behaviors that mark one as a Mormon Christian. They suggest attributes that I associate with my understanding of Jesus. I try (with limited success, frankly) to choose one of these traits or attitudes each day, figure out what it means, and apply it that day to my behavior. For example, if the day’s word is “caring,” I might think as I drive my car, “How can I care for people in the other cars on the road?” I might conclude, “I won’t use my cell phone, I’ll avoid competing with other drivers, and I’ll drive carefully.” You might think of this approach as the “Borderlands Game.” You might also compile a personal list for yourself and try this game. Then have your kids try the game.

Below is my list.

NOTES

1. In our model, we have defined a “Borderland” member (Group 2) as “a Church member who maintains ties to the Church but who may have a different understanding of faith and belief, lack of a standard LDS ‘testimony,’ a different view of LDS history, open questions about some aspect of the Church, reduced or modified Church activity, feelings of not meeting traditional Group 1 norms or acceptability criteria.”


Please send me your experiences from life in the Borderlands.

D. Jeff Burton, djeffburton@gmail.com

The Borderlands Game

accepting caring a celebrator charitable chaste clean comforting compassionate concerned contrite courageous a defender diligent empathetic equal faithful fair for giving for the right generous gentle honest honorable honoring humble happy helpful hopeful inclusive joyful just kind liberal long-suffering loving meek merciful obedient open patient a peacemaker pleasing prayerful principled sacrificing sharing temperate thankful thoughtful tolerant true truthful trusting wise
Who hasn't experienced the contradiction of doing all we are supposed to do within the Church yet feeling like a loser because we think we could have done more? This sense of shame breeds self-enmity and hatred. We don't need more self-righteous, self-promoting religious behaviors. We need to surrender our self-contempt and finally embrace the part of ourselves that we've been trying so long to hide from: the vulnerable, imperfect child.

Our behavior as sons and daughters, husbands, wives, mothers and fathers, lovers and friends is ultimately fused with our unexplored interior life—childhood memories, feelings, fears, and especially our relationship with ourselves.

Authors, artists, composers, and poets have the ability to articulate inner realities in a way that scientists and clinicians cannot. While researchers conduct studies that add much to our knowledge of the dynamics of family interactions, they cannot capture the intensity, complexity, and profundity of actual life. Creative artists and storytellers give life to the findings of scientific research—which seems like a miracle to me.

Some of the most moving film portrayals of family life I've seen include Ordinary People, The Great Santini, ’night Mother, Dead Poets Society, Kramer vs. Kramer, Parenthood, My Life, and Doing Time on Maple Drive. The power of these stories resides in their ability to sensitize us to the underlying and sometimes hidden essence of our relationships.

Another such movie is The Kid. Though it's a typical, feel-good Walt Disney release (in which Bruce Willis gives up his guns for a suit), it is also a well-tuned metaphor for the six stages of self-discovery.

Willis's character is Russ Duritz, an aging but successful Los Angeles image consultant whose life is interrupted by an unwanted intruder—his pudgy, whiny, eight-year-old self, Rusty.

**Stage One: Oblivion**

In this first stage, we are living deep in cultural slumber. We put all our mental, emotional, and physical efforts into establishing our success as human beings according to our culture's dictates. Conformity and production are the goals of this phase. We are clueless about why we act the way we do.

Thirty-nine-year-old Russ has no tolerance for people who feel sorry for themselves. To a client on the brink of an emotional breakdown, he sneers, “Somebody call the waaaaAmbulance!” However, Russ also suffers from insomnia and a twitch in his left eye. Like some of us, he remembers absolutely nothing from his childhood. He also avoids anyone connected to his past, including his father. His house is an extension of himself—a virtual fortress with high concrete walls and alarms to keep intruders out.

The only pleasant thing in Russ's life is his personal assistant, Amy, a lovely, good-hearted woman who habitually bites a fingernail when feeling stressed or put upon. Russ and Amy are attracted to each other, but neither admits it.

The movie begins with Russ being his typical jerky self while performing triage on the public images of his clients. But while he's stopped in a freeway traffic jam, a red bi-plane buzzes him, causing him to scream like a little child. The plane is a metaphor for his subconscious energies marshalling to get his attention.

**Stage Two: Agitation**

In this stage, our carefully constructed world starts to unravel. The energies we have suppressed since childhood begin leaking out. We are assaulted by feelings and memories that we do not understand and don't want to face. Many people seek relief from the symptoms of this stage through medications and addictive behaviors.

Russ arrives home late at night to glimpse a child in a red jacket just disappearing into the bushes. Infuriated and wielding a baseball bat, Russ searches his house, but the only thing he finds is a red toy plane that he thinks his father must have left.

Later that night, Russ is awakened by a red-jacketed kid, who has managed to break into his house. The boy escapes through a window, but Russ jumps into his Porsche and takes off in pursuit of the boy as he speeds away through the dark streets on a red bike. The boy disappears.

In the morning, Russ goes to a psychiatrist's office and demands a prescription. He insists that he's not like the nut-jobs who have to see a therapist—he just needs some pills to stop the hallucinations. When the psychiatrist questions him about his childhood, Russ responds, “I’ve forgotten my childhood. It's in my past where it belongs.” Reluctantly she gives him a prescription for four pills but insists that he find out what is causing the hallucinations.

Russ returns home to find his hallucination playing with the toy plane in the living room. They argue about who owns the plane until Russ's knees give out and he has...
to sit down. When he hoists his pant leg to reveal a scar, the kid pulls up his own pant leg and shows off an identical scar. The thought that this kid could be his younger self hits Russ like a freight train.

**STAGE THREE: DENIAL**

Denial is the most difficult stage to penetrate—and we often never do. Our emotional life is typically barricaded behind years of defensive postures, distortions, and memory blocks. As I've explained in previous columns, most of us are protecting ourselves from feelings of self-loathing that the sanctuary trauma of our childhood had foisted on us. These feelings are so painful and pose such a threat to our controlled, ordered selves that we will do almost anything to keep them at bay.

Unwilling to accept that his young self is sitting in his living room, Russ bolts out of the room and locks himself in the bathroom. There he gulps down all four pills in an attempt to make Rusty disappear.

But Rusty doesn’t.

Russ brings the kid to his office to learn if Amy can see him. She can, which makes Russ feel better about his sanity but does nothing to help the fact that he’s stuck with the doughy little loser he’s been trying to escape all his life.

Meanwhile, young Rusty isn’t very pleased with his older self, either. He figures out that Russ isn’t a jet pilot, hasn’t married, and worst of all, doesn’t have a dog named Chester. He concludes that he is going to grow up to be a loser.

Though Russ accepts the fact that Rusty is going to be hanging around a while, he decides that he’s going to make Rusty more presentable. He puts Rusty on a diet and signs him up for boxing lessons. But Rusty fails miserably, throwing Russ into a rage. He calls Rusty a pudge-boy and a pathetic dweeb. He makes fun of his appearance and the way he talks. Then he turns to Amy, asking if she despises Rusty as much as he does. Amy answers, “No,” then asks, “Why? Do you despise you?” It’s a question we all could ask ourselves.

**STAGE FOUR: SOFTENING**

The stage of softening occurs only when the stage of denial has been breached. It is a painful and scary process. Maybe for the first time in our lives, we begin to consider the possibility that all is not well. Though frightened, we begin to approach what we fear the most—our own denied and forgotten past.

During a wedding (where Rusty embarrasses Russ yet again), Russ has the chance to take his relationship with Amy up a level. But he blows the encounter, unwilling to make himself vulnerable to her. On the way home, Rusty laments Russ’s failure and pleads with him, “We gotta change. We have to change.” Rusty really doesn’t want to grow up to be a “dog-less, chick-less guy with a twitch.”

That night, while getting ready for bed, Rusty tells Russ that he has figured out what image consultants do: they help people lie about who they are so they can pretend to be somebody else. Russ is jolted enough by this no-holds-barred assessment of his life’s work that he talks candidly with a past client about his strange situation. She notes that the boy is obviously there to teach Russ something—not the other way around.

So Russ goes home and wakes Rusty, staying up the rest of the night peppering him with questions about his forgotten childhood. Rusty reminds him about how he liked caterpillars and the day...
Parmesan cheese got stuck up his nose. He talks about messing up at home and at school, his second grade teacher, and his best friend whose house smelled like fish sticks. Amid these reminiscences, they stumble upon the reason Rusty is probably there.

When Russ had been Rusty's age, he'd been tribunal in a school yard fight, which destroyed his reputation for the rest of his years at school. The two decide that if Rusty could hold his own in the fight, their lives could change. And through the magic of Disney cinema, the mountain tunnel they are driving through becomes a time warp portal transporting them backward thirty-two years to the very day of the fight!

Rusty uses the techniques he learned in his sole boxing class to knock the bully down. But winning the fight changes nothing, it's not Rusty who has to change; it's Russ.

STAGE FIVE: COMPASSION

The stage of compassion occurs when we are willing to let our hearts be vulnerable; when we are willing to face our past; when we can embrace the sadness of past injuries. When we become willing to acknowledge our own goodness as well as our wounds, we can finally forgive and embrace our wounded self and be made whole.

After the fight, Rusty is brought to the principal's office, and his mother arrives to take him home. When they pull up to the house, Rusty's dad storms out of the house and berates Rusty for making his mother come get him. We learn that she is dying. “How could you do this to your mother?” he rages. “You’re killing her!”

Rusty starts crying, but his father takes him by the face and demands, “Stop crying! Stop! You gotta grow up now. Do you understand? Grow up!” At this, Rusty’s left eye starts to twitch.

“Mom’s dying.” Rusty tells Russ after Rusty's dad has left.

“I know,” says Russ.

“Soon?” asks Rusty.

“Before your next birthday.”

“Did I do it?”

Instead of calling for the waaaAAAmbulance, big Russ gets down on his knees and embraces little Rusty, telling him that his mother's death is not his fault. This embrace of his childhood self symbolizes Russ's willingness to forgive—and this forgiveness changes everything.

STAGE SIX: ENLIGHTENMENT

When we surrender to our heart’s wisdom instead of our ego, we have entered the enlightenment stage. We reclaim our own interior life, the one we had abandoned so long ago in our attempt to appease our culture. We embrace our core identity and, for the first time since early childhood, feel at peace. Our souls are no longer engaged in civil war; our balance is restored.

By having compassion on his young self and integrating him into his life, Russ begins the process of healing enlightenment. Many of us spend much of our lives in one of the first three stages—oblivion, agitation, or denial. Though we likely experience moments of softening, we harden ourselves again to protect ourselves from the unknown. Sadly, this means we live in a state of dissonance, unable to become our deepest selves. We remain a house divided.

I think Jesus was talking about this state of self-compassion when he commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves. After all, how can we be capable of loving others in a deeply human way unless we truly love ourselves?

My own awakening wasn’t nearly as surreal as Russ’s, but it was certainly as effective. Instead of being a hard-hearted jerk, I was a self-righteous, self-promoting religious person. I didn’t know any other way to live. I was sleepwalking what my culture and church had taught me, being good exactly in proportion with the contempt I felt for myself.

Fortunately, I stumbled across this thought from Eric Hoffer: “Self-righteousness is a manifestation of self-contempt.” The idea resonated strongly with C. S. Lewis’s idea that all pride is enmity: the more pride a person carries within his or her heart, the more hostility, loathing, hatred, and contempt for self and others also resides there. Pride and contempt are joined at the hip, and, as Lewis has explained, both are the anti-state of God. I was a spiritual contradiction, my church service and good behavior fueled by my self-righteous, self-promoting religious behaviors. We need to surrender our self-contempt and finally embrace the part of ourselves that we’ve been trying so long to hide from: the vulnerable, imperfect child.

The compassionate embrace of the vulnerable inner self is a spiritual gift from God; and because it changes everything else, it may be the most important gift we could ever receive. I think it may be at least partially what Jesus meant when he said of children: “of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14). Unless we become as they are, we won’t be going there.

In the next column, I will begin exploring our well-intentioned but destructive treatment of little children via our culture’s forms of discipline.
DURING THE APRIL 2011 priesthood session of general conference, President Thomas S. Monson dedicated one fifth of his speech to encouraging single men to marry—a subject on which Church leaders have been preaching almost since Mormonism began.

“Brethren, there is a point at which it’s time to think seriously about marriage and to seek a companion with whom you want to spend eternity,” he said.

During the Sunday morning session of the same conference, apostle Richard G. Scott told single young men, “Don’t waste time in idle pursuits. Get on with life and focus on getting married. Don’t just coast through this period of life.”

Days after President Monson’s speech, LDS leaders announced the disbanding of all student wards in Utah Valley and the formation of new all-single stakes and wards for people 18–30. the Salt Lake Tribune’s Peggy Fletcher Stack connected this reorganization to the pro-marriage preaching in conference the week before, noting that persuading “young men and women to stop postponing marriage . . . is, after all, the goal of all these singles wards.”

What challenges do LDS singles confront? Does being single in the Church promise more than becoming a “ministering angel” who will wait tables in the celestial kingdom, as Pat Bagley has humorously imagined? Is singlehood a condition to be frowned on and pitied, or could it be accepted as normal—perhaps even celebrated?

FROM CONDEMNATION TO ACCOMMODATION

AUTHORS Marybeth Raynes and Erin Parsons trace LDS statements against singlehood back to 1831, when Joseph Smith penned a revelation for Leman Copley, a former celibate Shaker, declaring that “whoso forbiddeth to marry is not ordained of God, for marriage is ordained of God unto man” (D&C 49:15). By 1843, Joseph Smith was privately marrying plural wives and teaching that only those married for eternity by the power of the priesthood would “have an increase” in the resurrection.

As soon as Mormons settled in the West, Church leaders vigorously promoted marriage as the only way for men—naturally sinful and lazy—to become devout Christians, righteous patriarchs, and productive citizens. An 1837 Mormonism began. These emphases against singlehood contrasts with Church leaders’ statements against singlehood in the 1878 general conference sounds about as severe: “A large number of unmarried men, over the age of 24 years, is a dangerous element in any community.” Ten years before that, Brother Brigham had admonished: “Let every man in the land over 18 years of age take a wife.”

While single men have been characterized as “selfish, sinful, and possibly suffering from a chemical imbalance,” women have generally been treated as “gentle victims of man’s selfishness,” with Church leaders consoling them that “they will yet receive all the blessings of matrimony in the hereafter.” As Lavina Fielding Anderson and Jeffery O. Johnson note, “Whatever single women may suffer, they still need not cope with the pressure and guilt single Mormon males must face in a culture where the initiative rests with the man and where the responsibility to take it is preached by precept and example in every ward in the Church.”

A century later, President Ezra Taft Benson worked in the same rhetorical vein as had Brigham Young and George Q. Cannon when he implicitly questioned the manhood of unmarried males, urging them to “arise from the dust . . . and be


Desperate RM: In this Deseret First Credit Union ad, a young man opens a savings account for “the engagement ring.” He confesses to the teller that he’s not engaged yet—in fact, he’s not even dating—yet he feels that “it’s time to get serious” because he has been back from his mission “long enough.” “How long have you been back?” the teller asks. The answer: “Twenty-two days.”

Single Mermaids: Left to right: Lydia Roes, Lani Chapman, Sasha Piton, students at the University of Arizona, sing “I Need a Man,” an adaptation of “Part of Your World” (from Walt Disney’s movie The Little Mermaid). “I want to be where the elders are! I want one for my eternal companion! One who’s not afraid of commitment,” they sing. “I’m really great! Why don’t I date? I need a man!”

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men” (2 Nephi 1:21).

Delmont R. Oswald, a 47-year-old divorced Mormon, responded to Benson’s speech at the next Sunstone Symposium.

“The tone of President Benson’s speech troubled me,” Oswald said. “I heard his words as those of an adult lecturing a child. Too often [in the Church] adulthood comes to be defined by marital status rather than by age and maturity.”

At that same symposium, BYU sociologist Lawrence A. Young noted that the activity rates of single females in the Church can be five times that of single males. “There is strong evidence that as a Church, we are not meeting the needs of LDS single members, particularly single men,” he said. Young pointed to data showing that “single women over 30 have higher levels of education, occupation, and Church activity than single men.” Consequently, Young cautioned, “If never-married men were to arise en masse from the dust and seek marriage, we can only wonder who they would go out to marry. Based on available studies of marital success, we would have to be very concerned about the quality and long-term stability of a marriage between the typical never-married LDS male over thirty and the typical never-married LDS female over thirty.”

In retrospect, Benson’s 1988 address may have been a “last hoorah” for the harsh nineteenth-century style of preaching on male singleness. The quarter century since that address has seen some attenuation in Church leaders’ admonitions to marry. In fact, in 1987, President Hinckley declared that “marriage should not be viewed as a therapeutic step to solve problems such as homosexual inclinations or behavior.” In an even more recent speech to 5,000 singles, apostle M. Russell Ballard admitted that “not every one of you may find an eternal companion.”

In 2001, Jeffrey H. Larson, chair of the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at BYU, made headlines at the university’s paper, the Daily Universe, by stating that LDS singles needed to put more thought and preparation into marriage. “Don’t rush even if you’ve found the right person,” Larson wrote. “I don’t think the Spirit will tell you, ‘Don’t get to know him or her better first.’” Larson explained that pressure to marry and marrying too young are factors that hamper the success of a marriage: the divorce rate, he warned, is 70 percent for people who marry before age 20.

**FAMOUS BACHELORS**

DESPITE the tremendous pressures single men and women face in Mormon culture, there have been some Mormon men who have defended their bachelorhood and Mormon women who rose to positions of prominence in the Church despite their single status.

None may be more peculiar than Evan Stephens (1834–1930), who served 26 years as director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. A confirmed bachelor who took a series of younger men under his wing and into his home, Stephens was also a gender-transgressive artist who sometimes sang in falsetto and impersonated “the old maid of ninety-five.” When world-renowned soprano Nellie Melba asked how many wives he had, Stephens quipped: “I am sorry you pressed the question. It is almost unlawful to talk about.” Ultimately, however, Mormon theology cured Stephens of his invertebrate bachelorhood: on 5 November 1930, a year after his death, Stephens’s housekeeper Sarah Daniels was sealed to him.

In the twentieth century, perhaps no Mormon bachelor has received more media attention than legendary quarterback Steve Young. Successful, athletic, attractive, well-adjusted, and still single in his mid-thirties, Young cautioned, “If never-married men were to arise en masse from the dust and seek marriage, we can only wonder who they would go out to marry. Based on available studies of marital success, we would have to be very concerned about the quality and long-term stability of a marriage between the typical never-married LDS male over thirty and the typical never-married LDS female over thirty.”

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Young was living proof that not all Mormon bachelors suffer from “a chemical imbalance.” At age 33, Young was asked by Mike Wallace about his single status. “Do you wanna talk about the pressure I feel?” Young answered candidly. “Brigham Young once said, right here on these grounds, that anyone over 27 years of age that’s not married is a menace to society. So here’s my grandfather telling me to get with it. You don’t think that I feel the pressure? I guarantee it.” Young escaped his “single cursedness” at the ripe age of 38, when he married fellow Mormon Barbara Graham, a former model. They have two sons and two daughters.

Not even the shortest short list of famous single Mormons would be complete without Sheri Dew, possibly the most prominent single woman in Church history. C.E.O. and president of Deseret Book, Dew is also an inspirational speaker, writer, former counselor in the general presidency of the Relief Society, and former White House delegate to the United Nations.

Dew has spoken about her single status in many occasions, characterizing that status in essentially negative terms—as a cross to be borne. She has said that her singleness indicates that her prayers “have not been answered the way [she] asked them to be.” Dew has presented herself as an example of remaining chaste for life, if necessary. “As someone who has remained unmarried two-and-a-half decades beyond a traditional marriageable age, I know something about the challenge of chastity,” she stated at age 46. “It is not always easy, but it is far easier than the alternative.”

At the same time, Dew has reiterated traditional LDS teachings, affirming marriage and parenthood as normative. In October 2001, Dew affirmed that motherhood is “the essence of who we are as women” and preached on the topic, “It is not good for man or woman to be alone.” The dissonance between these ideals and Dew’s singleness has made her vulnerable to criticism. At an interfaith event in 2004, Dew found herself at the center of a controversy after speaking in defense of traditional marriage. Displaying a photo of two men getting married at the San Francisco City Hall with their adopted twin daughters in their arms, Dew said, “This is hard for me to stomach. What kind of chance do these girls have of being raised in that kind of setting?” (Dew was unaware at the time that one of the men pictured, Eric Ethington, is a former LDS missionary.) In a statement expressing “outrage” over Dew’s remarks, Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons pointed to Dew’s singleness in an attempt to undermine her credibility: “While Ms. Dew, who has never married or raised children, pontificates about families, Eric Ethington, with his husband and his daughters, shows to the world what it really means to have one.”

THE EMERGENCE OF SINGLE WARDS

IN settings such as Brigham Young University, LDS leaders treat singleness as a transitional period in which youth must be encouraged to keep the faith while being given opportunities to socialize, date, and find a spouse. “Church members who have never married or are divorced or widowed make up a significant portion of Church membership,” the 1998 General Handbook of Instructions frankly states. “All members, regardless of their age, circumstance, or interests, need the blessings of the gospel and a full range of Church experiences.”

Starting in the mid-1960s, Church leaders contemplated the creation of student wards, branches, and stakes, and established rules regarding who could belong to these units. During the 1970s, the only single wards were student wards (meaning only students could attend them). The 1980s saw the creation of some wards for singles 18–30, as well as units for those over 30, regardless of their student status. But Church leaders were ambivalent about this development. Participation in such units, they insisted, should be considered somewhat transitory. Indeed, Church policy held that the best place for singles to “enjoy a full range of church experience” is the conventional family ward.

The driving aim of singles wards is simple: To create more opportunities for singles to find a spouse. BYU wards, with their frequent admonitions to marry, pictorial ward directories, and classes on dating, have generated a subculture revolving around the ideal of celestial marriage. Members who do not find suitable dates in their assigned wards sometimes engage in “ward-hopping.” According to the Deseret News, some BYU bishops have gone so far as to call ward members to serve as “dating specialists” to help other ward members find a spouse. A few years back, one BYU stake dedicated a meeting to the theme, “every member a matchmaker.”

“A goal of mine is to get them married,” Walt Plumb, bishop of the University of Utah 16th Ward, acknowledged to the Deseret News in 2007. Plumb encouraged his ward members to date at least once a month and occasionally gave men $25 to take a woman out. “I know some people aren’t going to have the option of marriage for some reason or another,” Plumb said, “but it sure seems to me that people are a lot happier being married.”

In a culture influenced by a TV series such as Friends, concerned LDS leaders have noted a trend among young Mormons at BYU and elsewhere to “hang out” rather than go on traditional dates. BYU student Elisee Newey told the Deseret News that she prefers hanging out because it allows people to get to know each other and this “leads to better dates.” But Church leaders have recently voiced disapproval of “hanging out,” reaffirming the ideal of traditional dating. “Young women, resist too much hanging out, and encourage dates that are simple, inexpensive, and frequent,” apostle Dallin H. Oaks preached in 2007. “Don’t make it easy for young men to hang out in a setting where you women provide the food. Don’t subsidize free-loaders.”

SEX AND THE SINGLE MORMON

DESPITE LDS leaders’ efforts to create a culture of sexual abstinence among young Mormon singles, evidence suggests that these efforts have been only partially successful. In 1992, BYU sociologist Tim B. Heaton combined data from three surveys taken in the 1980s and concludes that “60 percent of LDS women will have had sex before marriage.” A study Wilford E. Smith conducted in the 1970s indicates that “nearly half of active LDS males of university age and a quarter of the active LDS young women” masturbate.

In the face of these realities, Church leaders have become less prone than previously to describe sexual immorality as a sin “next to murder” (Alma 39:1–7). “It appears that Church leaders are becoming increasingly aware of deviations from sexual standards,” Tim Heaton observed in the 1990s, but “feel somewhat frustrated in knowing how to deal with immorality. Changes in sexual norms may have also created a generation gap between the youth and their leaders or parents. These trends could make it more difficult to deal with the discrepancy between official codes of conduct and actual behavior.”

Twenty years after Heaton...
wrote those words, the LDS Church may be facing a new generation of young Mormons who are openly questioning the Church’s standard of chastity. A 2005 story in the Washington City Paper spotlighted Janna Taylor, a single Mormon living in northern Virginia. At age 28, sitting through yet another Relief Society lesson on chastity, Taylor finally felt she had to stand up and vent. “We all know what the law of chastity is, and we all know the reasoning behind it,” Taylor said, getting teary. “What I want to know is how I’m supposed to live this law as a 28-year-old virgin. Because the reality of the situation is that every single cell in my body is telling me to have babies.”

“I’m a sexual being, and that doesn’t change because of my faith,” Taylor told the Washington City Paper. “The question is how to reconcile that faith with my physical body. How can I embrace my sexuality as a single woman and a Mormon?”

In a more recent essay in the New York Times, Mormon author Nicole Hardy went a step further, writing about her decision, at age 35, to leave her Mormon virginity behind and become sexually active by dating non-Mormon men. “As I grew older, I had the distinct sense of remaining a child in a woman’s body,” Hardy writes. “It wasn’t just sex I lacked but relationships with men entirely. Too independent for Mormon men, and too much a virgin for the other set, I felt trapped in adolescence.”

NEW WARDS, SAME GOAL
ADDRESSING some 5,000 singles from Salt Lake Valley on 26 April 2011, apostle M. Russell Ballard announced the dissolution of nearly 150 student wards and the integration of single students into 12 new stakes and 121 young single adult wards. According to Ballard and other Church leaders, the goal of the reorganization is to quell the massive loss of members in the 18–30 age group.

“The reason we’re anxious for you to reach out and to encourage some of the young single adults that are not active is because one of the great places where there can be peace and joy and fellowship, a sense of belonging, is by being active in the Church,” Ballard said. “Would you do what you can to try to draw some of those who are less active back into fellowship in the Church?”

“As an eternal unit, families go to the eternities forever—together forever,” Ballard added. “That’s why we’re drawing you into these young single adult stakes and young single adult wards under the tutelage of bishops and stake presidents who have keys of the power of the holy priesthood of God to answer your questions, to guide you, to give you blessings, and to help you along the way.”

Seventy David Evans explained that pilot programs were run in Ogden, Cedar City, St. George, and other Utah areas in 2010 and were deemed a success: of 4,500 inactive singles visited, 1,000 had returned to the Church.

And, as reported in the Salt Lake Tribune, LDS leaders concluded that the program also succeeded in “getting [singles] to the marriage altar.”

PAINTING UP CONTROVERSY:
THE WORK OF JON MCNAUGHTON

BY HUGO OLAIZ
AND JOHN-CHARLES DUFFY

HE MIGHT BE called the Thomas Kinkade of Mormonism... or perhaps Glenn Beck with a paintbrush. To his already extensive catalogue of LDS-themed paintings—including temples, scenes from the life of Jesus, and episodes from Mormon history—Utah artist Jon McNaughton (MCNAUGHTONART.COM) has now added detailed allegorical tableaus portraying American history as taught by the late Mormon archconservative, Cleon Skousen. McNaughton's best-selling piece, One Nation under God, has gained wide notice, in and out of Mormon circles, for its dramatic fusion of Christian piety and conservative ideology. The painting has attracted international media attention, inspiring a number of online parodies and sparking some controversy at Brigham Young University, where the artist alleges that his work has become the victim of “liberal” censorship.

At the center of the controversial painting stands the imposing figure of Jesus dressed in a golden robe. Raised in his right hand is the U.S. Constitution. Arrayed behind him, against the backdrop of the Capitol and the Supreme Court building, and under a starry sky turning red with the dawn, is a pantheon of historic American figures. Standing or kneeling closest to the Savior are George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and James Madison.

At McNaughton’s interactive website, visitors can hover over each element of the image to read an explanation of its meaning. Among those arranged at lower left—that is, at the right hand of Jesus—are a white farmer (“the true backbone of America,” McNaughton explains), an Asian immigrant (reacting with “a look of shock” to this revelation of “the source of America’s greatness”), and a black college student, who holds Cleon Skousen’s Five Thousand Year Leap (a book Glenn Beck admires). At Jesus’s left hand is a Supreme Court justice hiding his face in shame at the sight of offensive rulings scattered at Jesus’s feet. These include Roe v. Wade and Everson (a 1947 decision McNaughton blames for initiatiing the removal of prayer from schools). A sneering movie producer represents the “liberal slant [in] Hollywood.” A college professor embraces a copy of Darwin’s Origin of Species. And a pale, red-eyed wraith, Satan himself, appears in the corner—a reminder, according to McNaughton’s commentary, of “the reality of the adversary and that he interferes in the affairs of men.”

One Nation has attracted polarized responses and international publicity. Stories about the painting appeared at the Telegraph, Mother Jones, and many blogs. While admirers praised the painting for its detailed composition and inspiring message, others criticized its conservative ideology. Ridicule was also a common response. The LDS group blog By Common Consent posted more than 500 parody haikus inspired by the painting, including “Jesus was a Jew/ Who knew Jewish carpenters/ Had Nordic features?” and “Christian Minister/ Sees Tree of Life on Jesus’ shirt. Mormons were right.”

The comics website SHORTPACKED.COM created an
interactive webpage that mirrors McNaughton's but with tongue-in-cheek explanations of the figures. For instance, when the visitor hovers the cursor over the figure "U.S. Marine," ShortPacked's commentary reads, "He was kicked out of the military for being gay." Hovering over the figure of black orator Frederick Douglass, barely visible at the back of the tableau, elicits: "A famous abolitionist and fighter for women's suffrage. He gets to stand in the very back."

Another humor site, BLAMEITONTHEVOICES.COM, posted a gory parody called One Nation under Cthulhu, a reference to a monster from early twentieth-century horror writer H. P. Lovecraft's works. In the parody, many figures have been defaced or covered in blood, and the central figure of Jesus has been replaced by Lovecraft's bat-winged, tentacle-faced monster. One Nation under Cthulhu may have been inspired by Cthulhu-themed parodies of the didactic comic strips of Protestant fundamentalist Jack Chick. The point of such parodies is to suggest that the vengeful Christ of fundamentalism is indistinguishable from the pangalactic monster.

McNaughton cites visions and personal revelation as the (literal) inspiration for One Nation and other paintings. "In the middle of the 2008 elections . . . I was sitting in the gallery in front of my easel when I saw what I can best describe as a vision," he explains at his website in a Q&A about One Nation.

McNaughton's second most controversial painting after One Nation is a political allegory titled The Forgotten Man. McNaughton has implied this painting was created in response to a divine call he received as he was praying in dismay over passage of the Democrats' health care reform bill ("Obamacare") in 2010. "I think that the Lord often waits for us to simply come to Him and ask the question . . . what should I do?" McNaughton wrote about that prayer.

What McNaughton decided the Lord wanted him to do was paint The Forgotten Man, which he says "came" to him as a mental impression. The painting is a tableau of U.S. presidents, with the White House in the background. In the foreground, Barack Obama is depicted trampling on the U.S. Constitution. The presidents appear in two loose groupings—good and bad. Toward the viewer's left are the good guys, gathered in concern around the painting's titular figure, a despairing everyman slumped on a bench, robbed (McNaughton's interpretive text explains) of his opportunity to achieve the American Dream. Clustered behind President Obama are the bad presidents, whose sins, the artist's commentary alleges, are chiefly economic: raising taxes, deficit spending, and contributing to the creation of the welfare state. In general, McNaughton's division of the presidents into heroes and villains corresponds to the small-government fiscal conservatism championed by Glenn Beck and the Tea Party. James Madison, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson,
and Ronald Reagan stand on the right—in every sense—while Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and FDR rank among those who literally trample the Constitution underfoot. However, Andrew Jackson, who figures as a principal villain in Glenn Beck’s account of American history, ends up on the side of the just in McNaughton’s tableau—his virtue being that he was “the only president in United States history to have paid off the national debt,” McNaughton explains.

Given the conservatism of most American Mormons, it’s easy to see why McNaughton’s political work has won admirers among the Saints—admirers and customers, who may pay over $3500 for a framed reproduction of One Nation under God. Likewise, it’s easy to see why McNaughton’s work has attracted criticism and mockery from liberal quarters. Less predictable, perhaps, is that his political work has won admirers from liberal quarters. Less predictable, perhaps, is that his political work has won admirers from liberal quarters.

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This past April, McNaughton announced to readers of his blog that BYU was censoring his art “for being too conservative.” In the following media flap, a BYU spokesperson explained that because of “negative feedback,” school officials had decided that the BYU bookstore would no longer sell One Nation under God, despite the painting’s popularity with customers. “The Vice President over the Bookstore was ‘uncomfortable’ with the painting,” McNaughton complained in his letter to the Daily Universe, BYU’s campus newspaper. “Why is this painting, which is supported by Church doctrine (D&C 101:80), such a taboo image to display at BYU?”

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Signs of trouble had appeared a few months earlier: In fall 2010, the BYU bookstore unexpectedly withdrew McNaughton’s paintings from display but promptly put them back when a local news station came sniffing for a story. Then in March 2011, a month before the bookstore announced it would no longer sell One Nation, BYU canceled McNaughton’s invitation to speak about the painting at a BYU conference. Officials cited concern that the presentation would violate the university’s policy of political neutrality. Protestings the cancellation in a letter to BYU president Cecil O. Samuelson, McNaughton accused the university of succumbing to liberalism: “Has Liberalism so infected this university that speakers can be invited to speak about the truths of Darwinism, but a simple artist who wishes to speak about the Constitution and its importance in America is too controversial?”

In the wake of the BYU controversy, McNaughton has found a renewed sense of purpose. “As I look at the coming nineteen months leading up to this crucial election, I feel that my purpose as an artist will be to wake up as many people to our situation as possible,” he recently wrote on his blog. “As Americans, we must protect our liberties as defined in the Constitution and make the kind of responsible choices that will guarantee a future for our children and grandchildren.” Worried about the prospect of Obama’s reelection, McNaughton believes that “the 2012 election will be determined by how well the Republicans can rally behind a single candidate.” Of this candidate, McNaughton adds, “He must be a conservative, not a moderate like John McKane [sic].”

At the same time, McNaughton appears uncomfortable being pegged as political. “I rarely delve into the fray of politics,” he maintains. “Even my painting The Forgotten Man is more about principle than politics. I watch what is happening and I hope with all my heart that someone will come along that will have what it takes to turn this country around . . . both economically and morally.”

Meanwhile, McNaughton remains a magnet for criticism. On 1 May 2011, he became the target of yet another parody, this one from Salt Lake Tribune cartoonist Pat Bagley. Titled “WWJD (Who Would Jesus Damn?),” Bagley’s editorial cartoon portrays an angry Jesus, with a pistol tucked inside his robe, shielding his human flock from the forces of evil, who cower away toward Jesus’s left. As on McNaughton’s interactive website, hovering over the different figures in Bagley’s cartoon reveals written explanations. Among the damned: “Charles ‘Monkey-Boy’ Darwin,” a “hoax-pulling climate change scientist,” a reporter representing the “lame stream media,” Barack Obama, and Pat Bagley himself in the act of sketching Jesus. Among the righteous shielded by pistol-packing Jesus: Dick Cheney, Rush Limbaugh, Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck, a Wall Street banker brandishing his bonus . . . and at the back, with paintbrush and easel, a certain undefined “Provo artist with inside scoop on who is Jesus’ BFFs.”

People

Running. For president, YEAH SAMAKE, 42, in his native Mali, Western Africa. Samake, who converted to Mormonism in 2000 while living in New York, has a master’s degree in public policy from BYU and is currently the mayor of Ouelessebougou, in southwestern Mali.

Remarried. Singer and actress MARIE OSMOND, 51, to her first husband STEPHEN CRAIG, 54, in the Las Vegas Temple. Her second marriage ended in 2007. A promoter of Nutrisystem weight loss products, Osmond wore her original wedding gown for the 4 May ceremony. The blissful couple drove away from the temple in a white stretch Humvee.

Posted. A video on Vimeo.com showing MARSHALL MILLER and HARTMAN RECTOR III BASE jumping from the Church Office Building in Salt Lake City last November. Earlier this year, the duo pleaded guilty in abeyance to an infraction for leaping from the building. Rector is the son of former SUNSTONE publisher DANIEL HARTMAN RECTOR.
Transferring. To the University of Washington, University of Utah President MICHAEL K. YOUNG, 61. Young served as chairman of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom during 2003 and 2004. In a recent BYU conference on religious freedom, Young said that Mormons “should be among the most passionate civil libertarians in the world,” and “all ought to be members of the ACLU.”

Stepping Down. Mormon Olympic gold medalist PETER VIDMAR, 49, from his post as head of the U.S. Olympic team. Vidmar received criticism from some athletes after the Chicago Tribune reported that he had contributed to the campaign to pass Proposition 8. “I wish that my personal religious beliefs would not have become a distraction from the amazing things that are happening in the Olympic movement in the United States,” Vidmar stated. “I simply cannot have my presence become a detriment to the U.S. Olympic family.”

Showdown? JON HUNTSMAN, 50, Jr., and MITT ROMNEY, 63, both emerging Republican presidential hopefuls. While Romney presents himself as religiously devout, with solid conservative credentials, Huntsman, who served as ambassador for a Democratic White House and supports civil unions for same-sex couples, projects a more independent image. “I can’t say I’m overly religious,” Huntsman told Fortune magazine in 2010. “I get satisfaction from many different types of religions and philosophies.”

Deported. FELIX CALLEJAS, who’d served as a branch president in Draper, Utah, after a failed attempt to obtain asylum from his native El Salvador. Church spokesperson Scott Trotter told the Salt Lake Tribune that “this case reminds us all of the need to address immigration reform.”

Sentenced. KEITH SCOTT BROWN, 55, father of the five piano-playing siblings who perform as The 5 Browns. Brown was sentenced to ten years to life for sexually abusing his three daughters when they were children. DESIRAE, 32, DEONDRA, 30, and MELODY, 26, said that after learning that their father was planning to mentor other children in musical careers, they decided to reveal his earlier abuse.

Died. Pollster RICHARD B. WIRTHLIN, 80, from natural causes. As Ronald Reagan’s chief strategist, Wirthlin had helped steer Reagan’s political career from his early days as California governor through his two terms in the White House. A brother of apostle Joseph B. Wirthlin, he had served as a member of the Second Quorum of the Seventy between 1996 and 2001.

Honored. THERIC JEPSON by the Association for Mormon Letters for guest editing issue 160 of SUNSTONE—also known as the comics issue. According to the citation, the issue has “created a foundation we hope will initiate a legacy of quality comics that takes Mormon literature in new and exciting directions.”

In Heaven. SAMUEL KEITH MCBRIDE, known to Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium attendees as an enthusiastic promoter of Emmanuel Swedenborg’s teachings. He handed out hundreds of books on Swedenborg and Helen Keller during his years at the Symposium.

Retiring. Arch-conservative Utah state senator CHRIS BUTTARS, 69. A blunt critic of gays and lesbians, Buttars was admired by supporters as a champion of moral causes. Buttars attracted controversy in recent years for comments that critics charged were racist and anti-gay.

Suspended. BRANDON DAVIES, 19, from the BYU basketball team, for allegedly having sex with his girlfriend. The story, which received widespread national attention, comes one year after footballer HARVEY UNGA withdrew from BYU on similar grounds. Unga has since had a son, married BYU girlfriend and fellow athlete KEILANI MOEAKI, and signed with the Chicago Bears.

Honored. Presiding Bishop H. DAVID BURTON, 73, a recipient of Salt Lake City’s “Giant in Our City” Award. During a banquet in his honor, Burton reaffirmed the Church’s commitment to revitalizing downtown Salt Lake City, noting that the $1.5 billion City Creek Center under construction across from Temple Square is scheduled to open in March 2012.
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