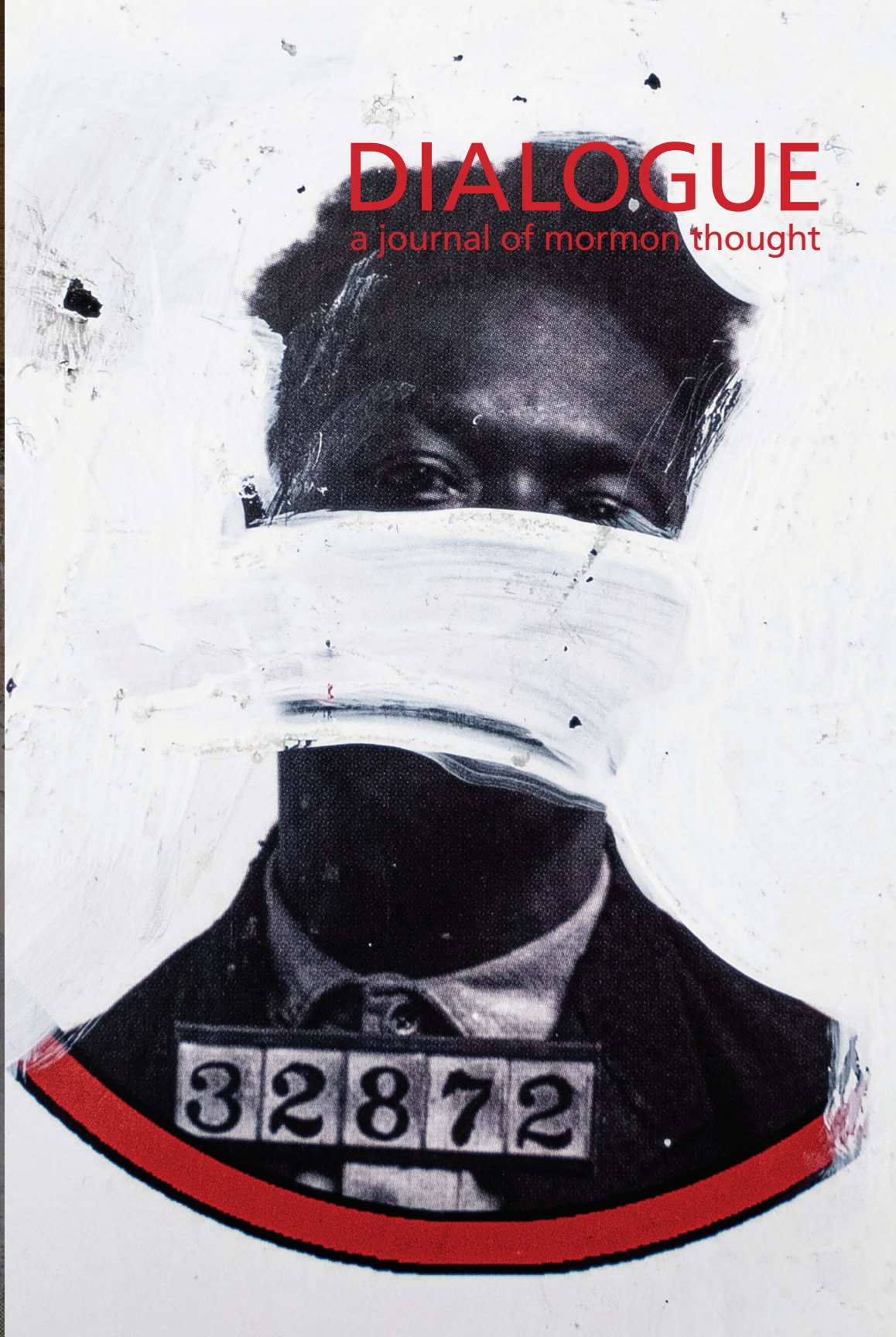


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QUEER MORMON HISTORIES AND THE POLITICS OF A USABLE PAST

Alexandria Griffin

The relationship between the queer community and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has received considerable attention in the last few decades, along with the overlap between the two communities and the queer Mormon experience. While both scholarly and amateur work on the history and identity of queer Mormons is on the rise (especially ethnographic work on contemporary queer Mormons), there have, as of yet, been no works outlining what kind of arguments are commonly made by people participating in the construction of queer Mormon vernacular histories and what they are trying to achieve with these arguments.¹

Queer Mormon vernacular histories employ arguments about people in the past to construct new ways of being for the future. Vernacular histories include publishing a pamphlet, writing a blog post, or writing an essay in a collection intended for non-academic readership. This work may, in some cases, be done by people with

1. A note on terminology: throughout this paper, I purposefully use the term “queer” to refer to a wide swath of non-heterosexual people (whether cisgender or transgender), including those who may identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer, person with same-sex attraction, or a host of other possible terms. I turn to the umbrella term “queer” as a space-saving measure so that I am not constantly reiterating this extensive list of possible identities, as well as in recognition of its utility in scholarship on this and related topics, e.g., “queer theory.” I recognize that “queer,” which is, essentially, a reclaimed slur, is certainly a term that people of any of those categories may not necessarily identify with or might object to; I use it for its expediency, with full realization of these potential problems.

academic training in historical methods; however, more often than not, this is not the case. This does not mean that the authors of such work have not researched substantially on their own, or that they do not interact with academic work on the subject. I examine a variety of sources; many come from archival materials, the LDS LGBTQ organization Affirmation, Instagram accounts, blog posts, YouTube videos, and even advertising for commercial brands. These represent the variety of ways that popular accounts of the past make it to the general public. I focus specifically on material that not only explores the queer Mormon past but makes arguments about what that past means for the future. These materials come from different historical, religious, and political contexts but all seek to use the past to construct new futures. These texts are often written in a more informal register than comparable academic work and are often produced with a specific intention of shifting conversations about queer Mormons in the present. Points of view also vary: not everyone contributing to this vernacular queer Mormon past is themselves queer or even Mormon.

In this mode of engaging history, the past is seen as a resource that can help people to create more inclusive futures for queer Mormons. I aim to outline the parameters and modes of these histories and examine the patterns of their argumentation, using the work of John Boswell as a point of reference. I argue that the patterns evident in Boswell's work on the history of homosexuality are also apparent in many works of queer Mormon vernacular history. Namely, Boswell argues that "between the beginning of the Christian Era and the end of the Middle Ages" attitudes toward same-sex romantic and sexual relationships changed from relative indifference or toleration to active antipathy.² Queer Mormon vernacular histories make a similar framing, arguing

2. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

that early Mormonism was relatively tolerant of homosexuality and that recent antipathy toward it is an aberration.

Queer Mormon vernacular histories go further and argue that the past is proof that the future could be more accepting than the present. I take up David Halperin's charge that "the tendency to refashion past sexual cultures in the image of our own says a lot about our own historical situation, the functioning of contemporary sexual categories, our standard ways of thinking about the past. It is richly informative in its own right."³ I am less interested in whether these vernacular histories are "right" or "wrong" than in what they tell us about contemporary debates about the role of queer people in Mormonism. Some arguments made are more plausible or verifiable than others, but all of them offer value in understanding the ways in which people have sought to use the past to create new futures.

Mormon Conceptions of the Past

In order to understand queer Mormon historical modes, we must first examine the role of history and historical thought in Mormonism more broadly. Mormonism is, as a religious tradition, incredibly invested in history, not only as a means of memorializing the past but of orienting and constructing the self in the present. The verse in Doctrine and Covenants 21 admonishing Joseph Smith that "there shall be a record kept among you" is taken seriously (and literally) by Mormons. Former official LDS Church historian Marlin K. Jensen commented in 2007 that "the scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon, make clear that 'remembering' is a fundamental and saving principle of the gospel."⁴

3. David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 15.

4. Marlin K. Jensen, "There Shall Be a Record Kept Among You," *Ensign*, Dec. 2007, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2007/12/there-shall-be-a-record-kept-among-you?lang=eng>.

Since their earliest days, Mormons have felt that keeping a record of one's past is important and that it can shape the future. Historian Roger D. Launius has argued that "shared experience and misery has been one of the key elements of the Mormon religion."⁵

History is an essential part of the construction of Mormon identity; events like the Missouri persecutions, the progress of settlers to Utah, and other historical moments are often drawn upon as lessons in conduct for the modern day and as a shared, sacred history. This is a history that can even be literally reenacted, with the reenactment often promoted as an opportunity for spiritual growth by participants. These reenactments need not concern events that happened to one's own literal ancestors; once largely the province of pioneer-descended Utah Mormons, reenactments of the Mormon settlers' trek toward Utah have spread as far as Mongolia, where youth constructed handcarts and passed through parts of the Ulaanbaatar countryside labeled with the names of US states that Mormon settlers passed through in the nineteenth century.⁶ In his article "Playing Jane: Re-presenting Black Mormon Memory through Reenacting Black Mormon Past," Max Perry Mueller argues that, similarly, Black Mormons use recreations of the past to affirm both Black and Mormon identity and tie themselves to the Church's past in a way that creates a sense of identity important to the present.⁷

The LDS Church's emphasis on genealogical work and its salvific (in terms of temple ordinances performed on behalf of the dead) and practical purposes add to this overall sense of the importance of history

5. Roger D. Launius, "PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: Mormon Memory, Mormon Myth, and Mormon History," *Journal of Mormon History* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 4.

6. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Mormons Around the Globe Re-enact Pioneer Trek," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Aug. 10, 2012, <http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/lifestyle/54568506-80/dal-lds-zotto-trek.html.csp>.

7. Max Perry Mueller, "Playing Jane: Re-presenting Black Mormon Memory through Reenacting the Black Mormon Past," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 4 (2013): 513-61.

within Mormonism. In the temple ritual of baptism for the dead, the past becomes present as those who have already passed on are offered a baptism and a blessing in their name. Additionally, journal-keeping is encouraged by Church authorities in order to preserve one's own history for future generations. All of these actions and encouragements demonstrate the ways in which history is uniquely valued in Mormonism, specifically a genealogical form of history in which one seeks to interact or identify with one's ancestors, be they literal ancestors or figurative ones. By this, I mean that both people one is literally descended from as well as famed figures from the Mormon past are treated functionally as ancestors. In the case of queer Mormon vernacular histories, the interaction and identification lean toward the figurative, in that many of these histories seek out past queerness as evidence that queer Mormons have always existed and as proof that the Church could change its stances on queer relationships and identity in the future.

Queer Mormon vernacular histories clearly draw from this Mormon sense of history along with a queer sensibility that also values connection to the past. Joseph Smith's well-known King Follett Sermon has often been summed up by Lorenzo Snow's infamous couplet: "as man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be."⁸ We can perhaps imagine a similar concept at work in queer Mormon vernacular histories: "as things once were, things may now be." This vernacular history is not merely the kind of list-making of famous past figures that is often associated with LGBTQ histories but a more holistic endeavor that attempts to discover not just individuals but their contexts.

Queer Mormon histories work not just to draw on past events as resources for the present but to preserve present events for the future,

8. Gerald N. Lund, "Is President Lorenzo Snow's oft-repeated statement—'As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be'—accepted as official doctrine by the Church?" *Ensign*, Feb. 1982, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1982/02/i-have-a-question/is-president-snows-statement-as-man-now-is-god-once-was-as-god-now-is-man-may-be-accepted-as-official-doctrine.html?lang=eng>.

that their histories might serve a similar purpose for someone else. Commenting on his own journal-keeping, former Affirmation director James Kent wrote that “if this history can survive past my own lifetime, it can be of benefit to those who follow me. Should the future shine bright and give total equality of opportunity to non-heterosexuals, they can look back to a time when that was a journey of hope. Should the struggle continue far into the future, they will know from the past that they are not alone.”⁹ This is part of the importance of a queer Mormon vernacular history, according to its authors: it gives queer Mormons a historical context from which to evaluate progress or to reflect on the experiences of those who came before them. Recordkeeping is valuable not only because it preserves a record for one’s posterity; as Marlin K. Jensen noted, it takes on a form of sacred responsibility to future generations. We must also think about context here; Affirmation is a group for LGBTQ Mormons that comprises both former and active members, seeking to provide space for both. As such, it is unsurprising that someone in this context would speak to traditional Mormon thought on memory and history.

Traditional LDS recordkeeping has also contributed to the documentation of queer Mormons. In Utah Gay and Lesbian Community Center member Connell “Rocky” O’Donovan’s 1989 Gay Pride Day speech to Salt Lake City media members, he remarked that “often people first ask us ‘Is there even any Gay history in Utah?’ to which we reply emphatically ‘Yes!’ We are fortunate in our state because of the predominant view here that history should be recorded, and then these records should be maintained. Therefore there are several very large collections of private journals, newspapers, directories, court records etc. around this state, all of which give us clues and facts about

9. James Kent, “Keeping a Journal and Other Thoughts,” *Affirmation*, accessed Jan. 15, 2014. This post is no longer available on the Affirmation website at the time of publication.

who our gay foremothers + gay forefathers were.”¹⁰ O’Donovan, who was raised in the LDS Church, has written extensively on both LGBT and LDS histories as well as their overlap. This has included comparative work on the treatment of queer Mormons and the treatment of African American Mormons prior to the lifting of the priesthood ban in 1978.¹¹ O’Donovan, in his Gay Pride Day speech, draws a clear connection between queer history and Mormon history, noting the “predominant view” in Utah that “history should be recorded.”

Similarly, in an article originally published in the Affirmation newsletter *Affinity* in 1982 and reproduced on the Affirmation website, Ina Mae Murri reflects on the Mormon legacy of genealogy and recordkeeping for future generations, writing that “I have in my possession a folder in which my mother assembled all the family histories she had on both her and my father’s side. . . . [T]his also gives me food for thought as I look at my life and what I want my descendants to know about my life. Probably we have all heard stories in our families about an aunt, uncle, cousin, or some other relative who the family keeps quiet about. . . . [D]o we as homosexuals fit in the category in our family where they do not know our true story?”¹² Family history is

10. Rocky O’Donovan, “1989 Gay Pride Day Speech” (speech notes, 1989), Accn. 1918, box 23, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah. Capitalization, punctuation, etc., present in original.

11. Connell O’Donovan, “I Would Confine Them to Their Own Species’: LDS Historical Rhetoric and Praxis Regarding Marriage Between Whites and Blacks” (paper presented at Sunstone West symposium, Cupertino, Calif., Mar. 28, 2009), available at http://www.connellodonovan.com/black_white_marriage.html.

12. Ina Mae Murri, “Family’ History: Leaving a Legacy of Truth,” *Affirmation*, accessed Jan. 15, 2014, http://www.affirmation.org/history/leaving_a_legacy_of_truth.shtml. This post is no longer available on the Affirmation website at the time of publication.

seen by Murri as something that connects people to each other, and she worries that a lack of attention to queer Mormon histories will result in people not truly knowing their kin.

These vernacular histories are intended to have public audiences. “Prologue: An Examination of the Mormon Attitude Toward Homosexuality” is one of the earliest sources we have in print of a gay Mormon making an argument for a queer Mormon usable past. The pamphlet was written by a gay Brigham Young University student, Cloy Jenkins, who was responding to a psychology professor who saw homosexuality as “pathology,” with the help of a BYU instructor, Lee Williams.¹³ In the words of the pamphlet, “The influence of the homosexual in the church has been positive and profound from top to bottom, from the temple sessions to the favorite Mormon hymns we sing each Sunday, from the Tabernacle Broadcasts to the welfare system.”¹⁴ This genealogical bent is crucial to understanding the ways in which queer Mormons navigate usable pasts by making queer members an inseparable part of Mormon identity.

The queer Mormon usable past spans beyond what we might think of as the traditional temporal domain of the LDS Church. In a 1988 pamphlet entitled “Homosexuality and Scripture from a Latter-Day Saint Perspective,” it is traced back to Book of Mormon times. Pamphlet author Alan David Lach examines varying attitudes toward same-sex intimacy in the ancient Middle East, arguing that “if a more relaxed attitude toward homosexuality did exist among the pre-exilic Hebrews, the Book of Mormon peoples would have brought it with them to the

13. Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 85.

14. Cloy Jenkins, *Prologue: An Examination of the Mormon Attitude toward Homosexuality* (Provo: Prometheus Enterprises, 1978), 55, accessed via Accn. 1867, box 5, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

new world.”¹⁵ Further, he argues that a global turn against same-sex intimacy occurred “during the period the LDS call the ‘great apostasy,’” implicitly linking anti-homosexuality attitudes with a period regarded in Mormon thought as a sort of spiritual dark ages.¹⁶

This pamphlet demonstrates the sort of thinking that reappears throughout materials that engage with creating a vernacular queer Mormon history: if homosexuality was not reproached (or was reproached less severely) by the historical Church, be it the Church in the 1950s or the Church before the birth of Christ, then queer Mormons can be legitimately woven into a sacred Mormon past, with attendant rights and responsibilities. If Mormonism is the restoration of God’s true Church upon the earth, this narrative goes, and if homosexuality was not seen as reprehensible during the time that this Church was originally upon the earth, or in earlier periods of the restoration, then the modern Church has no justification for current policies that penalize homosexual activity. Later in this same pamphlet, Lach rebukes Mormon apostle Dallin H. Oaks for claiming in an interview that the Church has always condemned homosexuality, arguing that “only recently, within the last quarter-century, have apostles and prophets made explicit statements condemning homosexuality per se.”¹⁷

These materials occasionally create an argument for a queer Mormon past based on absence of reference to it. Fewer direct references to homosexuality in Church materials in the past, this narrative commonly goes, may be attributed to greater tolerance for homosexuality by Church leaders. Lach makes the argument that Joseph Smith only refrained from openly condoning homosexuality

15. Alan David Lach, *Homosexuality and Scripture from a Latter-day Saint Perspective* (Los Angeles: Affirmation/Gay & Lesbian Mormons, 1988), 15–16, accessed via Accn. 1867, box 5, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

16. Lach, 17.

17. Lach, 26.

because it would have been too distracting from his overall mission, writing, “What if Joseph Smith, for instance, had published a revelation claiming heavenly sanction of homosexuality? Its effect would have been explosive—enough to disrupt the reformation before it began.”¹⁸

A usable past is inferred not only through absence but also from instances where Mormons were punished for homosexuality but less harshly than they may have been today. One example of this can be found in the work of Robert Rees, who has written extensively for over two decades on LGBT Mormon issues and has served as an LDS bishop.¹⁹ Rees writes in a 2000 pamphlet entitled “In a Dark Time the Eye Begins to See: Personal Reflections on Homosexuality among the Mormons at the Beginning of a New Millennium”: “I believe we have become less tolerant of homosexual relations. Fifty years ago . . . a music teacher was released from the faculty at Ricks College for homosexual behavior. A counselor in this man’s stake presidency wrote to the First Presidency asking what action should be taken. President J. Reuben Clark recorded the following in his office diary: ‘I said thus far we had done nothing more than drop them from the positions they had.’”²⁰ These treatments are then contrasted unfavorably with current threats of excommunication, disfellowshipping, or other punitive measures. Again, the argument conveyed is that if things once were a certain way, there is nothing to prevent them from being so again in the future. However, these writers often envision not merely a return to this

18. Lach, 27.

19. “Robert A. Rees,” *No More Strangers*, <http://www.nomorestrangers.org/robert-a-rees/>.

20. Robert A. Rees, “‘In a Dark Time the Eye Begins to See’: Personal Reflections on Homosexuality among the Mormons at the Beginning of a New Millennium” (paper presented at Family Fellowship, Salt Lake City, Utah, Feb. 27, 2000), accessed via Accn. 1867, box 5, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah. This paper was subsequently published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 137–51.

quasi-acceptance but for this past state to be used as a launching point toward brighter futures, whatever they may be envisioned to be.

Madam Pattirini

One key example of vernacular queer Mormon histories is the wide-ranging use of Madam Pattirini, a famous character played by Brigham Morris Young, one of LDS President Brigham Young's many children. He served two missions in Hawaii and was one of the founders of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association, the forerunner of the current Young Men program. However, Young is probably most known today for his performance persona of Madam Pattirini in part because of the popularity of this figure in queer Mormon histories. As Pattirini, Young wore dresses and sang opera arias in a falsetto. Some of the vernacular histories I examine use anachronistic terms like "drag" and similar contemporary terms to discuss Madam Pattirini, which allows us to understand what modes and practices of queerness are being put to work in discussion of Pattirini. In vernacular histories, Madam Pattirini is an example of a purported modern Mormon hypocrisy or another way in which prior Mormons were more lenient toward queerness.

Modern interlocutors have often framed Pattirini as an instance of socially accepted "drag" performance, one used today in primarily queer subcultures. A post on the blog *Indie Ogden* is an example of this phenomenon.²¹ Blog author Whitney gets into Young's personal history, drawing attention to his parentage and writing that "I was fairly shocked when I came across this bit of information and also very happy at the same time because it is truly a beautiful thing to see a person no matter their faith, or in this case, 'who's your daddy,' live unabashedly bold and fearless."²² Pattirini is constructed here as proof that queerness

21. Whitney, "Indie Ogden History: Madam Pattirini," *Indie Ogden Utah*, June 3, 2012. This post is no longer available on Indie Ogden website at the time of publication.

22. Whitney.

in the form of drag performances was once tolerated in Mormonism and that it could be tolerated more openly once again.

Young has been memorialized under official auspices like that of Utah Pride Center. In a section of their site called “Queer Utah Ancestors,” Utah Pride Center memorializes Young along several other LDS and non-LDS Utah residents, writing that “[t]he historical evidence points only to Young cross-dressing as public entertainment, but he paved the way for later cross-dressing entertainers who appeared in Utah, some of whom were LGBT.”²³ This is a careful parsing of Young’s legacy; he is not equated with drag performers or with transgender people but is seen as a forebear to whom LGBT people more broadly owe a debt of gratitude.

An Instagram account called @lgbt_history makes a similar claim. After giving a sketch of Young’s life more broadly, the account notes that while he was not “a drag queen in the modern sense” he “crossed Mormon gender barriers.”²⁴ Moreover, the account notes that Young was a streetcar driver, an occupation associated in the nineteenth century with homosexuality, and that he drove a route that included the Wasatch Municipal Baths, a popular cruising ground for men seeking sex with men.²⁵

A YouTube channel called LGBT Snapshots, which profiles various LGBT people from history, has also featured Madam Pattirini. In the video description, the channel’s creators wrote: “We’ve chosen Madam

23. “Queer Utah Ancestors,” *Utah Pride Center*, accessed Mar. 24, 2019. This post is no longer available on the Utah Pride Center website at the time of publication. You can find more information about Brigham Morris Young at “Brigham Morris Young: Son of a prophet, ‘Qween’ of the highest order,” *Latter Gay Stories*, Feb. 13, 2019, <https://lattergaystories.org/brighammorris/>.

24. @lgbt_history, “Madam Pattirini (a.k.a. Brigham Morris Young) (January 18, 1854–Feb. 20, 1931), c. 1900. Photo by C.R. Savage, c/o Church History Library,” Instagram photo, Jan. 18, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsyHUGpHmM4/>.

25. @lgbt_history, Jan. 18, 2019.

Pattirini as this week's Transgender Story, though we don't know for certain whether Brigham Morris Young was actually transgender, or whether Madam Pattirini was the feminine expression of a gay man or even simply a character created by a straight man for entertainment."²⁶ The video's creators walk a careful line; though they are featuring Young and Madam Pattirini as a "transgender story," they admit that there are other possibilities for how Young related to the character of Madam Pattirini. This struggle over terminology in relationship to historical identity is something that resurfaces in other discussions of LGBTQ Mormon history, as we will see later.

A particularly interesting element of the Madam Pattirini case study is the use of Pattirini's image for an Ogden, Utah liquor distillery's brand of gin. Referring to Pattirini as a "drag diva," an article from the *Ogden Standard-Examiner* mentions that Young was "one of Brigham Young's sons" and lauds the move on the distillery's part as "bringing a little-known piece of Mormon history to light."²⁷ A *Salt Lake Tribune* article similarly states that "Utah liquor distillers often enjoy poking fun at Utah's conservative Mormon culture, and the newest product from Ogden's Own Distillery—Madam Pattirini Gin—is no exception."²⁸ Naming the gin after Madam Pattirini is seen not as a neutral branding decision but as something meant to rattle conservative Mormons, presumably on queer issues. In this way, Young and the persona of Pattirini are just one of many contested queer Mormon histories picked over by both Mormons and non-Mormons in search of a usable past.

26. LGBT Snapshots, "LGBT Snapshots: Madam Pattirini," YouTube, May 22, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShMiJeAI2Z8>.

27. Makenzie Koch, "Ogden Distillery Pays Homage to Mormon Drag Diva with New Gin," *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, May 6, 2017, https://www.standard.net/news/business/ogden-distillery-pays-homage-to-mormon-drag-diva-with-new/article_1f36073a-73c3-5d2d-82a5-0557ec5e0c2a.html.

28. Kathy Stephenson, "Utah Distiller Introduces Madam Pattirini Gin, Named for a Little-Known Mormon Drag Diva," *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 3, 2017, <https://archive.slttrib.com/article.php?id=5222043&itype=CMSID>.

Gay By Any Other Name

What people call themselves, past and present, can tell us a lot about how they think about themselves. As the case of Pattirini has shown, terminology can be a point of some controversy in queer Mormon vernacular histories. Essentially, the debate becomes whether it is appropriate to apply the adjectives “gay,” “homosexual,” “transgender,” or similar terms to persons who lived before these terms had any meaning. Yale historian John Boswell freely used the term “gay” for medieval and ancient subjects who expressed a preference for same-sex romantic and sexual relationships, while recognizing it was a label impossible for them to apply to themselves, “making the question anachronistic and to some extent unanswerable.”²⁹

In professional Mormon histories, these terms are similarly fraught. D. Michael Quinn’s *Same-Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example* is a book that must be acknowledged when discussing queer Mormon pasts. Quinn argues that same-sex relationships were relatively tolerated in Mormonism until the mid-twentieth century. Though it is a scholarly work, Quinn’s text has had a tremendous influence on vernacular histories, in part by interesting specific Mormon figures who had same-sex relationships. *Same-Sex Dynamics* influenced this debate over language in part by introducing the idea that names and concepts for behaviors had changed over time.³⁰ Some works, especially those emerging after this book, do note that the term “gay” has not always existed as it does now, and that people referred to historically with that term would not necessarily have recognized it or seen themselves as members of such a specific category of identity, while arguing that persons with a disposition

29. John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xxv; Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 41.

30. D. Michael Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

toward same-sex attraction, in some form, have existed continuously throughout history even when it was not a basis for sexual identity.

The tension between a belief in transhistorical “homosexuality” and an obligation to restrict the use of the term to modern contexts appears in numerous vernacular treatments. For example, Seth Anderson, in a post on the blog *No More Strangers* presenting a timeline of Mormon attitudes toward homosexuality, wrote, “On a personal level, I do believe that homosexual men and women not just ‘homosexual acts’ have existed throughout all of human history. We have the privilege to look back in time with our late twentieth and early twenty-first century historical lens and can see things that seem ‘gay’ but we cannot impose that identity on a person who never identified as ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual.’”³¹ This distinction between “homosexual men and women” and “homosexual acts” nonetheless runs into Anderson’s insistence that even though said men and women have “existed throughout all of human history,” it is not appropriate to impose that identity on them. This paradox is left unresolved.

It is important to note that the acts/identity distinction has been a tremendously important one in the history of Mormon thought on homosexuality, not just in queer circles. Taylor Petrey notes that “the question of labels remained a preoccupation” even in quite recent discussions of homosexuality among the Mormon hierarchy.³² This issue has been a long-standing one in Mormonism, with debate over whether terms like “gay” or “lesbian” should be used at all, as they may imply that same-sex desire is a fixed part of a person rather than a behavior that is subject to change.

31. Seth Anderson, “Timeline of Mormon Thinking About Homosexuality,” *No More Strangers* (blog), Dec. 8, 2013, <http://www.nomorestrangers.org/timeline-of-mormon-thinking-about-homosexuality/>.

32. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 195.

Conclusion

Queer Mormon vernacular histories draw on a usable past that is influenced by a Mormon emphasis on the value of history and a mode of recovering queer pasts. These pasts are then used to imagine more inclusive futures for queer Mormons, based on the idea that queer Mormons were once more tolerated by the LDS Church and could be once again. These draw on genealogies, archival sources, and other memory-making tools to present narratives and characters that challenge contemporary heteronormative thinking. Such constructions of history point to individuals, imagined historical contexts, and contemporary debates to tell an alternative counter-history to a master narrative of uniform, universal heterosexuality in the Mormon past. These stories seek to integrate queer Mormons into a more general Mormon history, to normalize queer identities and practices as part of the past, and to gesture toward another, more imaginative future. The point here is not to fact-check these histories, though that has its place, but to explore the ways that queer Mormons operationalize the past in distinctively Mormon ways. Using the logic of precedent and an attachment to Mormon storytelling, queer vernacular histories construct a usable past for a livable future.

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THE THEOLOGICAL TRAJECTORY OF “THE FAMILY: A PROCLAMATION TO THE WORLD”

M. David Huston

On Reading “The Family: A Proclamation to the World”

When President Gordon B. Hinckley read “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” during the general Relief Society meeting held September 23, 1995, few would have predicted the cultural weight that it would still carry for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) nearly twenty-five years later. For many in the LDS Church, this relatively short proclamation (only 630 words) is the defining statement on a variety of social issues: marriage, homosexuality, abortion, gender roles, domestic abuse, etc. Many members of the LDS Church recall the proclamation’s release as a defining “where were you” moment in life; the church experience of an entire generation of youth and young adults has been shaped profoundly by this statement.

Despite the authoritative status of the proclamation as a document, there is not an authoritative interpretation. The proclamation is regularly referenced in general conference and in local meetings, and it has been examined by many LDS (and non-LDS) scholars, advocates, and critics, with each of these parties coming to different conclusions. This should not be surprising. As many theories of textual interpretation have demonstrated, decoding a text is the result of an interaction between the text and the reader that reveals as least as much about the reader and the reader’s context as it does the text itself. There is nothing inherently wrong with such a textual transaction. In fact, there is no way we could do otherwise.

This realization that interpretation of a text is an interaction between the text and the reader arises out of literary theory. But this view has been influential in other fields as well. For instance, scholars of scripture also leverage the philosophical, methodological, and hermeneutical tools of literary theorists to better understand sacred texts. For instance, feminist readings of a text might help expose the male-centered nature of texts by reading it through the lens of contemporary concerns. But it can be difficult to realize that the text acts as a mirror. Too often, individuals do not recognize their confirmation bias and instead claim that their readings are both authoritative and fully self-evident. And just as often, these self-fulfilling interpretations are then weaponized and used to launch attacks against individuals and/or social positions that oppose the interpreter's worldview.

Because of the sensitivity and polemical nature of the issues upon which the proclamation touches, it will likely remain a disputed text—particularly on issues such as gender roles, Heavenly Mother/Father, and homosexuality—regardless of any single person's efforts to crowd out other readings. But in the spirit of embracing learning “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118), I hope to offer two, perhaps under-recognized, ways to examine the proclamation that, taken together, may help open this text and create more space for individual and group exploration and understanding.

First, I want to explore the social environment in which the proclamation was created and released. Second, I will apply a feminist technique for reading the Pauline epistles, that of reading for “theological trajectory,” to see where the proclamation may be leading us. To be clear, it would be disingenuous and inaccurate to claim that this analysis and my own perspectives are free from bias. I cannot escape my context any more than the next person. That said, my goal is not to claim these approaches to the proclamation as *the authoritative* way to understand it but simply to foreground ideas that may help us see the proclamation in new ways.

Social Environment

Following the end of World War II, the Western/European vision of the family began to shift. Where families were once commonly understood to be multigenerational, co-habituating social groups, the 1950s and 1960s saw a normalization and idealization of the “nuclear family”: a married couple with children. Multigenerational families—at least in affluent, white America and Europe—were no longer viewed as the “standard” household arrangement. Research has shown that this idealized version of family life was never universal, not even in the 1950s,¹ and it is an increasingly inaccurate picture of America’s family structure today.² However, the basic notions of a breadwinner father, caregiver mother, and obedient children—the nuclear family—are foundational to the proclamation. Fathers are to “preside over their families . . . and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection.” Mothers are “primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.” Indeed, these “divine” roles for husband and wife theologize very specific Western/European gender roles and enshrine a very specific Western vision of what a family looks like. The proclamation is a product of its time (mid-1990s) and place (a developed Western nation): it reflects a post-World War II Western/European family ethos and an LDS theological perspective grounded in twentieth-century social issues.

To be fair, the proclamation alludes to alternative family structures. However, those allusions cast alternatives to the nuclear family as

1. Philip Cohen, “Family Diversity is the New Normal for America’s Children,” *Council on Contemporary Families*, Sept. 4, 2014, <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/the-new-normal/>. Cohen questions the notion of the idealized family structure that developed as part of the suburban ethos in the 1950s and ’60s and suggests that there was no “typical” family.

2. Pew Research Center, “The American Family Today,” Dec. 17, 2015, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/1-the-american-family-today/>. See also research from the IOM (Institute of Medicine) and NRC (National Research Council) in Steve Olson, ed., *Toward an Integrated Science of Research on Families: Workshop Report* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2011), 7–20.

less-than-complete and often the result of some sort of calamity: “disability, death, or other circumstances”—in other words, not the way God intended. And though it also references extended families—which still remain part of the basic family unit in most of the world today—the proclamation distances them by simply saying they should “lend support when needed.” The implication is that extended families are separate from the husband/wife household, not regularly involved in its day-to-day activities, and not part of the heavenly unit. In short, the proclamation seems to imagine a heavenly family that strikingly similar to the twentieth-century Western ideal: a noble father as the head of the household, a supportive and caring mother by his side, and a brood of well-behaved children.

The proclamation’s Western/European/twentieth-century notion of family would not have worked and does not work for many, many situations in the Church’s past and present. Between 1843 and 1877 while Brigham Young was president of the Church, an authoritative document on marriage and family would have certainly included overt references to, and a powerful defense of, plural marriage. Additionally, the proclamation’s view of extended family is not consistent with living situations in Latin America and parts of Africa (regions of rapid Church growth), where the percentage of individuals in living in extended families range from 25 to 75 percent, with extended families helping to provide “an important measure of social and economic support.”³ Further, the proclamation’s picture of the ideal family is not consistent with the family structures portrayed in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, which are most often described as communities of interrelated individuals living in close proximity to each other. Given this dissonance, one approach would be to dismiss these alternative family structures (e.g., the extended-family households and ancient

3. Mindy E. Scott, W. Bradford Wilcox, Renee Ryberg, and Laurie DeRose, “Executive Summary,” in *World Family Map 2015: Mapping Family Change and Child Well-Being Outcomes* (New York: Child Trends and Social Trends Institute, 2015), 3, 12.

family structures of the Bible and Book of Mormon) as flawed and contrary to divine will. However, another, and I believe more productive, approach is to recognize that the proclamation portrays a culturally specific vision of family that can be easily situated within a particular time and place and is not reflective of many historical and contemporary family structures.

The proclamation is also properly contextualized within the culture wars, specifically the gay marriage debate that raged through the 1990s and 2000s. In 1995, Utah became the first state to pass a state-level “Defense of Marriage Act,” though twelve others “previously had approved statutes defining marriage as between one man and one woman.”⁴ In September 1996, the US Congress passed the federal Defense of Marriage Act, which upheld a state’s right to ban same-sex marriage and defined marriage, for federal government purposes, as the union between one man and one woman.⁵ By 1998 the majority of states had either a constitutional amendment or statutory language banning same-sex marriage.⁶ Given this social context, it is not surprising that the very first statement in the proclamation is *not* about “families” but rather a definition and theological defense of *marriage*: “that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God.” Families are included later in the sentence; however, the reference is not a description of what constitutes a family because that was not in dispute. Concerns stemming from the 1990s culture wars played a role in the formation of the proclamation.

Lastly, in the years immediately leading up to the release of the proclamation, Latter-day Saint leaders spoke frequently about the decline of families. In general conference it was not uncommon to hear statements about the “terrible trends” of familial decline—i.e., the general movement away from the idealized family—and the “ghastly

4. Pew Research Center, “Same-Sex Marriage, State by State,” June 26, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/06/26/same-sex-marriage-state-by-state/>.

5. Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act was deemed unconstitutional on June 26, 2013 by the United States Supreme Court.

6. Pew Research Center, “Same-Sex Marriage, State by State.”

momentum” such trends are likely to produce in society.⁷ Thus we see in the proclamation language warning about the “disintegration of the family” and the statement that non-traditional family structures will harm “individuals, communities, and nations.” However, more recent general conference talks that address the family use far less drastic language. For comparison, between 1993 and 1995, there were four different general conference talks, all given by apostles or the Church president, that expressed specific concern about the “disintegration” of the family or home.⁸ From 2016 to 2018, there were none.⁹

The lack of mention of the “disintegration of the family” is not because the world is making a dramatic movement back toward the idealized nuclear family—indeed, we continue to see a movement *away from* that ideal. Instead, I believe that Church leaders are simply becoming more open in acknowledging and making room for the variable family structures found among Church members. Consider, for instance, Henry B. Eyring’s October 2018 general conference talk “Women and Gospel Learning in the Home” wherein he recognizes the various social situations in which women live and notes the possibilities for the potential good

7. Neal A. Maxwell, “Take Especial Care of your Family,” Apr. 1994, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1994/04/take-especial-care-of-your-family?lang=eng>.

8. A search for “families” on the Citation Index (<http://scriptures.byu.edu/>) limited to general conference talks between 1993 and 1995 yielded ninety-one results. Four talks specifically addressed the “disintegration” of the family: James E. Faust, “Father, Come Home,” Apr. 1993, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1993/04/father-come-home?lang=eng>; Boyd K. Packer, “The Father and the Family,” Apr. 1994, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1994/04/the-father-and-the-family?lang=eng>; Howard W. Hunter, “Exceeding Great and Precious Promises,” Oct. 1994, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1994/10/exceeding-great-and-precious-promises?lang=eng>; and Gordon B. Hinckley, “Stand Strong against the Wiles of the World,” Oct. 1995, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/10/stand-strong-against-the-wiles-of-the-world?lang=eng>.

9. Most references you find prior to 2016 are simply quotations from the proclamation rather than unique language on the family that makes a case independent of the proclamation.

these women can bring to their homes, churches, communities, and workplaces.¹⁰ Similarly, Neil L. Andersen’s April 2016 general conference talk “Whoso Receiveth Them, Receiveth Me” acknowledges the “complex family configurations” around the world and asserts that “with millions of members and the diversity we have in the children of the Church, we need to be even more thoughtful and sensitive.”¹¹ These statements, and others like them, by Church leaders are different in tone and substance from the “family disintegration” language of the mid-1990s.

In sum, the proclamation reflects the social assumptions and conventions of the time and place in which it was produced. Written at a different time, in a different location, by different people, an authoritative statement on marriage and family would reflect different priorities and focal points. To be clear: *this does not mean that the proclamation is not inspired*. But prophets and their prophetic oracles come out of some social context.¹² Acknowledgment of this situatedness should encourage flexibility in interpreting the proclamation for our time and place and create the expectation that future statements on family structure—which will inevitably be released in different social environments—will reflect and respond to these differences.

Theological Trajectory

The proclamation’s apparent reinforcing, absolutizing, eternalizing, and deifying of contemporary gendered stereotypes and heteronormativity has presented a challenge to feminists and LGBTQ individuals. However,

10. Henry B. Eyring, “Women and Gospel Learning in the Home,” Oct. 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/women-and-gospel-learning-in-the-home?lang=eng>.

11. Neil L. Andersen, “Whoso Receiveth Them, Receiveth Me,” Apr. 2016, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2016/04/whoso-receiveth-them-receiveth-me?lang=eng>.

12. Consider the difference between Amos’s message to the Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE and section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Amos’s preaching against the use of “high places” is contextualized to the time and place in which he preached just as much as Joseph Smith’s statements about tobacco and alcohol are specific to his time and place.

feminist biblical scholars, who have had similar challenges with Paul's writings, have developed many creative and thoughtful strategies for interpreting gendered texts. One particular feminist technique for reading Pauline texts championed by Sandra Polaski offers a powerful tool for examining the proclamation, what she calls the "theological trajectory" of a text.

Paul's writings, or those attributed to Paul, contain numerous passages that seem to diminish women's roles in the Church.¹³ In her examination of Paul, Polaski suggests avenues to expose and counter male oppression in a text. First, she argues for reading *thematically*, that is to say, restoring "the woman's voice or critiqu[ing] the woman's suppression within the texts of male literary culture."¹⁴ In practice, thematic analysis re-centers the discussion of a text on the cultural context and social situatedness of its creation. Second, Polaski argues that readers must then learn to read *strategically*, seeking "a different reading altogether from the one that patriarchy has promoted."¹⁵ Polaski suggests that this sort of dramatic re-vision of a text, one that privileges social context, allows readers to see the gendered language in a text as a set of debated positions that reflect the world that the writer knows, not necessarily the one the writer intends.¹⁶ As Phyllis Trible might say, texts become descriptive, not prescriptive.¹⁷ This strategy strips a text of oppressive power and allows readers to "imagine [a writer, in this case Paul] and his interpreters as fully engaged in the messier political

13. See, for instance, 1 Corinthians 14:33–35, Colossians 3:18, Ephesians 5:22, 1 Timothy 2:9–12, 1 Timothy 5:14, and Titus 2:4–5. See also Rebecca Moore, *Women in Christian Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 53–56.

14. Sandra Hack Polaski, *A Feminist Introduction to Paul* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2005), 5.

15. Polaski. *Feminist Introduction to Paul*, 5.

16. Polaski. *Feminist Introduction to Paul*, 108.

17. Phyllis Trible, "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2–3 Reread," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 13 (1973): 80.

subjectivities of the diverse communities to which he wrote and those that have subsequently interpreted him.”¹⁸

A text’s theological trajectory goes beyond any one specific passage. Polaski suggests that readers can boldly reread challenging texts by uncovering the more fundamental principles on which the texts are built. This requires readers to understand texts as part of a specific social situation rather than a set of dogmatic, unbending universal principles. Further, as readers look deep into the text to see the principles upon which the text is based, they will necessarily recognize that these principles must be applied differently in different social situations. For Paul’s writings, Polaski suggests that readers see “the radical equality [Paul] posits between Jew and Gentile” and then apply the “theological trajectory” toward which the texts points to a understand a “similarly radical equality between . . . male and female.”¹⁹ Polaski looks at Paul’s writings “not so much to see where they (and their author and first recipients) *stand*. I look to see where the texts *point!*”²⁰

What is the *theological trajectory* of the statements in the family proclamation? Where is the proclamation *leading us*? By going through this exercise, I believe that readers can see the proclamation in a new light: as a living, flexible set of principles, not a monolith of social morality. Let me offer a few specific and powerful examples applying theological trajectory.

- The proclamation notes that “All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God.” Since Mormons believe in a gendered deity, there must be both a male image of God and a female image of God if this statement is to be coherent. When considered alongside the reference to “heavenly parents,” this language clearly *points toward* an increased discussion about, and examination of, a Heavenly Mother

18. Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre and Laura S. Nasrallah, “Beyond the Heroic Paul: Toward a Feminist and Decolonizing Approach to the Letters of Paul,” in *The Colonized Apostle: Paul through Postcolonial Eyes*, edited by Christopher D. Stanley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 173.

19. Polaski, *Feminist Introduction to Paul*, 4.

20. Polaski, *Feminist Introduction to Paul*, 11, italics in the original.

who has more than a passive role in our eternal lives. It also *points toward* increased use of feminine imagery and language in LDS God-talk. Finally, the recognition that godliness is inclusive of gender differences may *point toward* the breaking down of the theological barriers that currently limit female and LGBTQ members' full participation in the priesthood and priesthood ordinances.

- The proclamation notes that gender “is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.” However, as I have noted elsewhere,²¹ it does not say that gender is *the* essential characteristic of identity and purpose nor is there any explicit link between gender and priesthood (in fact, there is no mention of priesthood at all in the proclamation). The trajectory of this realization *points toward* increasing equality in ecclesiastical responsibilities, fewer (or no) gender-specific callings, and potentially the structuring of priesthood offices for women. For instance, this might include calling women as Sunday School president or men as Primary president, having women serve as the leader of a ward or stake, creating a regional leadership function for women (comparable to the Area Seventies), allowing women to serve in all General Authority positions (Quorums of the Seventy, Presiding Bishopric, apostles, etc.), or having young women assume responsibilities now only reserved for young men, such as preparing, passing, or blessing the sacrament. Further, if gender is only one of many characteristics that are essential to our individual purpose, this language *points toward* a dismantling of the stigmas and exclusion that too often accompany Church participation for those in the LGBTQ community.
- The proclamation delineates a father-breadwinner/mother-caregiver paradigm. At the same time, it also states: “Parents have a sacred duty to rear their children in love and righteousness, to provide for their physical and spiritual needs. . . . In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners.” Just on its face, this statement opens the doors for wives to “help” the husbands with breadwinning responsibilities and for husbands to “help” the wives with caregiving responsibilities. However, the statement *points toward* situations where breadwinning and caregiving responsibilities are decided by the individual circumstance of a specific family rather than dictated in a universal, gendered statement that applies to all families.

21. M. David Huston, “Generation X and Framing Gender in the Church: My Personal Journey,” *Sunstone* 186 (Spring 2018): 12.

- Perhaps most interestingly, the proclamation’s primary argument can be summarized as: “Happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities.” This statement seems to *point toward* the idea that gender-specific roles and idealized family structures are far, far less important than the activities and qualities that characterize successful family life. Thus, this statement *points toward* the fairly remarkable view that *quality* relationships (both with other family members and with our heavenly parents) matter much more than any particular organizational schema and potentially more than whether, or to whom, one is married. For instance, a same-sex couple or a single mother or father raising a family that is founded on “faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities” may be *more* pleasing to God than a family that follows traditional father/mother structure but lacks those attributes.

While some might raise the concern that this sort of reading leads us “beyond the text,” “beyond the text” is where the living tradition of scripture is found. The Gospel of Matthew, for instance, is replete with fulfillment citations that come from the likes of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea (among others).²² These scriptures cited by Matthew certainly meant something in the time in which they were uttered—they had a contemporaneous meaning—but Matthew looked “beyond the text” to see where these oracles were pointing and suggested that they were pointing to Jesus. For many modern Christians, including LDS readers, Matthew’s trajectory-analysis that points to Jesus now seems self-evident—in fact, there are many Christians who cannot understand the Old Testament scriptures cited by Matthew as anything other than a reference to Jesus—but in its day, it was an act of interpretation and

22. See, for example, Matthew 1:22–23; 2:15, 17–18, 23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:35; 21:4–5; and 27:9–10. Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 112.

re-vision. Just as Matthew's process of reconsidering prior prophetic oracles to see where those texts might lead helped early Christians embrace the "newness" of Jesus' advent, we can re-see the family proclamation in new and exciting ways to embrace the "newness" that is to come in our understanding of families.

Conclusion

In her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Phyllis Tribble observes of scripture, "interpretation of its content is forever changing, since new occasions teach new duties and contexts alter texts, liberating them from frozen constructions."²³ This same optimism and vision of freedom should fill LDS members worldwide. We are a people who deeply value our "living church"²⁴ and who believe that God "will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God."²⁵ Certainly some of those revelations will come as we reconsider the words of the past. The family proclamation is not meant to be a "frozen construction" leveraged by individuals to support preexisting biases or a weapon against those who do not share political or ideological perspectives. Rather, by carefully unpacking the proclamation through understanding the social situatedness of that text, we are liberated to look far into the future and consider where the proclamation is pointing.

23. Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 202.

24. Doctrine and Covenants 1:30.

25. Articles of Faith 1:9.

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VARIETY OF PERCEPTIONS OF GOD AMONG LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Taylor Kerby

In their 2010 book *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God—And What That Says About Us*, sociologists of religion Paul Froese and Christopher Bader argue that Americans harbor four conceptualizations of God.¹ These conceptualizations sit on two axes: the degree to which God is involved in the world and the degree to which God judges the sinner. Put together, these four quadrants include the so-called “authoritative God” (who is active in the world and judgmental of the sinner), the “benevolent God” (who is active in the world but less judging of the sinner), the “critical God” (who is less involved in the world but nevertheless judgmental of the sinner), and the “distant God” (who is neither involved in the world or judging of the sinner).² These four ideas of God do not always evenly match up with a particular denomination. For instance, as Froese and Bader argue, Roman Catholics are just as likely to believe in the so-called “authoritative God” as they are the “benevolent God.”³ This suggests that understanding the subtle nuance of a practitioner’s belief should go far beyond simply evaluating whether or not they attend a certain church and suggesting further that two attendees at the same church service may be speaking

1. Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, *America's Four Gods: What We Say about God—And What That Says about Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 27–31.

2. Froese and Bader, 35

3. Froese and Bader, 52.

together about “God” while unknowingly possessing two varying conceptualizations.⁴

The present study is a small-scale replication of Froese and Bader’s method within the Latter-day Saint community, a group neglected in their initial research. There is within this community the (possible) theological justification for any of these four models of the divine. For instance, Latter-day Saints seem to harbor a certain ambivalence regarding the extent to which God is involved in the world. On one hand, Latter-day Saints affirm the theophanies of their founder Joseph Smith Jr., suggesting their belief in a god who is capable and willing to participate in revelatory visitations.⁵ Additionally, Latter-day Saints place continual and repeated emphasis on the influence of the Holy Spirit in their life as a guide and prompter. The Holy Spirit, acting as an emissary from God, is sometimes referred to as a “constant companion” for the baptized and has been cited as warning of danger, comforting, and passing on communication from God.⁶ On the other hand, Latter-day Saints also stress the role of agency in human life and God’s unwillingness—or perhaps even inability—to interfere in one’s life non-consensually. As one Latter-day Saint hymn puts it, “For this eternal truth is giv’n: That God will force no man to heav’n.”⁷ Terry and Fiona Givens describe a God “who weeps” because he (God is gendered male in Latter-day Saint thought) is unable to change his children’s

4. Froese and Bader, 41.

5. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 21.

6. For instance, see Gary E. Stevenson, “How Does the Holy Ghost Help You?,” Apr. 2017, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2017/04/how-does-the-holy-ghost-help-you?lang=eng>; Henry B. Eyring, “The Holy Ghost as Your Companion,” Oct. 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/10/the-holy-ghost-as-your-companion?lang=eng>.

7. Michael Hicks, *Mormonism and Music: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 102.

ways and, more to the point, experiences vulnerability because of this limitation.⁸ In other words, Latter-day Saint theology would postulate (in contrast to Calvin's irresistible grace) that, for them, God is met and experienced on the believer's terms rather than God's, suggesting that perhaps Latter-day Saints might understand God as being less involved. Thus, it is in the interest of scholars to ascertain how these varying factors come together to create the Latter-day Saints' understandings of God.

The present study was interested not only in what sort of God LDS people believed in but what type of variation might be found within the community. To that end, active LDS men and women, LGBT members of the Church, and former members were polled and interviewed. Each section in the paper addresses one of these subgroups of respondents. In summary, the following was found:

1. Generally, members of the LDS Church believe in the "benevolent God," stressing God's love and involvement.⁹
2. In keeping with national trends, LDS women believe God to be more loving (less judgmental) than Mormon men.
3. There was a positive relationship between church activity and belief in the "benevolent God."¹⁰ As church activity increases, belief in God's involvement and love also increases.
4. There is a positive relationship between belief in LDS doctrines and belief in a benevolent God.
5. There is a positive relationship between a feeling of community in one's local congregation and belief in a benevolent God.
6. Non-LGBT members of the Church tend to believe God is more involved and loving (non-judgmental) than LGBT members do.
7. LGBT members are more likely to describe God as "critical," but those who attend church regularly still reported God as *loving* and *involved*.

8. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012), 21.

9. Froese and Bader, *America's Four Gods*, 27–31.

10. Froese and Bader, 27–31.

8. Former members of the Church have previously believed in the “benevolent God.”¹¹
9. Former members of the Church feel their experiences in the Church cut against their understanding of a deity who is both *involved* and *loving*.

Description of Survey and Interviews

The survey I administered asked the same questions with the same scale as Froese and Bader asked originally, but it was expanded to include questions unique to the Latter-day Saint experience. These additional questions included inquiries regarding the rate at which participants attended church meetings, the frequency with which they paid tithing, and their level of belief in Latter-day Saint doctrine. It also asked for participants to rate the extent to which they believed Joseph Smith was a prophet as well as the extent to which he was a role model. Lastly, the survey included additional questions meant to gauge the extent to which the respondent considered themselves a member of the Latter-day Saint community, including a question regarding the extent to which they “fit in” with the Latter-day Saint community and another asking the extent to which they are “similar to” other Latter-day Saints.

Each semi-structured interview began with me asking the same questions asked by Froese and Bader. These questions included:

1. Do you believe in God? [If not, do you believe that something exists beyond our physical world?]
2. Please describe God as best you can. [Is God a “he” or a “she”? What does God look like? Can you describe God’s personality?]
3. Is God active in your daily life? In what ways?
4. Are there specific things that you have experienced that you believe were acts of God?
5. Are there world events that you believe were acts of God?
6. How does God deal with sinners?
7. Is there divine justice? What is it and how is it accomplished?
8. Does God have an opinion about moral issues? [e.g., abortion, homosexuality, the death penalty]

11. Froese and Bader, 27–31.

The second half of the interview was rather unstructured, beginning with my simply saying, “Tell me about your experience in the Latter-day Saint community.” In most cases, this request was sufficient to prod data regarding the extent to which the participant felt like a valued member of the organization. Each interview lasted roughly forty-five minutes, and each was transcribed and thematically coded. The respondents were also asked for basic demographic information including their gender, age, place of residence, sexual orientation, and race.

This study does not argue itself to be conclusive and there are obvious limitations to the research conducted. The link to the survey was distributed primarily via social media, especially Facebook and Twitter. As such the respondents tended to be under the age of forty. In addition, most of the survey respondents were female. After some interview participants were identified using social media, a snowball approach was employed to find subsequent participants. This study attempted to collect a stratified sample for interviews based on the demographic ratios existing within the Latter-day Saint population. This proved problematic on at least two fronts. For the study it was assumed, as some sources have suggested, that 60 percent of Latter-day Saints are, as they would say, *inactive*, meaning they no longer attend church regularly.¹² In addition, in a true stratified sample, there would have been only one or two interviews conducted with LGBT Latter-day Saints. However, in order to gain greater representation, that particular demographic was expanded. The study also assumed that Latter-day Saint women outnumber Latter-day Saint men at a rate of 6:4, as has been reported by the Pew Research Center. This sample is not statistically representative of Latter-day Saints as a whole because most of the survey respondents were female. Note also that the names of all interviewed participants have been changed.

With these assumptions in place, the final sample group for interviews can be viewed in table 1.

12. Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 13–14.

Table 1

Demographic	Number of Participants
Church-attending LDS Men	11
Church-attending LDS Women	8
LGBT Latter-day Saint Men	7
LGBT Latter-day Saint Women	9
Post-Latter-day Saint Men	8
Post-Latter-day Saint Women	3
Total	45

A Loving Heavenly Father: A Look at Latter-day Saints Generally

Overwhelmingly, church-attending Latter-day Saints believe in a “benevolent God”: a God who is involved in the world but not angry or judging of the sinner.¹³ Latter-day Saints who regularly attend church rank God’s love highly and his *critical* and *wrathful* nature very low. The clear majority either agree or strongly agree that God is *ever-present* and either disagree or strongly disagree that *distant* is an appropriate classifier for deity. In short, the Latter-day Saints believe in a God who is both benevolent and helpful.

Survey Data

Looking at the survey data, there are some interesting disparities between genders. My survey found that Latter-day Saint women view God as more *involved* and more *loving* than do their male counterparts. This is not necessarily a surprising finding. Froese and Bader also found that women, on average, tend to lean toward the “benevolent God,” who is both highly involved and highly loving.¹⁴ Additionally, Latter-

13. Froese and Bader, *America’s Four Gods*, 28.

14. Froese and Bader, 28.

day Saint women are more likely than men to believe God is involved. For instance, 71 percent of women reported that the term *ever-present* describes God *very well*. This is compared to just over half of Latter-day Saint men who reported the same.

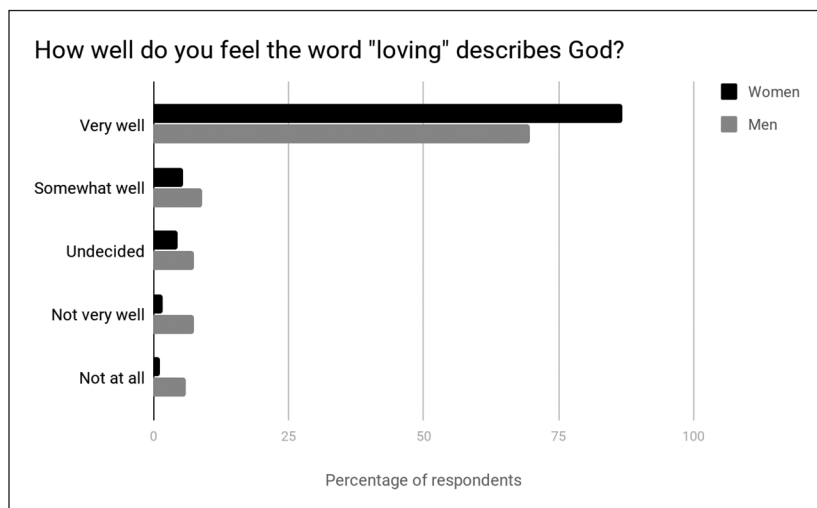


Figure 1

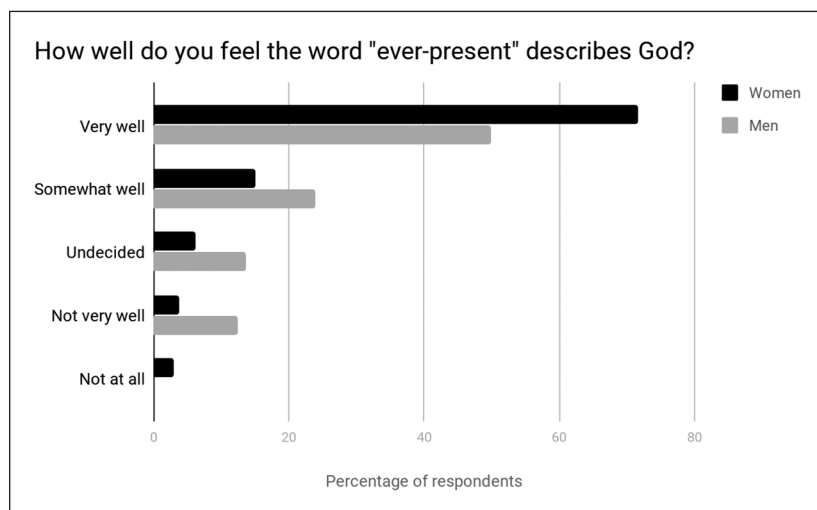


Figure 2

The data suggest that belief in a loving Latter-day Saint God is correlated with belief in Latter-day Saint teachings, activity in the Church, and social stability within the organization. Whenever any of those three indicators rise, the respondents' belief in a loving God seems to rise in turn. For instance, 99 percent of respondents who agreed that *Joseph Smith was a prophet* also found God to be *loving*.¹⁵ In contrast, only 48 percent of those who either *strongly disagreed* or *disagreed* that Joseph Smith was a prophet felt that God was loving. The same trend can be seen when one does not believe Joseph Smith to have been a *good role model* or that the *current Church leadership* receives revelation.

Perhaps most striking, when respondents either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement "The majority of Latter-day Saints are similar to me," they reported believing in a *loving* God at 97 percent. However, the same can only be said of 78 percent of respondents who either *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with the statement. A similar trend is found in response to the statement "I 'fit' in the Latter-day Saint community." More than 98 percent of respondents who *strongly agreed* with that statement also reported that *loving* described God *very well*. However, only 47 percent of those who *strongly disagreed* that they fit in the Mormon community said the same. In other words, simply not fitting into one's congregation seems to find a correlation with the love they perceive—or don't perceive—from deity.

Interview Data

Furthermore, Latter-day Saints believed that when God's presence was not felt regularly, it was likely due to their own lack of trying. More than one interviewee stated so explicitly. "I haven't felt God in my life . . . because I haven't been doing what I need to feel God," said one, typical of the wider trend. In other words, even if God did at points feel distant to Latter-day Saints, the situation was not irreconcilably so. God could be brought back into full high involvement in an

15. Note that this is a merged total of respondents who *agreed* and *strongly agreed* with the statement regarding Joseph Smith.

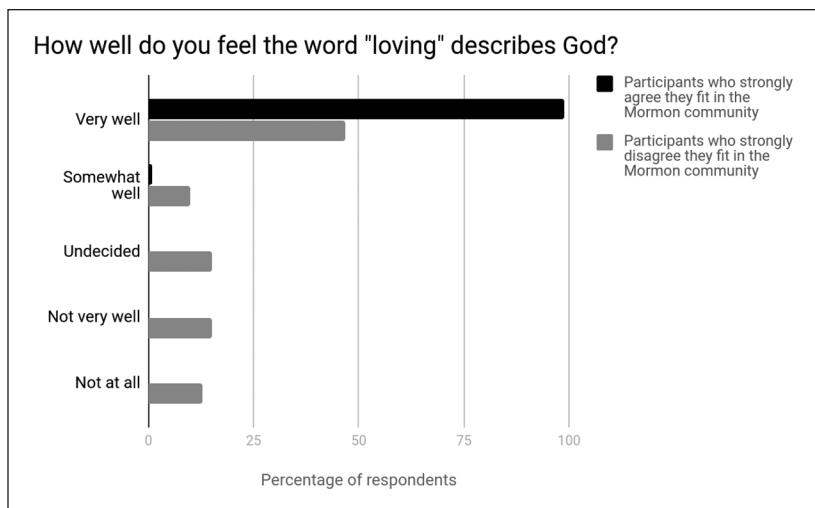


Figure 3

individual's life if they performed religious duties (e.g., reading Latter-day Saint scripture, saying a prayer, church attendance, etc.). Some participants took this further. It wasn't that God became less involved necessarily, some reported back—rather, when Latter-day Saints were not engaged in religious behaviors, they were, as they stated, less likely to *notice* God's acts in their lives. In other words, the "benevolent God" was still loving them and highly involved in their lives, they just didn't see it.

For Latter-day Saints, there might be scriptural, historical, or theological justification for a harsh, judging God. However, this does not seem to factor into Latter-day Saints' lived religious experiences with deity. God's benevolence continues to the point that he doesn't personally inflict punishment. One respondent, typical of wider trends, describes divine punishment by making a comparison between the effects of sin and the law of gravity. He explained:

Is God himself bringing down a hammer? Oh my goodness, you lied to your mother, you did some unpardonable sin, you need to be punished for that—I don't think so. I think there are divine laws set in place, and if

you go against those laws, then there is justice. So that's the same things as gravity. . . . If you jump off a cliff, you're going to be punished for it. I don't think it's technically God; it was God that invented gravity, but it was still your fault if you're stupid enough to jump off a cliff.

Joleen, an active Latter-day Saint living in the Philadelphia area, is a good example.

I asked, "Does God inflict punishment?"

"I don't know. . . . I don't think so," she replied.

I asked her to explain her thinking.

"I mean, in the Book of Mormon, like, there are people who clearly are not doing the right things and clearly, they're despised tons and it's clear that it's a result of their wickedness, but . . . So, I guess that, like, doctrinally, I would say yes. But I don't know."

This anecdote illustrates the reluctance of a Latter-day Saint woman to believe in God's willingness to inflict punishment. Significantly, Joleen realized that what she nominally believed about God was at odds with her experience with God. God, as she experienced him, was too benevolent to inflict punishment, despite his doing so in the scripture she believed in. The question of God's punishing was cognitively dissonant for her and remained unresolved. This idea, of sin being its own punishment, was a nearly universal response to this question. In short, in widely held Latter-day Saint belief, God doesn't punish you for your sins—your sins punish you for your sins; God is too benevolent to do it.

The church-attending Latter-day Saint can conceptualize a more loving, more involved God than other demographics that will be discussed. For the church-attending Latter-day Saint, there are not the same obstacles disabling their belief in such an involved figure, in contrast to other demographics. For LGBT Latter-day Saints as well as post-Latter-day Saints, there is a cognitive cost to believing in high levels of God's involvement. While those who attend church can maximize their benefit by believing in their highly loving and highly involved deity, other types of Latter-day Saints minimize these costs and increase their cognitive benefit by adapting God to the needs of their individual identity.

LGBT Mormons

This section discusses the data surrounding the LGBT Latter-day Saint community. It explores not only what kind of God LGBT Latter-day Saints believe in but also how that understanding of God keeps them involved in a church that would mark any of their romantic relationships as an act of sin. The sample size from which this section pulls is small. As such, in this section I seek only to make claims regarding those polled, not LGBT Mormons generally.

Survey Data

The LGBT Latter-day Saints polled are less likely to identify as believing Mormons. Remaining in the denomination is no easy task given the belief in the sinful nature of sex outside of a heterosexual marriage. Remaining a Latter-day Saint as an LGBT person often means living a life of celibacy. These high demands are likely the reason that the percentage of LGBT respondents who strongly agree that they are believing Latter-day Saints drops nearly in half: 30 percent of LGBT Latter-day Saints compared to 65 percent of heterosexual Latter-day Saints.

Active heterosexual Latter-day Saints generally believe in a highly loving and highly involved God, what Froese and Bader refer to as the “benevolent God.”¹⁶ According to the survey data, LGBT Latter-day Saints do not consider God to be as loving as heterosexual Latter-day Saints do. This is not to say that LGBT Latter-day Saints believe in Froese and Bader’s “critical God,” who is described as being uninvolved and unloving.¹⁷ They simply do not believe that God is as involved and loving as the heterosexual Latter-day Saints report.

For instance, when those who responded *very well* and *somewhat well* to the question “How well do you feel the word ‘loving’ describes God?” are totaled, 68 percent of LGBT Latter-day Saints report believing in a loving God. However, they are less enthusiastic about that belief than heterosexual Latter-day Saints, who responded *very well* to that

16. Froese and Bader, *America's Four Gods*, 28

17. Froese and Bader, 31–32.

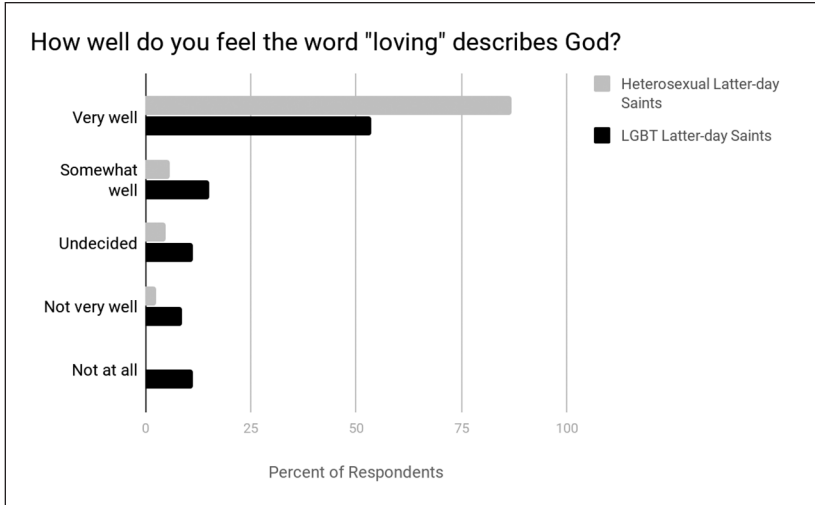


Figure 4

same question at 86 percent and had no respondents report *not at all*. Additionally, LGBT Latter-day Saints have more diversity of opinion on the extent to which God is loving, with a combined 31 percent of participants responding *undecided*, *not very well*, or *not at all* to the question. This is compared to 7 percent of heterosexual Latter-day Saints who responded the same.

Additionally, while LGBT Latter-day Saints do not believe in the “critical God,” they are more likely to describe God as *critical* when compared to heterosexual Latter-day Saints.¹⁸ LGBT Latter-day Saints generally are much more ambivalent about the question; just as many responded *very well* as did *not very well* when asked “How well do you feel the word ‘critical’ describes God?”

LGBT Latter-day Saints’ comparative ambivalence to the question of God’s love may be more a product of their mixed levels of church attendance than their sexuality. As the interview data will show, church-attending LGBT Latter-day Saints continue to believe that God is highly loving and not at all critical.

18. Froese and Bader, 31–32.

Lastly, LGBT Latter-day Saints are much less likely than heterosexual Latter-day Saints to believe that their beliefs about God are similar to other Latter-day Saints. The qualitative data will expand on this point and show that in order to continue to attend church,

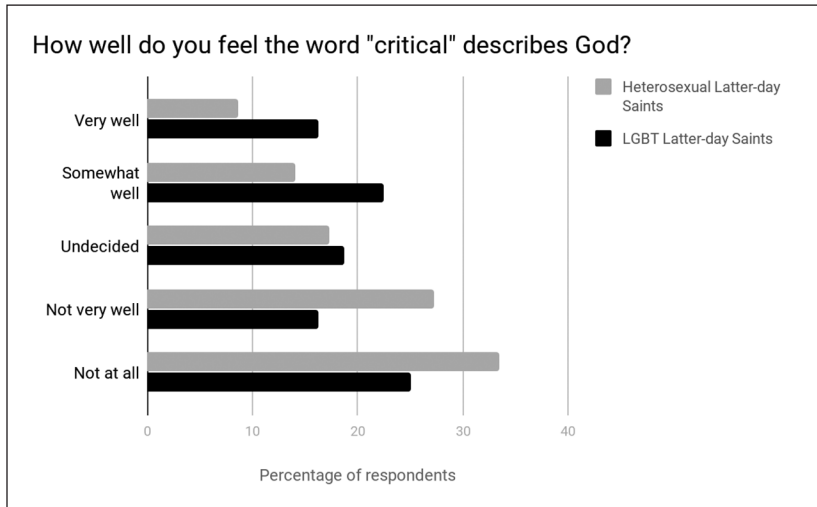


Figure 5

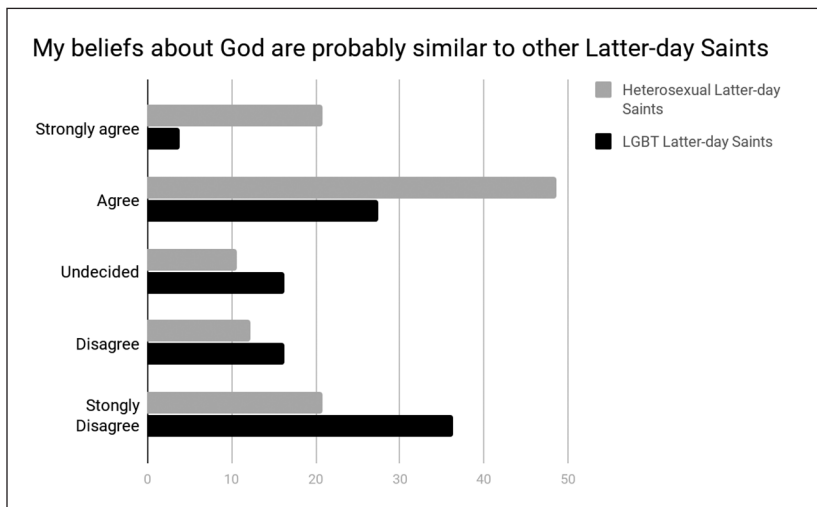


Figure 6

LGBT Latter-day Saints often have to rely on their own interpretation of Church teachings.

Interview Data

One question in this study was why LGBT Latter-day Saints would choose to remain active members of the religion and, in addition, how they find space for themselves within the community. In answering these questions, the LGBT Latter-day Saints interviewed gave replies that fell along several themes. Tony is a believing though now inactive (meaning no longer church-attending) gay Latter-day Saint living in a small studio apartment in the middle of LA. He was unassuming but excited to participate. His family, he told me, was originally from the Philippines and nearly all Latter-day Saints. He “discovered” his sexuality while still in his teens. He began to fall out of the Latter-day Saint lifestyle much to the chagrin and dismay of his very faithful family. The predictive course of this story is interrupted, however, by a spiritual encounter with God.

In something of a last-ditch effort to commune with the divine, Tony took Latter-day Saint truth claims to their source, God, for verification through prayer. Tony did not expound on exactly what he felt during his prayerful encounter with deity; however, whatever it was that Tony felt was sufficient to convince him that, in his words, “it’s all true.” This realization of *truthfulness* led Tony to serve a mission for the full two-year assignment. Upon returning home, Tony attended a singles ward, a congregation reserved for young single adult Latter-day Saints whose purpose is to provide opportunities for marriage among Latter-day Saints. For a few years, he had decided on a life of celibacy inside the faith. In time, however, the heavy burden of celibacy proved too much for Tony and, while he never stopped believing in the Church’s truth claims, he stopped attending, stopped seeking to live a life of celibacy, and began trying to find a man with whom to start a family.

I asked him explicitly, “Why not stop believing it?” Wouldn’t it be psychologically easier, I reasoned, to find a new system of belief that

better fit the life he hoped to lead? He couldn't, he told me. "It's all true, the whole thing," he said. "What will that mean for you in the afterlife?" I asked with curiosity. He had no idea. Whether he would be gay or straight in the life to come, he had no idea. It was here that I took a different turn in my questioning. "If Mormonism is true, why not attend Mormon meetings?" His answer: "It's too hard." He explained that when he attends church meetings, "Mormon Tony pops back up" and starts saying things like, "You should try to be celibate again." In an effort to avoid "Mormon Tony," it was just easier to not attend. In other words, Tony couldn't deny his experience, but he could try to forget, and, for him, that has seemed to be the best option.

In the previous section, one participant was able to comfortably affirm God's love and involvement. Tony, in contrast, believed in those attributes of God—after all, God was involved and concerned enough about Tony to personally tell him that Mormonism was true. But, in the end, the task of continuing to believe in and worship an involved and concerned god was too much for him emotionally.

In contrast, there were other LGBT Latter-day Saints who felt that their sexuality had actually brought them into greater intimacy with God. For example, Brandon, a young man in his late twenties made what was, in the moment, a surprising claim. I asked him to try and explain to me how his being gay may have impacted his understanding of God. Thinking for a moment and looking slightly upward, he suggested, as if realizing it for the first time, "I think my being gay brought me closer to God." He had felt alienated by his church community, there was no way around that; however, he also felt that in his alienation he had found greater access to the divine.

This was not an unusual claim, and, in fact, it became common among interviewees (though, strangely, this conflicted with the polling data). When another interviewee, Jason, was asked this question, he responded near automatically, "Absolutely . . . for better and for worse." On one hand, he explained that it "is frustrating that a heavenly parent, a Heavenly Father, would allow continuing things that are . . . incorrect,"

meaning the continuation of, as he saw them, false statements regarding LGBT peoples from both lay members and leadership in the Church. Jason's "frustration" was that God seemed to be working below the standards of benevolence and involvement Jason had come to expect. He could not understand how a loving God could allow the leaders of the Church, with whom God is able to communicate directly, to continue to preach false ideas (as he saw them) regarding homosexuality. Jason's discomfort and confusion about the Church is therefore rooted in his belief in a "benevolent God."¹⁹

Jason continued, however, by saying, "On the good side, you are forced to engage with God on a drastically more personal level." The God he discovered through this forced engagement is, in his view, very different from the more judgmental God he found from "General Authorities and prophets." The God Jason found from this engagement was, in his view, more loving and accepting than how he believed Mormons generally imagined God. This claim is also seen in the quantitative data, where LGBT Latter-day Saints showed they are far more likely to say they do not believe like other Latter-day Saints.

Many of the LGBT Latter-day Saints interviewed in the present study took care to distinguish between the Church and God. In an effort to make church more comfortable and edifying, many interviewed would fall back on their personal conviction of God's benevolent nature over any judgement (perceived or otherwise) from members in their congregation. Ian was a fine example of this. I met him in a small coffee shop, an ironic location given the Latter-day Saint prohibition against coffee. He entered excitedly, ready to share his story. Ian was a gay man and a believing Latter-day Saint, still very active in his congregation. I asked him if he was out to his congregation, "I'm sure they suspect," he said, "but I haven't come out to anyone." We then discussed the discomfort he feels on the typical Sunday. While he has found not coming out to his fellow churchgoers a more manageable scenario attending

19. Froese and Bader, 28.

his Latter-day Saint congregation, church attendance was nevertheless sometimes rather stressful. I asked him, “So, going to church is hard, but it’s still important to you. How do you *get through* church?” He paused, and after taking only a moment replied, “Well, I go for *me*.”

Responses like this were given frequently as I discussed this question with active and believing LGBT Latter-day Saints. For those who were able to make space for themselves within Latter-day Saint worship, it was imperative that they make the communal experience into an individualized one. By this I mean: for this group who was able to find a balance between being queer and being active Latter-day Saints, they needed to find a way to be selective in what in the faith was of value and what was not. Put into words more in tune with their own description, it became necessary to differentiate between what was *real* and what was simply other Latter-day Saints’ opinions. In this vein, Ian continued, “Every now and again I sit in Sunday School and I tell myself, that’s just what *she* thinks.” God’s accepting benevolence outranked any side comments from fellow members of the Church.

In conclusion, for these LGBT Latter-day Saints, there is a separation between church and God. Where the Church is faulty, God is perfect. Where the Church doesn’t understand, God has compassion. It must be noted, however, that, in their view, this does not delegitimize the Church. Rather, God becomes the standard that the Church simply hasn’t yet met but might shortly. God’s seeming unwillingness to debunk prohibitions about homosexuality remain confusing (especially given their perception of God’s direct involvement in the Church), however, God remains benevolent, even when his Church falls below that standard.

Post-Latter-day Saints

For post-Latter-day Saints, the data suggests a God who couldn’t be more different from Froese and Bader’s “benevolent God.”²⁰ Post-Latter-day Saints report belief in a God who is, when compared to the

20. Froese and Bader, 28.

believing Latter-day Saint, far more distant and critical and less loving. Occasionally, post-Latter-day Saints, due to a difficulty of reconciling the Church's faults with an involved and loving God, abandoned the idea of God altogether. Furthermore, others saw the God displayed in Latter-day Saint scripture or worshiped in Latter-day Saint meetings as far more oppressive than benevolent.

The data, therefore, might be interpreted both in terms of post-Latter-day Saints' actual belief as well as their disappointment with the God they encountered in Latter-day Saint worship. Furthermore, as has been seen previously, the Latter-day Saints' image of God is often sculpted by their experience at church.

Survey Data

This section compares the survey data from those who report having left the LDS church with two other groups: those who report never thinking about leaving and those who report occasionally thinking about leaving. The intention is to showcase trends across a spectrum of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the LDS Church.

Thirty-nine percent of those who report having left the LDS Church agree that *loving* describes God well. In contrast, that number increases to 77 percent for those who occasionally think about leaving the Church and 97 percent for those who never think about leaving the LDS Church. Froese and Bader argue that most everyone who believes in God believes God to be loving.²¹ Therefore, it is possible that this low number represents the God post-Latter-day Saints found unsatisfactory within the LDS Church rather than a god they continue to believe in. The same explanation might be applied to those who occasionally think about leaving the Church. Whatever the explanation, post-Latter-day Saints did not experience a loving God within the walls of LDS Churches.

The opposite trend occurs as participants engage with the extent to which God is *distant* and *critical*, as we see in figure 8. A combined 60 percent of post-Latter-day Saints report that *distant* describes God either

21. Froese and Bader, 80.

very well or *somewhat well*. This is in sharp contrast with those who never think about leaving the LDS Church, none of whom felt it described God *very well* and 76 percent of whom felt the term did not describe God at all. Those who occasionally think about leaving fell between the two.

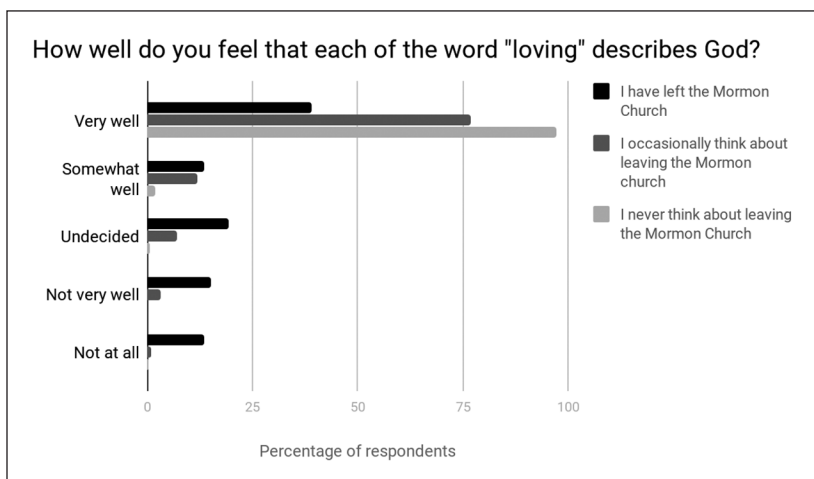


Figure 7

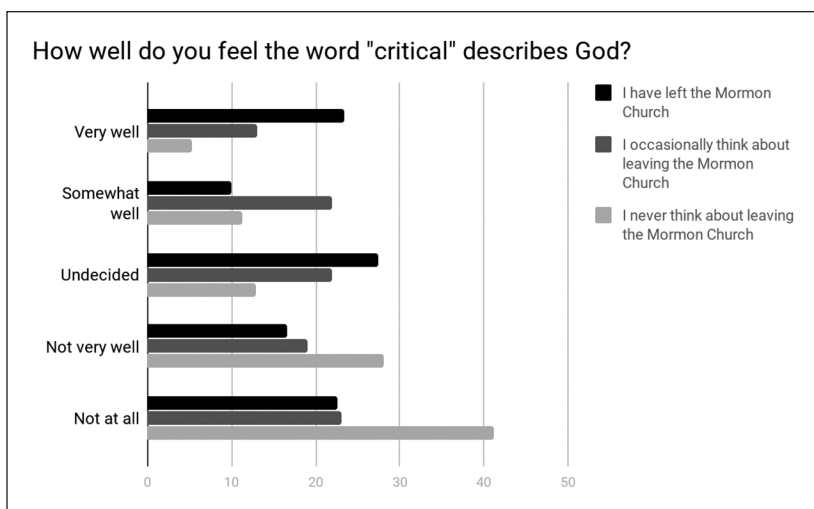


Figure 8

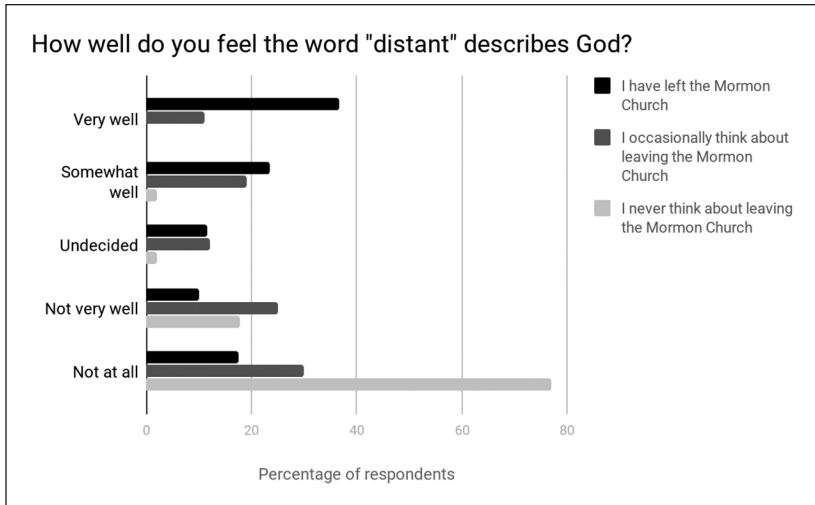


Figure 8

In contrast, the extent to which God is *critical* drew more ambivalent results from post-Latter-day Saints; 23 percent report that it describes God *very well*, 22 percent say *not at all*, and 27 percent are *undecided*. Their ambivalence is matched by only a little more certainty among those who never think about leaving and those who occasionally do. It seems that while Latter-day Saints generally believe in a highly loving and highly involved God, there are many who harbor the possibility of God also being *critical*.

Interview Data

For many post-Latter-day Saints, their experience as a member of the LDS Church was self-reported as being dysfunctional, oppressive, or domineering.

For Anne, a respondent typical of others, her de-conversion began when the Church stopped working for her.

I felt like a lot of what was being taught in church was actually quite counterproductive. . . . There's a lot of teachings that lead you to think,

“Well if you’re sad you must be sinning,” you know, “if you’re having a hard time you must be doing something wrong,” and then there’s so much expectation with church involvement that I think that can make people a little more anxious or perfectionistic. So, this kind of stuff. . . . I saw a lot of damage to women from the Church or what I perceive as detrimental stuff for women. And then the stuff with homosexuality and the Church’s involvement in that. All that kind of built up to me seeing a lot of things where I felt like the Church was doing a lot of harm.

Note here the conflict between Anne’s lived Latter-day Saint experience and what one should expect from the “benevolent God.”²² A highly loving deity, Anne believed, would not head a system that detrimentally affected her mental health. She continued:

I kind of started to feel like there wasn’t a lot of solid ground for some of the Church’s truth claims. And it kind of came down to, like, I felt like if the Church had really solid truth claims [and] then there was some kind of negative collateral damage happening, like I could maybe stick with it. Like the true points were kind of tricky but like if everything the Church did turned out great, that would probably be okay too. [But] then also I felt like, you know, the crux of the Church’s truth points kind of comes down to . . . you pray about it, you feel that it’s true and . . . it comes out a lot to what I perceive as [an] emotional response. And I didn’t feel like that was enough . . . to justify the harm I saw being done.

Anne’s expectation of a more forceful response from God rather than just an “emotional one” makes sense given Latter-day Saints’ assertion that God is involved enough to answer prayers with clarity. And her dissatisfaction with the lived reality of the Latter-day Saint experience is made worse by her prior conviction that God is both benevolent and involved enough to make the Church better than what it is.

As seen in the data, typified by Anne’s narrative, the challenges of faith experienced by post-Latter-day Saints are rooted not only in their experience in the Church or with its history but also in the

22. Froese and Bader, 28.

perceived contradiction between all those things and the Latter-day Saint understanding of God as involved and loving. That is the cost, it seems, of a highly involved and loving deity.

Spencer, another respondent, was asked what the most influential factor was in his leaving the LDS Church. He replied, “I would say it came down to . . . Joseph Smith’s character and the things that he did and said that I find very immoral and very questionable. I guess the plausibility theories that the Church offers versus the theories that historians offer up in naturalistic explanations were just much less convincing. This man is not who I thought he was.” George has a similar experience. He grew up in a devout Mormon family in Utah. Once he was a young adult, George realized he was starting to have questions related to the Church’s history and policies. Eventually, he began to investigate other internet sources including an ex-Mormon subreddit, despite a warning from a friend. Once on the subreddit, he discovered racist quotes from former Church leaders and became increasingly interested in the Church’s former policy of not allowing men of African descent to hold the priesthood. He asked rhetorically, “God is totally cool with leaders being super racist? It’s just all really [weird].”

To understand the concerns of these post-Latter-day Saints, it is imperative to remember that their quandaries were not simply with Church history or policy but also in the difficulty of reconciling the “benevolent God” with their respective concerns.²³ In Anne’s case, if she had not expected such a forceful and clear witness from deity, her cognitive dissonance when met with feelings would have been less so. For Spencer, it was not simply an issue of Joseph Smith lacking in character, it was also the question of how an involved and loving God would allow an immoral man to be his mouthpiece. For George, while his faith crisis had its origin in issues of Church history and policy, it became a concern about the nature of God. How could a God who is involved and loving allow the leaders of his Church to be overtly

23. Froese and Bader, 28.

racist? That question, left unanswered for George, became a catalyst that ultimately motivated his departure from the LDS Church.

In Summary

In each section, I have argued that the experiences and identity of each Latter-day Saint has impacted their conceptualization of God. Among the post-Latter-day Saints, we see those who could not bear the cost of believing in a “benevolent God.”²⁴ Reconciling this God with the lived realities of Latter-day Saint worship, the darker shades of Latter-day Saint history, or their own feeling of distance from deity proved to be a task far too complex to undertake. The cost required to make this reconciliation led them away from church and, in many cases, from the idea of God altogether.

For others, God could still be found outside of the LDS Church. They perceive God as more distant and uninvolved, far from the loving Heavenly Father described in the contemporary LDS understanding of Joseph Smith’s experience. What seems very clear in the reflection of this data is the reality that, for Latter-day Saints, the image of God is sculpted and molded in the shadow of their church experience.

This project found that active Latter-day Saints believe in a highly involved and loving God. They were freer than other LDS groups to believe in such a God, as there was no cognitive dissonance to satisfy, in contrast to the LGBT and post-Latter-day Saints. Additionally, it was found that the more engaged a person was in the LDS community, the more they believed God to be involved and loving. In contrast, post-Latter-day Saints tended to believe in a God who was not only less involved but less loving as well.

Active LGBT Latter-day Saints faced daunting questions regarding cost and reward and had to reframe their understanding of God in order to ensure that their cost did not outweigh their reward. Many

24. Froese and Bader, 27–31.

did this by creating a God who was highly loving but less involved to explain why Church leaders could be “wrong” about homosexuality. Others nuanced the idea of God’s level of involvement by supposing that the degrees of involvement could vary from person to person. The strength of their personal connection to deity gave them the self-assurance to disregard what other Latter-day Saints said about issues of gender and sexuality. Interestingly, while post-Latter-day Saints view God either as the source of their oppression or the apathetic bystander to an irrevocably faulted church system, LGBT Latter-day Saints (at least the active and believing LGBT Latter-day Saints interviewed) view God as their ally. While both have significant struggles with the Church—whether in terms of history, policy, culture, or all the above—for one group God was their tether to faith while for the other he was the final straw.

The present study has expanded on Froese and Bader’s work by including the Latter-day Saint community, a denomination ignored in their initial study. Additionally, with its inclusion of LGBT and post-Latter-day Saints, it incorporated an additional group Froese and Bader ignored: the marginalized and the unbelieving. It reveals that their framework is effective not just for those sitting in the center of the pews but also those standing at the margins.

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ASSUMING POWER

Linda Hoffman Kimball

I am the youngest of three sisters, reared as a Protestant in the Illinois suburbs of Chicago. My mother was a nurse who returned to working when I was in my late elementary school years. Her mother was a nurse, too, a Swedish immigrant who arrived in Rockford, Illinois, at the age of ten in 1890.

My mother was creative, generous, and hospitable. Throughout my school years, we hosted guests through various international programs from Germany, Argentina, Japan, and Iran. When I was twelve, my sisters, mother, and I traveled to see my mother's relatives who still lived in Sweden and then went on a whirlwind tour of Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, France, and England.

Mom had the loudest voice and strongest opinions in the household. She was determined and committed to her sometimes eccentric opinions. She had a unique approach to allergies, believing that any ailment—from car sickness to cancer—could be attributed to something ingested or inhaled from the environment. For example, she was convinced that my unsettled tummy after car rides to my grandparents' house in Chicago (which I attribute to being squashed between my parents in the front seat and driving forty-five minutes on bumpy roads) was a reaction to my grandmother's gas stove and gas heating, to which I was surely too sensitive.

Armed with her strong beliefs, Mom petitioned the school board in our town to allow me to go to high school a year early because the middle school being built would have gas heating, which she insisted would have a deleterious effect on my health. I went to high school a year

early. After earning straight As my first term, the school board decided I was officially a freshman and didn't have to do any catch-up work.

Because there were no boys in our family, I just assumed that girls could do whatever they wanted to if they put their minds and hearts into it. My dad was as good a chef as my mother, and Sunday dinners were always his delicious domain. They both had honorable jobs making the world better. Gender didn't count for much other than which bathroom I used at school. And as far as racial distinctions went, and as far as Christ was concerned, that had surely been settled long ago. I brought home 1960s civil rights songs from junior Bible camp and sang them joyfully: "And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free!"

I read the scriptures as my pastors and my own questions led me—seeking truth from the Good Book (and balking at some of Paul's wilder sexist remarks just as I balked at some of my mother's odd conclusions). The words to John Oxenham's hymn "In Christ There Is No East or West" led me along my path:

In Christ there is no east or west,
in him no south or north,
but one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.
Join hands, disciples of the faith,
whate'er your race may be.
All children of the living God
are surely kin to me.

I was a faithful Christian girl who had, as the Protestant parlance pronounced, a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." (I have been Jesus' girl for as long as I have conscious memories. I still am.) I was very involved in our church's youth group and served as its president. Despite it still being the 1960s, I seriously considered becoming a pastor "when I grew up"—at that time a rare and radical profession for women.

During my senior year in high school, I became close friends with an LDS girl in my class whose family had recently moved to our

town from Utah. She and I found we had a lot of common ground in matters of faith. She invited me to her house for dinner and to meet the missionaries. When they asked me if I wanted to learn even more about Jesus Christ, I said, “Of course!”

Ten months later, as a freshman at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, I felt I would never get a satisfying answer to the dilemma in front of me: did God want me to become Mormon? I was happy and fulfilled in my Protestant faith. The concept the Mormons (as they were then called) taught that the gospel contains all truth¹ was exciting and compelling. It was not a question of “by their fruits ye shall know them” because in terms of quality of character, I recognized there were spiritual giants in each place. There were also the kooky kind of “fruits” on full display in both traditions, too.

During an October visit from two missionaries at my freshman college dorm I had a pivotal experience that gave me a jolt of grace and love beyond anything I had previously experienced. It granted clarity that assured me God wanted me to become a Mormon.

At first, I interpreted the transcendence of that encounter as “Yes, it’s true!” Over the course of the intervening decades, I have come to realize that I didn’t (and still don’t) understand what the “it” in that exclamation refers to and what the adjective “true” fully means. Regardless of my constant wrestling with words and their meanings, I still consider that experience in my dorm room as among the “true-est” experiences I have ever had. It changed my life if not my blood type and continues to shape my journey of faith.

After I waited for two years (attending Cambridge’s university wards and even holding callings), my parents were persuaded that this was not just an adolescent whim and allowed me to be baptized, three days shy of my nineteenth birthday.

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 16, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-brigham-young/chapter-2?lang=eng>.

The LDS women I first encountered in New England were dynamic, eager, outspoken, questing, accomplished women. These included, among others, Claudia Bushman, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Judy Dushku, Grethe Peterson, Nancy Dredge, Jill Mulvay, Carrel Sheldon, Cheryl DiVito, Judy Gilliland, and Mimmu Sloan. A half-generation older than I, they were the embodiment of what I thought all Mormon women (and men, for that matter) would be—articulate, advocates of equal rights for all, and full of faith in Christ.

As part of an institute class these women researched the lives of the nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint foremothers, compiled their results, and published a book called *Mormon Sisters* in 1976.² They also launched a new iteration of the nineteenth-century periodical *Woman's Exponent* for LDS sisters and christened it *Exponent II*—basing it on the “twin pedestals of Mormonism and Feminism” as they had seen exemplified in the lives of Eliza R. Snow, Emma Hale Smith, Patty Bartlett Sessions, Martha Hughes Cannon, Emmeline B. Wells, and others.

I remember walking past an institute class in Cambridge. I heard Judy Dushku saying that when her colleagues at the college where she taught asked her, “How can you be a Mormon *and* a feminist?” she replied, “Of course I’m a feminist! It’s *because* I’m Mormon!” To me that sounded just right. Shouldn’t everyone—male and female—be a feminist if it means allowing each individual to achieve “the measure of their creation”?

Soon I was illustrating for *Exponent II*, then writing articles and eventually a column, and attending or presenting at Exponent retreats in lovely New England settings.

In September 1979, President Spencer W. Kimball gave an address called “The Role of Righteous Women.” In it he said:

Much of the major growth that is coming to the Church in the last days will come because many of the good women of the world (in whom there is often such an inner sense of spirituality) will be drawn to the Church in large numbers. This will happen to the degree that

2. Claudia Bushman, ed., *Mormon Sisters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Emmeline Press Limited, 1976).

the women of the Church reflect righteousness and articulateness in their lives and to the degree that the women of the Church are seen as distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world.³

I wanted to be “righteous” and “articulate.” The way I understood it, LDS women I knew weren’t “claiming” power from anyone else’s domain. They were examples of *owning* the power inherent in them as daughters and heirs of God.

When, as a new mother, I moved with my husband Chris to Hyde Park on Chicago’s South Side, I met more examples of women (and men) who understood the amazing potential God has invested in each of us. Throughout the decades I discovered soulmates among more LDS women. My sister-friend Cathy Stokes, an African American convert to the Church, was straight-talking, outspoken, committed to the gospel (and Gospel music)—and was not-to-be-messed-with. Others continued to lead, guide, and walk beside me as examples of Christlike women-in-action.

Cathy Stokes is the one who introduced me to a hymn from her previous Baptist tradition. I often hum and sing its refrain. It’s called “Plenty Good Room”:

Plenty good room, plenty good room,
plenty good room in my Father’s kingdom,
Plenty good room, plenty good room,
Just choose your seat and sit down.

Over the course of many decades of Church membership I have, of course, discovered that sisters in the Church vary in their attitudes and confidence in recognizing, owning, and asserting their God-given powers. Not all women were nurtured on the laps of confident, committed women. Not all of them grew up under the influence of strong-minded mothers in a house full of females and a non-hierarchical father. There are aspects of our LDS culture that subtly—or

3. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Role of Righteous Women,” Oct. 1979, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1979/10/the-role-of-righteous-women?lang=eng>.

directly from the pulpit—have been tainted by “the philosophies of men mingled with scripture.”⁴ There remains a lot of long-standing toxic rhetoric that women are somehow “less than,” subservient, or in need of covenantal “safety hatches.”

Some feel that “smashing the patriarchy” is the ultimate goal of what they define as “feminism.” That is not my opinion. Each of us—female and male—have power given us to serve and lead, speak out and nurture, preach doctrine, and clean the bathrooms in the ward building. I’m sure there are others who feel that distinct rules and roles must be enumerated and enforced. I generally diffuse the discontent that stirs in me by reminding myself that each of us approaches life from our own quadrant of the Myers–Briggs personality scale. Some like rules. Some function better with hazier boundaries. (That doesn’t resolve all the hurdles I come across in my life as a committed misfit among the Latter-day Saints, but it provides enough buffer of charity to keep me moving forward.)

As I have assumed from my earliest years, Christ is our example. Can we hear him calling us as he did in 3 Nephi 10:4: “How oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and have nourished you?” I am persuaded that part of my (and, I believe, our Church’s) current task is to ensure that there is, in fact, “plenty good room” in God’s kingdom. Let us acknowledge our power from our divine heritage. Then let’s choose our seat and sit down.

4. Hartman Rector Jr., “You Shall Receive the Spirit,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1974, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1974/01/you-shall-receive-the-spirit?lang=eng>.

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CALLED NOT TO SERVE

Neal David Silvester

My brain is slightly broken. The natural lows and highs of life are amplified by chemical imbalance into deep emotional troughs and crazed manic waves that can strike anytime and for any reason. I also experience what are called “mixed states,” where I feel both depression and mania simultaneously. My brain will be on fire, setting off a horse race of depressing ideas and emotions. The worst thoughts I’ve ever had about myself all gallop to get a nose ahead of the others.

It’s impossible to feel the Spirit in these episodes. That may sound blasphemous, but it’s true. Most of my mixed-state experiences are channeled into a prayer to my Heavenly Father, to please send help, please take me out of this, please show me a sign that you still love me. But for that space of time, there’s a barrier that the Holy Ghost can’t or won’t penetrate. I feel entirely alone in a permanent night, blocked from sunlight by the wall of earth that is my chemical imbalance.

I feel forsaken.

You weren’t good enough. You weren’t stable enough. You weren’t worthy enough.

The others are.

That’s not what the stake president says when he releases you from the call to serve a mission. Not at all. But it’s what you tell yourself. Or what the devil says into your ear. It’s hard to tell the two apart when you’ve got bipolar disorder.

Eventually the thunder passes like a headache, and I wonder just why I was feeling so deranged. I wonder if those negative thoughts were whispered into my ear by the devil or merely my disorder. If the devil, why didn’t my supplication to God send him running? If the disorder, what on earth was the point of such useless, debilitating suffering?

For years as a young adult, I endured this condition because I was too prideful to ask for help. I wrote my experience into my first novel. It turned out in the end that I had no idea what I was doing as a novelist, and so, in denial of its fundamental flaws, I self-published it, eager to jumpstart my inevitable career. That I did not care to improve my craft before trying to announce myself to the world was the first of my failures and an example of my prideful tendencies, an obvious parallel to my mental health.

It was only by a miracle, a direct intervention from God, that I found the humility to seek help and the medication—Geodon—that saved my life. My mind cleared up, and soon my soul did, too. As the months went on, I increasingly felt the need to repay the Savior and serve a mission. It came to a head about six months later: I was writing in my journal and started the sentence: “I want to serve . . .”

Then I stopped. For a moment I pondered which words should follow. Did I want to serve a mission? Or did I want to serve God? Either would have been honest. But as an aspiring writer, I wanted to get it just right. I ended up scribbling, “I want to serve God and go on a mission.”

This word choice may seem inconsequential to most people, but for me it was significant. Later, reading Doctrine and Covenants section 4, the phrasing hit me hard: “Therefore, if ye have desires *to serve God* ye are called to the work.”¹

That was enough. Within a few months my wisdom teeth were out and my mission papers were in.

Three weeks passed but the call didn’t come. Months passed. My stake president inquired, and Salt Lake City told him what has become one of the greatest ironies of my life: the medication that I take for my bipolar disorder—the medication that literally saved my life and soul—had sent up a red flag. Geodon is technically an antipsychotic

1. Doctrine and Covenants 4:3, emphasis added.

medication. I wasn't psychotic; these just happened to be the pills that gave my brain breathing room, the space for me to take control of my life. But how could the Church offices know that?

"How do you feel about not going on a mission and moving on with your life?" my stake president said.

I was told I was on the cutting edge of this policy. They were keeping young missionaries home if there was even the slightest chance they'd break down in the field. I felt fortunate not to be one of the previous generation, who might go out and attempt to live the missionary lifestyle—just doing what the Church asked them to do—and fail for reasons they could not control, while others around them succeeded. I did not have to be surrounded by those successful missionaries and mentally bludgeon myself with comparisons. I didn't have to be "sent home early," the subject of myriad rumors and speculation. I didn't fail to live up to the call to serve.

No: I was called *not* to serve.

In the dark times there would still always be that unavoidable feeling that I couldn't be as useful to God as others were. I didn't possess the right kind of mind. I was broken, and they were whole. I lacked the talents and skills to be a proper soldier in the army of the Lord. I wasn't making the sacrifice that real missionaries made.

But when I received that answer from my stake president, I didn't feel any negativity. The Spirit had already prepared me for that answer. I was so accepting of it that when I told my parents, and later my bishop, I was somewhat surprised at their reactions. They just stared at me in silence, disbelieving. Not in judgment of me, but on my behalf. I felt loved then, but I didn't feel any sadness. In my mind, it was the normal chain of events; I had already started making plans for what I was going to do next in life.

Within five months I moved out of my childhood home. I started work on my third (unpublished) novel with plans for more. I was on my way back to school. I was even married less than a year from that

meeting. Everything fell into place so easily that it was clear to me that God never intended for me to serve full-time in the field. This was the path he wanted me to take.

On top of all of that, I felt I had received a different kind of call to serve. This was crystallized in a message my sister sent me at that time: “Dear Neal, you have been called to serve your mission throughout your entire life. You will be blessed for your service. Through your faith and prayers you will see much success. Keep up the hard work.”

If full-time missions are the law of tithing—two years of service out of twenty lived—what my sister wrote seemed to be about the law of consecration. It was my duty, I told myself, to give my whole life to Christ.

My talents were the opposite of the great orators of the Book of Mormon. Moroni bemoaned the Nephites’ lack of writing ability and feared mockery for it. I was a writer, or wanted to be one, or thought myself one. Even back in the dark times, when I dealt not only with emotional frailty but addiction and self-hate, I wanted to change the world by warning others not to go down my path. Now, as a worthy Melchizedek priesthood holder who’d been brought out of darkness and into light by God’s hand, I could broadcast God’s truth to the world with my writing ability. Or so I believed.

While many detrimental elements of my bipolar disorder were sanded down into almost nothing, the sense of grandiosity persisted. But now it felt healthy, even divinely ordained. And of course God would be there to shower me with the same kind of success he promised the sons of Mosiah after they experienced depression and were about to turn back from their desire to convert the Lamanites. This would be my divinely appointed mission, and in accomplishing that mission, I would be great. I would be God’s champion, sent down to change the world through my novels. In fact, my first name, Neal, actually means “champion,” and David, my middle name, means “beloved of God”! Clearly these clues were crucial to understanding my grand destiny. No,

I was never called to fight in trenches. Instead, I would be a general, fighting and inspiring and strategizing from a distance.

Indeed, perhaps I was called to serve a mission after all.



It's been eleven years since that meeting with my stake president. It is quarter past eleven—forty-five minutes to midnight. I am at the end of a long, unprofitable day, in the darkest of night, with several hours still to go. I can't sleep—my pills are necessary to turn off my brain, but I can't bear to take them yet. I am exhausted, but I must work. Grace might be as my day, but all I see is night. I have not yet seen a fullness, nor has the sunlight of success found my heart. I have not yet seen the Lord take the work from my hands, call me a good and faithful servant, and finish what I cannot. It is still in my hands; I am yet unprofitable; I can't yet stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God and for his arm to be revealed.

It's been eleven years since I got that request from my stake president. Eleven years and over a million words of fiction written, rewritten, submitted—and but for ten thousand of them, all unpublished.

Not a part of even a single new baptism.

If this lack of success is a hint from God, I haven't yet taken it to heart. As you can see, I'm still writing. But there's a reason for that: mania, the opposite pole from depression, can have an effect like a boomerang. After a bout of darkness, it can swing you around into an extra sense of zeal, whip you up you with a wind of energy and zest for life that, in the moment, feels completely natural. You can conquer the world, accomplish any mission, live up to any standard. Where before you were down in the depths, now you operate on a higher plane than all the rest of the world, and someday soon they will see it when the fruits of your labor will shine for all the world to admire.

We call these effects *delusions of grandeur*. I've mistaken them for the Spirit many, many times.

Here's an example: back during the darkest days of my untreated bipolar disorder, I developed a crush on a certain girl (we'll call her Summer) who was part of my circle of friends. Over time, my feelings for Summer grew into an attachment. My happiness revolved around the bits of attention she paid me via email. It became an obsession. There were multiple points where I revealed my feelings and, more emphatically each time, Summer said *no*. So we would just be friends, I rationalized after climbing back out of the Mariana Trench of despair. But the romantic desire only deepened, because something about my chemical imbalance made it impossible for me to live without hope. This would all blossom into marriage, I was sure of it. The Spirit told me! There was simply no other way to live life without that specific concrete hope for Summer. Without it I would prefer to be dead.

It took me a long, long time to finally recognize this pattern elsewhere in my life. Over the years of my repeated failures, my mania would inevitably drag me back up to the heights of hope and promise. It has been an endless cycle of accepting failure followed by the flip of some chemical switch and the delusions of grandeur pulling me right back up in its wake, leading me to try and try and try again, and never, no never, no never forsake the mission call I felt I received.

I did get one book published, in which I take stories from pop culture and use them as religious parables. It might have sold better had I not moved away from Utah two months after it was published (my wife, the primary breadwinner, got a job offer in another state), effectively abandoning my target demographic. A freelance food critic reviewed it in the *Deseret News*, giving it a lukewarm appraisal, and it was quickly forgotten. The only royalty check I ever received from sales was instantly drowned in the sea of bills that awaited my family after the big move. If its message reached anyone but the one or two readers who contacted me personally, I didn't know it. The book left no dramatic imprint on my life at all.

All these years of profitless work—for what, exactly? For a mere ungraspable dream? For the project of greatness in the eyes of both

God and the world? Wasn't this, my true mission—writing—meant for success? Didn't God want me to be his beloved champion before the world?

It's only recently that a certain vexing suspicion has wormed its way into my consciousness: what if failure as a writer is my calling?

For so long I've been so puffed up by thoughts of my own great potential, that perhaps this is the ultimate lifelong mission God has set for me: a literal call not to serve. Indeed, perhaps it is no longer my stake president, but God himself asking, "Neal, how would you feel about not serving that mission and moving on with your life?"

I wonder if I could ever accept such a thing, even from God. The thought is earth-shattering, like a body rejecting a soul transplant. I think I would rather live a lifetime of trying to write, and failing, than accept this particular mission.

True, God has asked better men and women for more, and they've given it to him. I wouldn't be the first man to be asked to sacrifice his ego, the worldly trappings that artificially define his worth. Maybe this is what *consecration* really means. I give him what I've worked on all these years, and it's utterly up to him how to use it. I need to have the faith to accept it—even if he throws it in the trash.

It might seem a simple principle with an easy answer in Sunday School. The rich young man must sell all he possesses and give the money to the poor. For someone who had inherited wealth, or simply grown up in it, that might not be as demanding a prospect.

But I see how and why that rich young man was disappointed. It wasn't just luxuries he would be giving up. It would be the entire labor of his life, his very worth to the world, every daily goal achieved, every dream met, every skill honed. All that he had worked for over the course of his life, every talent God had gifted him that he had invested and doubled, every tear he'd shed and drop of sweat he'd bled—to let it be washed away to others with nothing palpable to replace it?

If I sacrificed my writing, what would remain, really? A naked soul, same as all the others. The trappings, the romance, the philosophy, it

would all be gone. Maybe that's what I'm most afraid of: being just like everybody else.

Just the ward cubmaster.

But maybe that's how God wants us to see ourselves. We may think the height of Mount Everest to be nigh unconquerable, but when you look at the curvature of the whole earth, it's hardly a bump. That's likely how God looks at his best, most spiritually perfect children here in this world—the Joseph Smiths, the Russell Nelsons—even they are so far away from God's level that it's pitiable. We all have work to do; we're all ordinary souls with growth to achieve far past this mortal life.

On the other hand, God could be sending a different message entirely. "Your worth is not found in your works," he's telling me. "It's inherent inside you as a son of God." Maybe God's trying to get that across and for some reason it cannot penetrate my mind. I accept that idea rationally and intellectually, but I've never felt it deep in my heart. Perhaps if I gave up the writing project entirely, I might feel it more clearly. Take a step into the dark corridor first, and only then feel God's light bathing my path in clarity.

But—what if the success I dream of lies just around the next corner? Just at the end of this latest corridor? The latest draft? It's like a big government stimulus to jumpstart the economy. If the economy doesn't actually improve, is it the fault of the idea itself or should the stimulus just have been more potent?

The questions swirl and vex. But they can't be waved away like smoke. I wish all the entreaties could be reduced to a simple request for personal revelation. I've asked for such answers many, many times, and I feel certain God wants me to continue. He wants me to be his champion and refuse to give up!

But this is another pitfall for the mentally unwell: how can I know for sure that I didn't just convince myself of the answer I wanted so desperately to hear? My manic state has misled me before. And I have no evidence outside of myself of the path I'm trying to tread. Nevertheless,

I know that God is still on the other side. I've seen too much of his hand in my life, in small moments and in its overarching course. I've seen the progress I've made as a writer, as a husband, as a father. And I've seen myself humbled in ways I never thought necessary, both spiritually and mentally.

I want the desires of my heart to be pure. And so, I consider this essay a prayer to the God I know is there, a confession to my best, my heavenly friend, who, through thorny ways, leads to a joyful end. Whether my compulsive hopefulness is a weakness or a strength, an emblem of ungodly pride or an article of faith in the long game of God's promises—or somehow both at once—it is an essential part of my life and my soul.

I'm listening, Heavenly Father. I'm listening.

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"Patterns," ink print,
by Marlena Marie Wilding. 2014

EXCOMMUNICATION AND FINDING WHOLENESS

John Gustav-Wrathall

In the 1970s and '80s there was a common attitude in the Church that a Latter-day Saint could not be gay, and the Church handbook was written in such a way as to allow individuals to be excommunicated just for being known to have a sexual orientation other than heterosexual. Even after the Church clarified that the mere fact of being gay was not grounds for excommunication, given that the majority of gay people choose a same-sex relationship over celibacy or marriage to a member of the opposite sex, disproportionate numbers of gay men and lesbians ended up excommunicated. An analogous situation exists for trans people, who generally need to transition in order to be healthy. Also, at least some Church leaders have continued, despite handbook clarifications, to excommunicate individuals for the mere fact of being LGBTQ. More recently, I know a number of gay and lesbian individuals excommunicated for “apostasy” during the forty-one months of “the policy” (categorizing same-sex marriage as apostasy).¹ For LGBTQ individuals who are Latter-day Saints, the experience or anticipation of excommunication looms large in our emotional and spiritual landscape.

I was excommunicated in 1986. I've known many other LGBTQ Latter-day Saints who have been excommunicated. I've seen the range of emotions and reactions to the experience of being excommunicated: devastation, liberation, sadness, bravado, loneliness, fear, resilience,

1. The policy categorizing same-sex marriage as apostasy and forbidding the baptism of children whose primary parents were same-sex couples was initiated on November 5, 2015 and retracted April 4, 2019.

anxiety, and peace. Excommunication can be a heartbreaking experience, with huge repercussions for one's self-image as well as for one's family and social relationships. For some, excommunication represents a desired break with an institution with which one has irreconcilable differences. But for others, excommunication carries a social stigma to be avoided at all costs. For some, the spiritual penalties that come with excommunication are most feared, since they see excommunication as banishment from God and the severing of covenants that bind us to our individual families and to the larger human family.

Regardless of one's feelings about it, excommunication is rarely seen as a positive thing.

One very common response to the threat of excommunication is to simply drop out of activity, to try to stay "off the radar" of one's Church leaders. I remember a number of years ago having a conversation with a gay Latter-day Saint who told me that he wished he could attend church, but he was afraid of being excommunicated. I was attending church regularly, despite being excommunicated. I remember thinking how ironic it was to stop attending church for fear of excommunication. Many individuals informally excommunicate themselves because of their fear of the formality.

I understand this is complex. Because I am contacted from time to time by LGBTQ Latter-day Saints asking about the experience of being excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, my desire here is to share insights that come with having lived with excommunication for over thirty years, half of which has been lived as a believing and church-active LGBTQ Saint despite being excommunicated.

While the focus of this essay is dealing with excommunication, just about everything that I have to say here could apply to how people might deal with other forms of Church discipline, such as having one's temple recommend taken away or being disfellowshipped. While this essay is written with a focus on the experience of LGBTQ individuals, I also hope this can be helpful to any others coming to terms with

painful Church disciplinary actions. At the heart of any advice I would share is my conviction that there are things in life we can control, and there are things that we cannot control. We cannot always control the consequences of our choices, but we are the ones who make the choices. If we take the time to discern what we truly want in life, and then if we pursue that which we truly desire with integrity, we will be happy even when the consequences of our choices are difficult.

My Experience with Excommunication

I am a believing Latter-day Saint, actively attending my ward, participating as much as I am able, and practicing my faith as much as possible within the constraints of my membership status. I have a strong desire to someday be a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in full standing.

I was excommunicated in 1986. At the time I had committed no offense worthy of excommunication. I had had my temple recommend taken away, and my bishop at BYU had told me that I should not partake of the sacrament until I had been masturbation-free for at least three months. After a bout with severe depression and nearly committing suicide, I felt prompted by the Spirit to write a letter to my bishop to ask that my name be removed from the records of the Church. Instead of performing this administrative procedure, my bishop convened a Church court and excommunicated me *in absentia*. My father attended the court.

My response to the excommunication was one of relief, with a little bit of annoyance. I had asked to have my name removed from the Church records and didn't understand why a full-blown Church court would be necessary in order to do that. However, in my mind the end result was the same, and I was grateful that my request had been fulfilled and that I was no longer a member of the Church.

Five years after my excommunication, I met and entered into a relationship with the man who is my husband to this day. We became a

couple in 1991; we held a public commitment ceremony in 1995, a time when same-sex marriage was legal nowhere in the United States; we purchased a home together in 1996; and we legally married in California in 2008. Regardless of how or why I was excommunicated in 1986, current Church policy is such that if I were a member, my bishop would have grounds for excommunicating me now, and I cannot currently be reinstated into membership.

In 2005, nineteen years after my excommunication, I had a series of spiritual experiences that led me to begin attending at my ward. I've remained "active" since then. I've been through five bishops and three stake presidents now and have met with each of them over the years, some of them on a regular basis. My church leaders and my ward are very supportive of me. They respect my agency and my desire to remain faithful to my relationship with my husband. They also hope and pray with me that I can someday be restored to full membership in the Church, however that may come about, whether by a change in Church policy or a change in my marital status.

There have been times when my excommunicated status has felt burdensome and when I have yearned to be able to be baptized and partake of the bread and water each week at sacrament. However, I firmly believe that I am currently where the Lord wants me to be, and I have felt reassurances through the Spirit that eventually all will work out so long as I remain faithful and attentive to its promptings.

I view my excommunicated status as a by-product of current Church policy and the state of our collective understanding of LGBTQ issues. I don't resent it in any way. In fact, I'm grateful for the opportunity that my unique life circumstances afford me to learn valuable life lessons of patience and love.

Those are my biases, that is my experience, and that is my perspective. That having been said, I hope that what follows will be helpful to people regardless of where they're coming from or what relationship they have or hope to have with the Church.

I've spoken with a number of close friends who are currently excommunicated, and everybody I know is in a different place with it. Of course, excommunication is an intensely personal experience, and I want to speak to some of the ways that we can navigate it despite the intense personal pain that we can experience around it. But excommunication is not merely personal, it is also social. So I also want to talk about some of the aspects of dealing with excommunication within our families and with our friends in the Church. If you live in a region of the United States where there is a Mormon majority, excommunication can have even more thoroughgoing impact, and I want to take a moment to address that situation as well.

Relationship with God

Ostensibly, Church disciplinary processes are all about our relationship with God. Some no longer believe in God by the time of their excommunication. For others, belief in God does not survive the excommunication process. For yet others, belief in and relationship with God remains an important factor throughout the process. Regardless of personal belief in or about God, the symbolic aspects of a process that is presented as a form of divine judgment on us is important to consider.

One of the most common ways that people typically think of God is as morality writ large. In psychological terms, God is identified with the superego. Our ideas about and relationship with God are often a function of our relationship with our superego. If we find ourselves frequently in conflict with authority figures, chances are likely that we will feel ourselves in conflict with, angry at, or disbelieving in relation to God. Whether God exists or not, it might be worthwhile to consider what that means personally.

Another way to think about God was articulated by Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. How do we relate to ultimate values in our life? Our ultimate values are those values that matter the most to us. They

are the values that we will not sacrifice for anything else. Where do we stand in relation to our ultimate values? If, for example, an ultimate value for us is having a deep, loving relationship with our family, but we have been neglecting family for our job, we may find ourselves out of sorts in life, feeling like something important is missing.

If we know what our ultimate values are and we have aligned our lives in such a way that we are in harmony with them, it's unlikely that we will need external validation in order to feel good about ourselves. It is even possible that in pursuit of our ultimate values we come into conflict with Church policies. It's possible to be a very moral human being, a human being who has high standards of ethical behavior, and be in conflict with Church policies. This has happened many times in the history of religious institutions. It is my personal conviction that eventually those kinds of conflicts will be resolved through divine mediation. But in the meantime, we may have to be prepared to find ourselves in inconvenient or uncomfortable situations. If we act with integrity, from an eternal perspective we have nothing to fear.

If, on the other hand, we do not know what our ultimate values are, or we know what they are, or have a vague sense of what they are, but we're not sure if our life is in harmony with them, external invalidation can be devastating to us. Others invalidating our choices can heighten the buried sense of doubt and fear that we already might have about the well-being of our souls.

For me, the most effective way to get in touch with my ultimate values is through spiritual practice such as scripture study, meditation, and especially fasting and prayer. It is important to approach these things in a completely open way, in a way of letting go of what we think we know and letting in what we don't know. We may think we already have the answers to critical questions in our lives, because somebody else has told us what they think those answers are. It doesn't matter if the people who have told us this are Church leaders or not. We need to figure these things out for ourselves. If we're experiencing doubt or

conflict about something, it is precisely because we don't have answers that are compelling and we need some broader perspective. And as we get in touch with that, we will get the right answer, even if it is an answer that is unexpected.

There are other ways to get in touch with our ultimate values in addition to fasting and prayer. What matters is taking the time and making the effort to know our own mind and our own heart and then to reflect on our place in the larger scheme of things.

This can actually be a lifelong process. So we shouldn't be surprised if we get answers and still have to wrestle with doubt about whether these are truly our ultimate answers. It's OK to make mistakes. It's OK to get an answer and to try that answer on for size and then discover further down the road that it's not the right answer. That's the nature of life, and to use the language of the Church, that's why we have the Atonement. That's why this mortal coil is defined by agency as well as by trust in the mercy and the atonement of Jesus Christ: so that we can learn through experience.

It can take time and work, but if we seek to get good with God (or our higher self), everything else will make sense and fall into place.

Family Relationships

My excommunication from the Church created a profound crisis in my relationships with my parents, my grandmother, and with other family members. It resulted in, among other things, my parents temporarily withdrawing their financial support of me in college. I mentioned that my father attended the Church court resulting in my excommunication. I've subsequently discussed that experience with him and learned that it was one of the most heartbreaking moments in his life as a father.

I was fortunate in that I managed to come to terms with being gay and figured out a way forward for myself before getting involved in a heterosexual marriage and having children. I know many, many gay

men and lesbians who exercised faith as they had been instructed to by Church leaders and married in spite of strong same-sex orientation, resulting in family situations that eventually became unbearable. Dealing with the full reality of being gay or lesbian and simultaneously facing the prospect of excommunication and divorce is something that I never had to deal with. And I recognize how damaging excommunication can be under those circumstances.

The most important thing we can do is to open our hearts and communicate with our loved ones. I say this knowing well that we may find ourselves in a predicament with our loved ones precisely because what is most important to communicate with them is also that which we have been most afraid to communicate with them. We may have been lying to ourselves and to them for years. So this often requires us to get as aligned as we possibly can with God, with the Holy Spirit, or with our ultimate values. But fully open-hearted and honest communication is the only chance we have at salvaging and strengthening these relationships that are and will always be the most important relationships that we can have in our lives.

It is possible that despite our best efforts to communicate openly and with integrity, our sharing results in some sort of a break. We cannot control how we will be received by others. Sometimes loved ones will respond harshly and unkindly and without understanding. Our mental health and well-being may require distancing from them at least for a time.

Family relationships, however, are different from other relationships in that they are the relationships that we will often ultimately need to keep working out even when there are breakdowns and failures that are long-lasting and damaging. So my second bit of advice would be to always find some way to keep a door or a window open to these relationships, even when we need to take a break from them. And we should always keep hope that redemption in these relationships is possible.

An open door or window could be an occasional letter or a phone call. It could be an appearance at a family reunion. It doesn't matter as long as it is a non-judging and authentic act of love expressing a desire for a positive relationship. We might need a therapist to help us figure out what our appropriate boundaries should be in relationships that have been or become abusive. Having an open door or window doesn't make sense if our house is in shambles or if we are not taking care of ourselves.

After a break with my parents that lasted for several years, over time we were able to start over and eventually come to a point where my family are among my most loyal and committed allies and supporters in my journey as a gay man. I know gay men and lesbians who have beautiful relationships with former spouses and with children, despite being divorced and excommunicated.

These are the kinds of outcomes I would hope for everyone. It may take a lot of patience, faith, and a little long-suffering in order to achieve them.

Church Relationships

I want to start here by bearing testimony that it is possible to completely break with the Church and live lives that are fulfilling and happy. Many of us grew up in Church cultures that taught us to believe that without the Church we could never be happy. In fact, we can be very happy. If we desire, we can find other religious or spiritual communities that will sustain us in our life journey, that will help us connect with our ultimate values and live our lives in alignment with those values. It is also possible to be quite happy without any church at all in our lives.

If you are peculiar in the way that I am peculiar and you have a desire for a positive relationship with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, despite being excommunicated from the same, I have a few additional bits of wisdom to share about this.

First of all, make sure that your desire for a relationship with the Church comes from an authentic place deep within. If you are making the effort as a default, because you can't imagine being happy in any other church, you may find church an increasingly frustrating and unsatisfying experience. If you have any doubt about your testimony of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, even the slightest doubt, being excommunicated is an excellent opportunity to explore other religions and to learn more about how other people view faith and see if it works for you. If you find something that brings you equal or greater joy than that which you experienced as a Latter-day Saint, it's a win!

If you've explored and come back, or you are 110 percent sure that this is where your heart is, the rest is relatively easy.

Yes, you will encounter skepticism about you and your motives and your testimony. If you find yourself demoralized by every off-putting comment, by everybody who stares at you when they think you're not looking, by words over the pulpit that you disagree with, by Sunday School discussions that are less than uplifting, church participation becomes an exercise in masochism. But if your motive for being there is because you have a testimony of the gospel, because you know this is where you belong, and you're eager to learn what the Holy Spirit has to teach you in the context of relationships with other believing and imperfect Saints, what to do in the various situations you encounter will be relatively easy to discern.

You will know that when somebody says something that offends you, the moment to deal with that is never a moment when your response is coming from a place of anger. You might know that a response should be put off indefinitely until your relationship with that individual is deeper, when an opportune moment presents itself and you feel the Spirit prompting you to speak. You will know that the most important purpose of gathering as a church is in fact to deepen our relationships with one another.

If that is your understanding, whether you are a formal member or not, you will be engaged in ministry. You will serve whenever and wherever and in whatever capacity opportunities for service present themselves. You might help vacuum the sanctuary on a Saturday morning, or show up when the elders quorum asks for volunteers to help somebody move, or bake a meal for sharing at the annual ward Christmas party.

You will stop worrying about whether your relationships with members of your ward are reciprocal. The question will always be: Are you becoming a more loving person? What are the areas in your life that you need to work on? Which way is the Spirit leading you? And you will find that as those things become your focus, members of your ward and your church leaders will open up to you. You will find yourself in surprising situations where members of your faith community become your advocates and your defenders and your best friends, the people who, in the whole world, make you feel most safe and most loved.

And added to that depth of human love you will experience divine love. You will feel the sweet and distinct and irreplaceable and unique presence of the Holy Spirit, whispering love and divine approbation. There will be moments when you can call upon priesthood blessings by worthy priesthood holders in your ward and you will feel those blessings coming not from men but directly from loving heavenly parents.

If we go into any ward situation with an evangelistic agenda, with the idea that we know what and where the Church should be and we are here to teach people, we will lose the Spirit. It doesn't matter if the Church does need to change. The fact remains that however or in whatever way your fellow Saints and leaders are imperfect, from the viewpoint of our Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother, we are imperfect in exactly the same way. We might have certain lessons down pat, but there are other things we struggle with that others don't. Some of the lessons that they have down pat are things we need to work on.

Until we have that recognition, there can be no Zion. And the attitude that we are there to fix things will militate against that recognition. In fact, it will lay for us the same traps of judgmentalism that many others fall into in relation to us as LGBTQ folks. Our sole agenda in the framework of the gospel is to learn and apply the lessons of the Atonement.

As we all learn those lessons, the Church becomes that which we all pray and yearn for: a place where there is no male nor female, bond nor free, black nor white, gay nor bi nor lesbian nor trans nor queer nor straight. A place where there is no excommunicated, where the walls of separation have all been torn down, where there are no strangers, where we are all fellow citizens as Saints. The Church will become the kind of church where you can belong, because you will belong.

You already belong there, as difficult as it might be to believe. I have learned on this journey that Zion appears when we begin to live in it. It might feel like you are the only one living there at first. But live in it long enough and it will start to spread from you to others.

Social Stigma/Social Support

At the time that I requested that my name be removed from the records of the Church, I had just completed my third year at Brigham Young University and would normally have returned to Provo for my senior year. I had just survived a summer when my intention upon leaving BYU had been to commit suicide. My decision to resign from the Church and to not return to BYU were made knowing of my psychological vulnerability and the risk of plunging back into a deep depression if I returned. I was also very aware of the social stigma that I would face as an ex-member of the Church, not to mention the problems that might pose in relation to my enrollment at BYU.

I don't know for certain exactly what kind of social stigma I would have faced at BYU or the challenges that would have involved

because I chose instead to transfer to Northern Michigan University in the Upper Peninsula (UP) of Michigan, where I completed my undergraduate degree. If there were Latter-day Saints in the UP, I certainly never encountered any! And I didn't seek them out. I joined a Lutheran congregation with evangelical leanings, and my status as an excommunicated member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was seen as something of a badge of honor. I had transplanted myself into a community and into social circles where I received ample love and support from many new friends who were eager to help in any way they could.

If you are LGBTQ facing excommunication from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and you live in the Intermountain West in a Mormon-majority community, you will definitely be facing some social challenges. My advice to you and to anyone facing excommunication, regardless of where you live, is find your post-excommunication social network. If you don't have a circle of friends and family who can be a part of that network, it is important to create one.

My story is a bit unique in that I was not excommunicated for being gay, I was excommunicated for requesting that my name be removed from the Church records. I was not out to the Church leadership. My story is also unusual in that my post-excommunication support network were evangelical Christians who also didn't know that I was gay. Evangelical Christians shared most of my core beliefs about God and Jesus Christ, and they were a very warm, compassionate community where I received lots of love in transitioning out of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But they were not a great support community for coming out, something I learned a few years later. Then I had to find my post-coming-out support network!

No LGBTQ person takes lightly the decisions that lead one to come out or take actions that lead to being excommunicated from the Church. We make these decisions through much heartache and wrestling, often plagued by fear of the consequences and self-doubt about the wisdom

of our decisions. Nevertheless, our decision is made with integrity, and we deserve to have a community of people around us who are willing to support us. Unconditionally.

So if you don't know who those people are, you need to find them as soon as possible. Affirmation: LGBTQ Mormons, Families & Friends is a good place to start. There you will find plenty of people who understand the piece about being excommunicated, as well as the piece about coming out and coming to terms with being L, G, B, T, or Q.

No matter where you go for support, nobody will fully understand all of the nuances of your particular story. Wherever you go for support, the most important kind of support to cultivate is self-support. Take time to look at the aspects of your journey for which you are grateful and begin to imagine the future that you want. Take steps to realize that future. As we learn to do that for ourselves, we will eventually be able to do that with others, and we will find a natural support community growing around us.

I should add, finally, that it is not necessary to write off friends and family in the Church as part of your post-excommunication network. In theory at least, members of the Church are supposed to rally around those who been excommunicated, showing an increase of love. I am aware that that doesn't always happen. I do know of individuals, though, who have made that work. They communicated with family, friends, and leaders in the Church about their coming out process and their decision to enter into a relationship or to transition. Often members of their church community understood and were supportive. This is not unheard of.

You get to be in the driver's seat through this process. You get to decide what kind of support you need, and you have a right to seek it.

The Contexts We Bring

I remember having a conversation with Mike Quinn, my former professor and mentor at BYU, shortly after his excommunication in

1993. Mike was one of the “September Six” who was excommunicated for apostasy, for things he had published on the ordinations of women in Nauvoo in the 1840s. Mike had played an important role in helping me to recontextualize things I had learned about Church history in my freshman year at BYU that shook my testimony. In many ways, I credited him with helping to save my faith. What impressed me about that conversation was his lack of acrimony, his generosity and equanimity in the face of an event that most people would consider shattering. Mike later spoke to me about a dream he had had of meeting Boyd K. Packer, the apostle who reportedly had ordered his excommunication, in the afterlife, and the two of them finally embracing. Mike taught me something important.

Recently I was listening to an interview on National Public Radio. In the interview, they were discussing stress and its impact on our well-being. One piece of the discussion caught my attention. They were discussing whether stress is good or bad, or if there are certain kinds of stress that are good or bad. The answer to the question was that our body doesn’t really differentiate between good stress and bad stress. The physiological reaction that occurs when we experience stress as positive is identical to the physiological reaction when we experience stress as negative. Long-term or intensive stress can be bad for us. However, stressful situations can be managed (or not) depending on the context that we bring to them.

If, for example, we see a stressful situation as an opportunity to learn something new, to overcome a challenge, or to see what we’re made of, the likelihood that we will navigate that stressful situation and ultimately manage or deal with the stress positively is much greater than if we view a stressful situation as calamity, as misfortune, or as persecution. The most important variable in how we come out of a stressful situation is our own context for looking at that situation. Certainly that is the only variable over which we can exercise any control.

Some people will call this a cop-out. But if we go into stressful situations telling ourselves we are powerless, we will end up being

victims in that situation whether we are truly powerless or not. On the other hand, if we go into a situation acknowledging that certainly there are things we do not have control over but recognizing that there are things we can control and then discerning which choices will be most positive based on what we can control of the situation, we have a fighting chance to manage that situation and come out victorious.

There are any number of contexts that we can use to come to terms with the situation of being excommunicated from the Church. We can look at it as an opportunity to get closure on a relationship in which we have experienced harm. We can look at it as the consequence, fault of no one, of a situation of insufficient understanding of complex issues, and we can forgive. We can see it as a test of faith, an opportunity to deepen our relationship with God.

This is heavy stuff. When we experience an overwhelming blow, asking ourselves to take a step back and recontextualize the situation might be asking too much in the moment. Our brains seldom work like that when we are in intense pain, and few things in life can be more painful than the rejection we experience when our church takes action to cut us off, including in that cutting off a message that we are unacceptable to God. There is no shame or wrong in simply acknowledging that a situation is too much and seeking support or help wherever we can find it. There are many individuals and communities within our reach who are there for us. If you don't know who to turn to, reach out to me and I will help.

I encourage allies or supporters of the LGBTQ community, either in or out of the Church, to be proactive in reaching out to LGBTQ individuals. It's always OK to ask someone how they're feeling, to get to know them better, and to find ways to be there for them, advocate for them, and stand with them as they speak their truths.

The most important thing that I've remembered through my own process of excommunication and the various contexts that I've applied to try to make sense of it is that God looks at the heart, and God never abandons us.

Prior to my excommunication, my fear of rejection by God and rejection by the Church left me terrified and even suicidal. Realization that God knew me intimately, knew the desires of my heart, knew who I was and how I was made, and loved and blessed and claimed me as his own, enabled me to face my excommunication, an event I once considered the ultimate failure, with equanimity.

In time, as I felt God calling me to reengage with the Church even as an excommunicated person, I experienced something new. I saw my excommunication and the circumstances surrounding it as a time of trial through which both I and the Church, as we came to understand it and the conditions that produced it, were growing into a deeper understanding of God's plan for all of us. And that recognition made possible by the Spirit leaves me with profound hope and anticipation. I now see my excommunication as a symbol of God's grace in my life and as a finger pointing toward something greater. And as my wise trans Latter-day Saint friend Sara Jade Woodhouse once said, reflecting on her own storied relationship with the Church, I can't wait to see what God does next.

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"WOMAN," ink print,
by Marlena Marie Wilding. 2014

THE COMPLEMENTARITY PRINCIPLE

Lisa Poulson

In 2008, I turned forty-five, Wall Street collapsed, California voters banned gay marriage, and I lost my virginity.

The financial system's meltdown changed the air I breathed, in the same way fire distributes ash for hundreds of miles. My financial foundation was at risk, but it was my people attacking the benignly beautiful institution of marriage that really broke apart the ground on which I stood that September.

I'm a lifelong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My family has been in the Church almost since it was formed in the 1830s, but we didn't live in Utah. We lived in Los Angeles, soaking in what cities have to offer. Half of my heart was embedded in my religion and culture, the other half swelling with love for the wider world and the people in it.

In 2008, my church heavily promoted California's Proposition 8, the ballot measure opposing gay marriage. Our conservative religion is dogmatic about defining marriage as only between one man and one woman. If Prop 8 passed, thousands of loving couples would lose their dream of marriage. I was devastated to watch my co-religionists lobby in opposition to a couple's right to celebrate and solemnize their love.

My empathy ran deep. From the time I was thirteen, my romantic aspirations bounced like a ball in a pachinko machine getting tossed from side to side without ever finding its way down any of the chutes.

I didn't have a boyfriend in high school. I spent ninety percent of my time with my public school friends who were not Mormon, but I was undesirable because I would not have sex outside of marriage. The prospect of betraying my parents and my God felt as risky as tipping

backwards off of a high dive without checking to see if the pool was filled.

Besides, I'd seen what sex did to my friends and it frightened me; one friend who got pregnant shoved her belly into the corner of her parents' dining room sideboard until she hemorrhaged. Saying "No" felt safe. At least I knew what would happen when I said no: nothing. Nothing was a comfortable void. Nothing was predictable. Nothing contained no risk. So, I didn't have sex in high school.

Nor did I have boyfriends during my four years at Brigham Young University. Somehow I never could be what Mormon boys wanted. I was that odd girl from LA lying on my dorm room bed alternately reading *Vogue* or H. L. Mencken, making cynical remarks. I showed up for church the first Sunday as a freshman wearing a dark green silk blouse, a pencil skirt, and pumps—a dark orchid in a basket of My Little Ponies. I was absolutely *not* proper Mormon wife material.

I had no capacity to soothe and encourage these boys into considering a life with me. Even as a little girl there was a bag of bees and lit candles and delicate eggs and crystalline jewels and razor-sharp knives and mud-caked horse hooves crashing around inside of me—I had no idea what to do with all of that energy and neither did they.

My father, a lawyer who was raised by a rare woman who had a career, encouraged my intellectual energy in fierce dinner table debates. It never occurred to me that my quick and incisive mind might repel the boys I met at church. On the other hand, Dad was perpetually concerned about my appearance (especially my weight), because the most attractive women attracted the highest-quality husbands. He was anxious to see me well settled in life.

I had no luck fulfilling his wishes. The girls who dated the most at BYU were sweet and pious. The boys wanted girls who would keep them on the straight and narrow path, who'd be wonderful mothers, who'd create nurturing homes. Once they found each other, couples often dated for just a few months before deciding to wed.

Part of me secretly hoped to someday meet a kind, worldly Mormon man who'd love me the way I was. Furtively, I'd scan the crowds of boys and see if there were any likely prospects. There weren't.

If I had been able to make myself attractive to the boys at church, I would have married during or shortly after college. I would have raised a family. I would have said yes in the appropriate way, at the appropriate times. But I didn't, because no one asked.



Life made demands as graduation loomed. What was a single girl to do? And where? I chose New York.

I arrived in Manhattan in October 1984, carrying my secret naivete and the scale Dad sent me as a housewarming gift. Lacking any experience with men, I convinced myself that I could learn to be sophisticated about other things—the way the world worked, the arts. I worked in the art world, then Wall Street, and finally found a home in public relations. I made great friends at work and at church—friends, not boyfriends.

As I built my life in New York City, my veins filled with loneliness and confusion. My encounters with men were awkward mishaps. Once I invited a young man up to my apartment after dinner with no idea that I was implying another invitation. We sat down. He kissed me. He kept pushing me down and sliding on top of me. After I had wriggled out from under him three times, he just got up and left.

True to the pattern, the boys at church in New York didn't see me as wife material any more than the boys at BYU had. I watched my friends at church pair off and get married. I swallowed the pain of knowing no Mormon man would propose to me.

Wouldn't it have been easier to find a man to love if I had just relaxed the rules a bit? Almost surely. But I did not know how to turn my back on my religion, which inculcated in me from birth a vocabulary for the divine that suffuses every cell in my body. In my body there is a triple,

not a double, helix. I have another strand on my DNA, encoded with a profound and unbreakable love of God. And my God, my church leaders, and my parents intended for me to marry within the Church.

Even if it was impossible to find a Mormon man who might love me, a life with someone outside of the Church was untenable. How could I expect a man to happily support a partner practicing a strange American religion that requires daily attention?

So, while I dallied with several men I met outside of the Church, I never contemplated a real relationship with any of them. The distance between their worlds and mine was too far to span.

Even so, I wanted to love God in my way—as myself—without becoming a cookie-cutter Mormon girl. If I had to do it alone, so be it. I embraced my independence with as much grace and fortitude as I could muster. I could, *and would*, create a lovely life on my own. I tried to will the desire for real love away, but within my heart remained a tiny, unquenchably hopeful flame.



One warm and still summer evening in 1992, after I'd been in New York for eight years as a single woman and had created my life and a career in public relations, I was walking up Broadway with one of my church friends.

“Could you ever see yourself being with a man who isn't rich? Maybe a man who is athletic and literary and has a career in the military, and when he retires wants to be an English teacher?” she asked.

“Well, I guess so,” I said. Even though I was always going around saying I wouldn't ever marry a man who didn't own his own tuxedo, I didn't want to seem shallow—to her or to myself.

Several weeks later, on Labor Day weekend, she asked if I was free that night. “My brother-in-law is going to be there, and I'd love for you to meet him.” What? Had those questions she'd asked before been about an actual human?

The idea of a date filled me with anxiety because I almost never went on proper “dates.” Casual hanging out and fooling around, sure. But not “dates.”

The thought of a date with a Mormon was like rubbing sandpaper on my eyeball—I knew exactly what they thought of me. I had been on four dates with Mormons in my life, and none of them had gone well. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. My dignity was at stake! I said no. But she persisted—her brother-in-law lived in California and was only in town for a week. Finally, I reluctantly agreed. How much could a person who lived on the other side of the country impact my life?

That night as I was getting ready, I felt awkward and prickly. The last thing I wanted to do was look eager, so I wore a baseball hat and almost no makeup. No Mormon man was going to think I was anxious to please and be evaluated by him!

Six of us (my friend and her husband, another couple we knew, the brother-in-law, and me) went off to play minigolf at a pop-up course in a warehouse in Soho. Marc, my date, took the game seriously, which I thought was hilarious. After golf, we all went to hit softballs at batting cages. I noticed him as he hit the seventy-miles-per-hour fastballs with ease, and caught him noticing me as I whomped the fifty-miles-per-hour softballs. I acted like I didn’t see him watching me, but I hit the next balls even harder. We then all went to play pool, where I unspooled a bit and flirted with him a little, which felt like harmless fun.

The next day at church, my friend was anxious for my reaction. Did I want to see him again? She told me Marc had said I had a luscious look. That adjective sounded delicious to me.

“Yes, I’d be happy to see him again.”

On our second date, late in the evening, wrapped up together on my sofa, Marc asked if he could ask me a question. He surprised me when he quietly, carefully, and very sincerely said, “Why haven’t you been to the temple?” I was stunned—there was no more personal question a person could ask me, and no more painful a topic. I knew that Marc,

who had been married before, had been to the temple. Nearly all of my church friends my age had.

I had never entered a temple and had no plans to go because I *knew* I could never be the right kind of Mormon woman. I had never wanted to have children, which was supposed to be my greatest desire. I had a casual relationship to the Church's law of chastity—I didn't have sex, but I felt perfectly fine doing whatever else as long as I remained a virgin. I was short-tempered, selfish, and self-indulgent. I didn't even bake!

I stared up at his calm and quiet blue eyes and thought, in this order:

1. How can I tell him the truth?
2. I've never talked about this with anybody.
3. Well, this is a leap-of-faith situation.

I said, "Do you want the real answer or the published answer?"

He said, still very quietly, "The real answer if you want to tell me."

I have no idea what compelled me to even consider telling him the truth. I just looked at him and something nudged me to take that leap.

I said that I had never felt like a proper Mormon woman, that I never thought I could be, that I couldn't sacrifice my identity to go to the temple. When I finished, I braced myself for criticism or a patronizing lecture, which is what I was used to getting from men at church.

But he simply leaned over, kissed me on the forehead, and said, "Thank you for telling me." That was all. He proffered no advice. He did not presume to judge me.

I had never had a man listen to something I said and respond simply by saying thank you. But I handed this man the delicate and sheltered center of my soul. He quietly held it.

My mind raced as I stared up at him, stupefied. *Who was this person with me? How was it possible that he existed and that he was in my living room?*

In those few moments of suspended and magical silence, my whole life changed.

We spent the rest of the week together, each in awe of what was happening between us, barely able to speak of it. We couldn't admit to ourselves, or to each other, that we fell in love that week.

Eventually, though, on the phone, we spoke the words. And we began the work of creating a real relationship. It wasn't easy. Marc lived three thousand miles away in Eureka, California. (He was a helicopter pilot in the Coast Guard.) Even more importantly, he was in the middle of a painful divorce, which felt both abstract and weighty to me. We began with letters (because this was before ubiquitous internet email), long phone calls, and a few sublime visits. Finally, the Coast Guard transferred him to Brooklyn.

Nearly a year after we met, Marc proposed.

Knowing that I was going to be married, and married to a Mormon, was a sensation not unlike finding a cache of diamonds hidden inside the radiator. I felt stunned; nothing more implausible could be imagined. Was I actually going to be a "normal" married Mormon woman *on my terms*? Loved and celebrated by a remarkable man simply for being utterly myself? I felt enormously lucky, drowned in the beauty of it all. I wandered around in a daze at church, where I'd soon be part of the large tribe of other married couples.

Even more importantly, for the first time, I felt that perhaps God actually understood me. I wouldn't have received a gift like this perfect-for-me man if God disapproved of me. Having the miracle of Marc in my life made me start to feel, moment by moment, that perhaps God truly knew me and also loved me just the way I was. I started to breathe in a different way; every molecule in my body filled with optimism and possibility. At the age of thirty, I became acquainted with hope.

Two weeks later, on the morning of August 31, 1993, I was sitting at my desk doing what PR girls do. I was calling reporters to book a media tour for a client. When the phone rang, I was a little surprised, because journalists rarely call you back. But it wasn't a journalist. It was Marc's brother. He'd never called me at the office before.

“Marc’s been in an accident.”

Adrenaline shot my eyes wide open. My brain zeroed in with that still, numb focus of fear. I never really thought of Marc’s job as dangerous. He was disciplined and cautious. The idea of him getting injured had never crossed my mind.

“Do you want to come to the hospital?”

No more details were offered. One thing was clear—Marc wasn’t capable of calling me himself.

When I put the receiver down, I forced my mind to focus. Speculating wasn’t productive. What mattered was what to do next.

My boss arranged for a town car to take me from Manhattan to coastal New Jersey—a two-hour drive. When I got to the hospital, Marc’s family, Coast Guard representatives, and hospital staff were assembled in a small waiting room. They handed me his wallet, watch, and dog tags.

We learned that Marc’s helicopter had overturned after hitting the railing of a lighthouse. It plunged about seventy feet down into the water below, where it smacked hard on the surface. Marc and the other pilot floated in the upside-down helicopter, unconscious, with their heads submerged in water for several minutes. The other pilot was never revived. Marc’s heart was restarted by New York City police divers, who were the first on the scene.

When we went into the ICU, I didn’t recognize the banged and bashed figure in the bed. Marc was in a coma and on a respirator. My breathing slowed and my eyes widened to take in the horrific scene before me. Marc’s head was the size of a pumpkin—nearly unrecognizable. He was swollen, bloodied, and covered in IVs.

But then I saw his hands. Those were the hands I knew. After a moment, in that swollen face, I saw his eyelashes—the only part of his face unchanged by the trauma.

He never woke from his coma. He died four days later, 364 days after we first met.



Marc and I never had sex. We were waiting until we got married because that is what observant Mormons do.

When he died, the fragile, nascent hope that had just begun to flow into my heart turned to ash. It stopped my heart, filled my lungs and my eyes, and drowned me more thoroughly than any ocean ever could have. Marc was the only person who'd ever seen and delighted in all of me—my tender and pure-hearted Mormon side and my fiercely independent I'd-rather-have-a-career-and-soak-up-every-bit-of-beauty-in-New-York-than-have-children side.

The certainty of his durable and miraculous love had just begun to seep into my consciousness, to change the way I saw the world, to reorder my very bone marrow. That love changed the way I saw myself and the way I saw God.

In the weeks and months after his death, my grief came in molten, furiously propelled waves. The hot density of it would flow in, drowning my senses and my capacity to reason. Sometimes it came in the morning when I woke and realized anew that he was gone. Sometimes it seized me in the afternoon at work, or in a restaurant, or on the train. When these waves overtook me, my mind and senses would desert me as the heat rose from my gut and my heart. I couldn't hear what people were saying, comprehend time, or speak. The grief would growl and stretch, enveloping my whole body and subsuming my brain. I would shake, or sweat, or cry, or all of the above when it had possession of me.

Over time I learned to be still, to breathe deeply and to let it run through me. Fighting it never did any good. Nothing was stronger than this sensation. I would hold onto the doorway or the side of a building and wait for it to finish with me. It was my first practice in surrender.

Eventually, as I grew accustomed to the grief, my mind started to reboot, to examine my experience. I saw that death is insulting and shocking. It doesn't negotiate. It doesn't ask. Death feels no consideration. Death takes. Death doesn't give a damn about what the taking does to you. Death is brutal in its callous disregard, its intransigence. Death will not change its mind and give you back your loved one.

Nothing and no one in my life had ever treated me this way. There was always something that could be done with ingenuity, patience, or charm. Not this time. Death slapped me across the face, pushed me down, kicked me in the stomach, and then rode away without a backward glance.

People talk about a broken heart, but that's not what it was. Grief had torn my heart out of my chest, thrown it down on a marble slab, taken one of those four-pronged gardening tools and whacked at it over and over again, shredding it into a pulp. I was drowning in the blood and tears of my decimated heart.

It surprised me that in my grief I turned, wholly and deeply, to God. Plaintive prayer was my only option when I woke in the middle of the night, unable to breathe. I filtered nothing when I talked to God. He heard all of my anger, my fear, my hopeless desperation. I gave it all to him because there was no human alive who could have received it. And, without fail, whenever I gave in to despair, light and comfort came to me. I was seen and held in a celestial embrace until I could find the courage to go on. My relationship with God became an unshakable, immediate, essential part of my life.

Several weeks after Marc died, I decided to go to the temple. Being there made me feel closer to God, to the things of eternity. The place I had wanted nothing to do with for thirty years became the safest and most beautiful place in my world.



The intervening years were full of anger, struggle, joy, insight, tedium, perseverance, and everything it means to be human. In 1995, I moved from New York to Silicon Valley, getting deeply immersed in the first internet boom. I grew sophisticated, weary, and irritable. I sank excessive energy into jewelry, handbags, and maintaining my porcelain skin and long dark hair that Marc had loved so much.

My frustrations with the Church peaked and ebbed. Eventually, I rebelled. God had taken away the man I loved, so I got involved in more than one questionable relationship. I still went to church every Sunday, but I rarely went to the temple because I was so close to the edge of the Church's chastity rules. Still, I kept one last gate closed—I did not have sex.



In April 2008, I turned forty-five. Four months later, in August, was the fifteenth anniversary of Marc's accident. That night I lay staring at the dark ceiling with grief and tears welling up. I had known and loved a man who had loved me so deeply in return, who made it clear that our relationship was the most important thing in his life. That was my past. What on earth was my future?

I knew the chance of finding love like that again was remote. Marc was the only Mormon man who had ever seen and loved all of me. That lightning was not going to strike again. And what man outside the Church would want a relationship without sex before marriage? I felt like a real estate agent trying to sell an unusual property. "It's a great house—fantastic layout, beautiful kitchen, gorgeous architectural details, amazing backyard, great location. It just doesn't have any bathrooms. That's OK, though, isn't it? Don't you want to buy it?"

Sometime after 2:00 a.m., I stared at the ceiling and spoke through it, out loud, to God, and to Marc. "Please. All I want is for some man somewhere to find me attractive. That would be enough!"

The following weekend I had a wedding to go to, so I booked a blowout. As the stylist washed my hair, he complimented my makeup. I've had so many conversations with stylists in San Francisco—what's the best adhesive for glitter eyeshadow, where to buy great false eyelashes, etc.

There was lots of amiable chatter as he dried my hair. We talked about how neither of us drank. I complimented his tattoos. Was I going on my own to the wedding? Yes, I was.

The conversation veered to my love life, and I felt comfortable enough with this chill and accessible guy to complain about the indifferent man I was sort of seeing—always happy to dish about my love life with gay men. “I mean, he can’t even get himself over to my apartment to fool around with no strings attached? It’s just demoralizing.”

He commiserated with me by saying something about the women in his life.

“You’re *not* gay?” I was stupefied.

“Nope. I’m not.”

I couldn’t take back my indiscretion, so I gathered myself and we moved on.

When he finished my hair, he fluffed it up around my face, stared into my eyes in the mirror, and said, “You are gorgeous.” I took those lovely words in like drops of honeysuckle nectar and thought, *There, God, thank you. That is the answer to my prayer.*

I went off to the wedding with my excellent hair and makeup in a pair of bubble gum pink Louboutins, looking chic enough that no one would need to feel sorry for me for being there alone.

Still, I snuck out as soon as the cake was served. Going alone to a wedding requires a ton of social stamina, and mine wears off by the time everyone is drunk and dancing. Walking out to my car, I saw I had a voice mail. It was the stylist. “I don’t normally do this, but I wondered if you’d like to have tea some time.”

With a little frisson running up my spine, I called back and got his voice mail.

During the hour it took to drive home to San Francisco, I felt like my blood and my brain were carbonated. It was hard to concentrate on anything but that sensation in my body.

Two hours after I got home, I was still too keyed up to sleep. I read a whole issue of the *New Yorker*. I was about to give up when he finally called.

Him: “Would you like to get together sometime?”

Me: "Sure. When would be good?"

Him: "How about now?"

Me (no pause): "Who's getting in the car?"

Him: "I am. Text me your address."

He was mellow and easy, standing in my kitchen doorway as I started to fumble at making chamomile tea. My hands were shaking too much to open the box. After about forty-five seconds of pretending to be calm, I walked over to him and said, "Could you please just kiss me now so I can get over my nervous anticipation and get back to making the tea?"

He did. And, for no other reason than instinct, that night I said yes. I finally lost my virginity. At forty-five. To a man I met that morning. It was not a decision I deliberated. It was a decision I felt. It felt entirely inevitable and entirely right.

Being with him took all the sophistication out of my persona. I could not imagine a more vulnerable experience. It was all metaphor. It was all fact. It was all meaning. It was all sensation. All at once. I had acted out the most basic ritual of yin and yang for the first time. It was intensely symbolic and more immediate than any experience in my life.

I thought I knew my way around men, but this was wholly new. There was so much information and sensation to take in, both with him and after he left late that night. I was used to an overloaded mind. A few times in my life my body had been awash with overwhelming sensation. But this consumed my whole body and my whole mind all at once.

What I had done that night made me ineligible to go the temple. For fifteen years I had hewed to the edge of my church's chastity rules rather than dive into the carnival of men and sexuality. This one time I made a different choice. It felt like the right choice.

I saw the stylist a second time—a couple of weeks after our first night together. If I were finally going to bring sex into my life, I needed a teacher. I imagined we'd continue seeing each other, and I'd continue

learning about sex and myself. I would face the consequences at church some other time.

A couple of weeks later, recently home from a business trip, I called and left a message saying I was ready for my next lesson if he was free.

It took him about ten days to return my call. Every day I waited I felt like an abandoned helium balloon that floated farther and farther away from the hand of the child that held it. By the time he did call, that balloon had been swallowed by the atmosphere. We had a polite conversation about current events and the weather. It took me just seconds to realize that he wasn't interested in seeing me again. I was self-possessed enough to breezily say goodbye. And that was that.

But that wasn't that. My body fell into a wordless, primal grief. It wasn't the all-encompassing pain of losing Marc. I barely knew this man. But the serotonin that had bathed each of my cells in beautiful warmth dried up and faded away and I would find myself in a fetal position on my bed, still in my work clothes and shoes, staring at my bedroom wall. I knew it was just chemical, but that didn't make the misery feel any less real.

As my capacity to reason returned, I knew I could not deal with aftermath like this again, no matter how ravishing sex might prove to be. I had a life to live. This type of crisis was unacceptable. So I made the only choice that felt safe—no more casual sex for me. I am too delicate to endure it. I squashed that fresh, tiny blossom of sexual identity that he planted in me before it could take root.

That next Sunday at church drove the wedge between my religion and me even deeper.

“For anyone who would like to go hang door tags in San Mateo County this weekend, we will have a bus leaving the church on Saturday at 9:00 a.m.”

On that sunny Sunday morning in October, there were about fifty women sitting on folding chairs in our classroom at church, ready for our weekly doctrinal discussion, which I was leading that day.

No one said anything when the announcement was made, except the woman with long, unkempt gray hair who always wore ancient yoga pants and shabby sneakers. “Why aren’t we hanging door tags here in the city? This is where people need to get the message.”

I found myself thrusting my finger toward her and almost yelling, “Leave these people alone! People come from all over the country to San Francisco to feel safe being who they are. We should respect them and leave them alone!” I took a few ragged breaths. With tears clouding my eyes and my voice breaking, I said, in not quite a whisper to no one in particular but to every Mormon I’ve ever known, “I don’t know why I am even in this church anymore.”

I consoled myself in those last weeks before the election with the certainty that Prop 8 would be defeated. But, of course, that’s not what happened. That November, as I was still healing from the loss of the only person I’d had sex with, Prop 8 succeeded on California’s ballot, destroying hopes of dignity and marriage for people who simply cherished love and each other. I was shocked, bitter, and full of shame. I had to walk away. Besides, I had had sex outside of marriage. I wasn’t a proper Mormon woman anymore, was I?

For the next two months, I didn’t go to church. I tried to live as if my religion were a memory, like beloved grandparents who had died, or a book I had read and loved a long time ago.

My plan didn’t work. In those weeks away from church, I was unmoored. Listlessly pacing around my apartment on a Sunday morning in December, I couldn’t think of anything to do. I didn’t want to go shopping. I didn’t want to go for a walk or to the museum. There was no way I was going to do any work. Sundays had always been sacred days for church, for spending time with family and church friends, for reading and contemplating and resting.

I was forced to admit that I was bereft and miserable being away from church. I missed my religious community. I missed that spiritual nourishment. I missed God. But most importantly, I missed my identity

as a person of faith. By skipping church, I wasn't just ignoring a weekly activity, I was turning my back on a way of life. I wanted it back.

But would being at church every Sunday constitute an endorsement of a policy that broke my heart? I asked myself, "If I found out my Dad were a hit man, would I still love him? Would he still be my Dad?" My answers, ultimately, were yes and yes.

If I could accept those theoretical opposites, could I tolerate the real opposites before me? I had to try. So, in January 2009, I went back to church, tentative and wary, and was welcomed as if I had never been away.



The physicist Frank Wilczek describes the complementarity principle simply: "You can recognize a deep truth by the feature that its opposite is also a deep truth."¹

In the cauldron of the fall of 2008, I found the capacity to hold both my absolute love for the Church and its doctrines *and* my deep frustration and disapproval of its position on gay marriage. I looked right into the reality in front of me. I saw it all. I grew up.

My new power to embrace contradictions flowed into the rest of my life too, as welcome as cream over a bowl of strawberries. I could accept that the two things I desired most in life—a vibrant sexual relationship with a wonderful man and a transcendent relationship with God as a faithful Mormon—were fundamentally incompatible. Without being married I would never have both. I accepted that insoluble dilemma.

I reexamined the conflicts in my own character too. I was expert at corrosive self-talk. "You may have been lovely to that one person," I'd say to myself, "but you know you're an impatient, condescending bitch! Your flaws cancel out your strengths. Don't fool yourself."

1. Frank Wilczek, *A Beautiful Question: Finding Nature's Deep Design* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 52.

But the voice in my head started to accept that my worthwhile acts deserved to stand on their own. I started to believe that my kindness and impatience could coexist.

This was tender territory. Starting to see myself as a good person was disorienting after decades of feeling like a “bad” Mormon. Little by little, though, I found the capacity to accept myself as a “good enough” Mormon woman, even with my iconoclastic independence and unorthodox desires. I am as full of contradictions as a person can be, but I am completely devoted to God. And God knows it. Of that I am certain.

When I accepted my complete, complex heart and soul, I became converted to the subtle and profound truth. There is more than one way to be sacred, more than one way to be good, more than one way to love and be loved by God. We each have an offering, and we are all worthy to make it.

I gained a capacity to be all of who I am—a complicated, thorny woman, with a bag of bees and lit candles and delicate eggs and crystalline jewels and razor-sharp knives and mud-caked horse hooves inside me. For decades they clattered around in dizzying disorder. Now they have found an orbit, humming along in an energizing harmony that sustains me. They are all meant to be there.

I’ll never be a “normal” Mormon woman, but it doesn’t matter anymore. I created my own place to stand in my church and in the world.

Happily, in 2015, the Supreme Court invalidated the bans on gay marriage. When I heard the news, I started sobbing, filled with joy that everyone can say “yes” to whomever they love. I also felt relief. For years, every time I met a new gay person, I had said, “I’m Mormon and I’m sorry.”

Even if the damage the Church did to gay families in 2008 was reversed, in 2015 the Church set a new policy that created barriers against baptism for children of homosexual parents. They reversed that

policy in April 2019. When I read the news, I wiped away tears. Any and every reason to hope is precious.

The events in 2008 brought enormous insight and expansion into my life, and yet I didn't find the courage to say yes again, to seek my own sublime and ravishing love. My heart couldn't untangle the joy of love and the pain of loss. "No" still feels safer than risking my heart, body, and soul.

But when I have had the courage to surrender, love has hurled flashes of incandescent beauty into my life. An intense and brief flame is better than no heat and light at all.

My sacred and my carnal experiences with love taught me the same lessons—to surrender certainty, to embrace the totality of my lived experience, and to welcome the contradictions that flow exquisitely through my body and out into the world.

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FINDING REBECCA: A EULOGY

Marie Blanchard

The DAILY ENQUIRER—April 24, 1897
A Poor Widow Distracted by Life's Burdens

“One of those events occurred this morning which causes the heart to grow sad and go out in sympathy to suffering humanity . . .”

. . . *She is hidden . . .*

“How did your mama die?” I ask Grandma Essie, my dad’s mother. She looks down at the floor.

“She died of quinsy.”

Something doesn’t feel quite right to eight-year-old me.

“What’s quinsy?”

“It’s a sore throat.” Grandma walks into the next room.

I ask Mama. “How did Grandma Essie’s mama die?”

She doesn’t answer right away, then says in a hard voice, “She got sick.”

“With what?”

“She just got sick.” She puts her hand on my shoulder and turns me away. “Now. Go and finish what I asked you to do.”

I find that some things are unspeakable.

. . . *The hollow wail . . .*

“Grandma Essie has the willies again,” my dad says to Mama. I know she’s angry because her jaw clamps down.

“Go and spend the night with your grandma.” Mama is pointing at me; my dad never has to go.

When Grandma has the willies, if one of us girls goes over to her house Grandma calms down. The eleven-year-old me inwardly whines, “Why doesn’t Mama go herself?” But I go because if I don’t, she’ll get mad at my dad again.

In the night, wrapped in a “spoon shape” in bed — which I hate but which calms Grandma — I wake up to low moans. I can’t quite make out the words . . . An unarticulated cry of desperation and abandonment seeps into my gut . . . “Mama. Mama.”

*I tune to the sound of unbearable
pain, residue of past wounding.*

. . . *Why this resignation? . . .*

My two preschool children and I are visiting my mom and dad in Provo. I notice that the foldaway bed in the back room is stretched out and made up. It isn’t until night that I realize my dad is sleeping there.

Why are my parents like this? Why does Mom turn away from dad? Why does my dad have the willies just like Grandma did? Why does he have to know where Mom is at every moment? It would drive me crazy!

“Mom, why don’t you come back with me to California for a visit? We’ll go to Disneyland and the beach and even Hollywood.”

“You don’t know your dad.”

“Just tell him I asked you and you’re going. You don’t have to ask his permission for every single move.”

My sister and I hatch a plan for me to spirit Mom away, to kidnap her, so to speak. Then my dad will blame me, not Mom. We lure her into

the car and I say I want her to come downtown with me. My sister has put a packed suitcase for her in the trunk.

We get about as far as Payson when Mom figures something is afoot. Her face becomes strained, then after a few moments she says quietly, “We have to go back, Marie. I have to tell him at least.”

My dad rushes out of the house as we pull into the driveway. I’m startled and scared because he seems a foot taller than usual and his face is furious. “I’ll never forgive you for this, Marie. Never!”

My mild, kindly father has become a being I don’t recognize.

“Mom. I’m sorry!” I’m so stunned that I have to force out the words.

“It is as it is,” Mom says slowly, without inflection. She doesn’t speak again.

*I observe how the legacy of abandonment
surfaces in succeeding generations.*

. . . *Don’t believe everything you read . . .*

I’m visiting Provo with my children, now school-age. My dad’s cousin Esther is in town. She calls the house and wants to talk to me. “I’m at the city library,” she says. “Meet me here.”

I pull up beside the curb as she comes out of the building holding something. “I found it!” she exclaims. She hands a microfiche copy to me but the quality is so poor I can barely read the words. I notice that the article was published in the newspaper preceding the *Daily Herald*, just days before Rebecca died.

I struggle through the first two paragraphs. Good Lord! It’s right here. In print, no less.

“At 4 o’clock Mrs. [Rebecca] Jane Reese, a resident of the Second Ward, diagonally opposite from the southwest corner of the West square,

attempted to commit suicide by cutting her throat with a razor. . . . At once medical attendance was summoned and the wound dressed. It was not believed to be serious. Drs. Taylor and Allen attended her, and on their testimony and that of Mr. Mildenhall she was committed to the State Insane Asylum by Judge Dusenberry.”

“Mom! Mom,” I call as I enter the house. “I know about Grandma Essie’s mother. Esther found out from an article in the old *Daily Enquirer*. It said she died in the Mental Hospital at the end of Center Street, three days after trying to commit suicide.”

Mom comes into the living room, wiping her wet hands on her apron. She looks at the copy I have in my hand.

“Don’t believe everything you read,” she says. Her voice is flat.

*I encounter rigid patterns of thinking
created by attempts to cope with
unacceptable emotion.*



Rebecca Jane Draper Reese, my paternal great-grandmother, was born December 18, 1850 and died on April 27, 1897 in what was then called the Utah State Insane Asylum. Cause of death: infection from a self-inflicted wound to her throat. So yes, Rebecca actually did die of quinsy, an infection then commonly seen after tonsillectomies.

She had been widowed one year earlier and left alone to provide for her five children, ages two to fourteen years. Working as a janitor in Franklin School and son Hugh working in a printing office brought in less than enough to eat. Cousin Esther remembers her father Hugh, the oldest of Rebecca’s orphaned children, telling her of a time when the family only had apples to eat for an entire week. And how the Bishop tried to get his mother to marry an old man who already had a family, and, in spite of polygamy supposedly abolished in the Church, more than one wife.

My grandma Essie was eleven years old when her mother ran outside unobserved and into the street at four in the morning, then tried to cut her own throat with a razor. She died three days later from an infection that began in her partially severed trachea. After her death, four of the five children were passed out to different families, each family agreeing to raise one of the new orphans. Hugh, being fourteen, was expected to fend for himself.



... *Don't depend on me* ...

I am walking around the grocery store. Behind me, my two-year-old daughter is intermittently reaching out and pulling my skirt. "Stop hanging onto my skirt," I scold, "and stand up like a big girl." Later, driving in the car I question myself. "Why did you do that? She's only a little girl. She was afraid."

I recognize unconscious preparation for premature physical separation, passed down for three generations, has surfaced once again.

After many years and much study I become a psychotherapist.



A carefully groomed woman¹ tells me that she grew up in a perfect family. When I ask for some memories she says far too quickly, "There was never any dissension at all. Never a harsh word."

I sense that for her some things are unspeakable.

This man has told me in the past that he has no memory of a period when he was five years old and his mother left the family. Today he is

1. All client information in the vignettes has been altered in order to protect their privacy.

relating a dream in which he is riding in a horse-drawn wagon. The horse bolts, the wagon tips and slides down a rocky hill, dumping him out on the way.

I infer the residue of abandonment.

A mother with seven children is pregnant with her eighth. Suffering from severe anxiety for years she hasn't been able to find relief. When I asked what made her choose to have another child when she is raising seven already, she says, "Oh my children are very independent. They take care of themselves. Besides, I always feel better when I'm nursing."

I detect a rigid pattern of behavior suggesting intergenerational trauma.

My new client won't meet my eyes and wrings her hands constantly. "My family is better off without me," she says.

I recognize psychotic depression and arrange for immediate hospitalization and medication.



Rebecca, your tragic death was not a complete loss, for it has defined the arc of my life. And through my work you have touched the lives of scores of people, though they of course, can never know.

Thank you for this, Rebecca. Thank you.

MARIE BLANCHARD {marieblanchard82@outlook.com} is a mostly retired clinical psychologist practicing in Fremont, California. She worked for a year as a volunteer for the NGO THRIVEGulu in northern Uganda organizing a mental health program and training counselors in diagnostic issues. Currently she spends time writing and improving her short fiction.

Until You Come

J.S. Absher

Taipei, '97. I walk past side-street
vendors selling lychee nuts and black
rice cakes, to an acre of bare dirt,
concrete pylons lifting a cloverleaf.
A grizzled man by a beat-up Buick
throws gobbets of meat from the trunk
to a growling scrum of gaunt,
scruff-biting dogs, their flying spit
bright yellow in the headlamp.
They've waited days for this.
I turn back before they see me,
dogs or man, fearful I've seen
things I shouldn't.

Cherbourg, '71. Hair cut short, shirts
bleached white, with copies
of Mormon's *Book*, we reach
the lone house facing a field
where the North Sea rigs are being built,
on the paved yard a graying woman
and her mewling, hissing cats
hunkered head down by lumps of flesh.

*Five years since I came here,
the woman says, in answer
to a classified, to help madame*

*tend these cats. She disappeared,
left me a car, this house, a note—
'Look after mes minous, I'll
be back.' No, not interested
in your religion, unless it'll
help me eat as well
as these cats. Hard to swallow
the bread of patience,
the salt of courage. Bye-bye
(she dismisses us in English),
tell Maman you've met
the viceroy of the absent.*

And now it's me who's gray
and waiting,
at times almost undone,
having neglected nearly all
I should have tended:

undo me further
till I am wrecked, not
man or mammal,
bird or insect, but
elemental,

till You come to heal
or break.

Praying on Gravel

J.S. Absher

Not yet March, already weeds
bring me to my knees
with trowel and bare fingers.

Under the loblolly
the hellebore are in bloom,
a periwinkle or two. The weeds

are in the white gravel
of the walk. My son has written—
another unexpected death.

On all fours I work down the path,
uprooting weeds, smoothing
gravel. I'll write my son

a letter back—it's how we talk
best, considered word for
considered word.

Perhaps I will thank
the weeds for bringing me down
where I've the time to seek

wisdom in the river gravel.
What words are good enough? My son
thought of the Vulgate's *non*

timebo malum, I will fear no evil.
I do not fear the weeds.
But I fear this prayer a little.

Grasshoppers in the Jar of the World

J.S. Absher

The jar is silent because it is full of praise.
The grasshoppers are loud because they, too,
are full of praise, clicking as they fly.

The grasshoppers jump, but the jar is too high.
They try to climb, but it is too slippery,
and clicking they slide and fall, slide and fall.

If the jar's all there is, why does it need sides?
If there's nothing else, why should grasshoppers
want to jump and fly away? If they are not meant

to get away, why give them legs and wings?
The jar is silent because it is full of praise;
the grasshoppers click as they fly praising

the outside because it is outside,
because it is unknown and out of reach,
because it makes them angels of desire.

Matriarchal Blessing

Kyle Bond

Your hands were on my head first.

No formal ceremony.

I was an infant
and shouting clouds trundled and thundered,
atmospheric pressure strangled my stubborn ears refusing airflow.
The blue chair in the living room rocked,
my cries received the blessing of your priesthood.

I was initiated.
Your family was my first ordained tribe.
Still, the anchor and chain slung over my back
are your lessons, to me, about the meaning of Zion:
memories of your collectivism.

We walked
each Christmas
together to the hospital,
like the Israelites to Canaan
with an offering of chocolate for the sick:
trimming 40 years
from Individualism's priestcraft
and capital's oblivion
with your sugar sweet vision.

I ran
up and down fields
with you watching from the sidelines;
your blessing meant your time,
your attention, your trophy of importance.

I returned
 home a different man
 and you asked, “What did they do to you?”
 I tried to tell you, but I think you knew
 because you saw me hurt
 and you hurt:
 you lost me.
 I had lost myself.
 And then I lost you.

Though you are gone,
 it is your blessing that remains within me.
 All others are only external.

The nine
 —φημί—
 it is your voice that my memory resurrects
 when the syncline canyon breathes on my face
 —ψυχή—
 and the ghosts of my salience swirl
 —γίγνομαι—
 as did the sea when the spirit of God moved on the face of the waters
 —ποίησι—
 like Red-shouldered Hawks spiraling above the pine-laced crags
 of Timpanogos’ Prominent
 and the snake’s ribbons in the dirt of Provo’s Canyons.
 Οὐν ὑμεῖς τέλειοι—
 yet not final.

You return
 in these images,
 with the lessons you sang:
 before you formed me in the belly you knew me;
 to be an egalitarian is to know God,
 of whom I am only a part.

You showed
receipts on those holidays
in the same spirit of your blessing,
making sure we knew that at least in your eyes
we mattered
alike
by the labor of your hands and the sweat of your brow.
With you, covenants were an unspoken spiritual contract
for the wellbeing of the broken,
laced with the strength of compassionate indignation.

You warred
when our neighbor came over dressed in frantic burning tears
telling us that her son was locked in the bathroom
and the water was filling
and she didn't know what to do.
You didn't ask questions
or
follow procedures
or
cast judgements—
you flew over the fence,
kicked in the basement window
and pulled him to safety
just before his head went under.

Mother, again, rejoined with child.

That was what mattered.

Never mind the puddle of blood you were standing in,
a three-inch laceration on your ankle,
which you refused to be treated,
though you had a sister as a nurse,
and a hospital in your backyard.
Instead, you superglued it shut yourself.

. . .superglued. . .

The scar, a silent evidence of your blessing's meaning—
that a single, even *vulnerable* life
is worth saving,
and for that, scars are worth having.

Years later,
in meditation,
your blessing is slowly teaching me something long forgotten:
there is no such thing as being worthy.

There is only being.

And worth.

Because, to talk about worthiness means placing value on others,
and value is not ours to place,
only to foster.

In this blessing,
like the Judgement of Solomon,
it wouldn't have mattered if our neighbor was your enemy;
you would have still saved her child,
because he too was your child.
You'd have taken her scar;
not because he was a child,
but because within the paradox of not placing value
it was people whom you counted—that counted.
Simply put, Zion could only be built again on the altar of sacrifice.

You understood this.

But, within my slow crystallizations of your understanding, I am
forced to wonder
if it was actually Eve who built the altar where Adam prayed.

Parousia

A. I. Christensen

She says she was eating or opening a window or just walking
dully along, and always had been, but tonight there might be
few angels. These things. Our dog
wagging across the foreground, the porch
that still needs fixing and has since we moved, the wind
scraping along the ice. The honest shepherds
(let them sing their morally easy life). Each sudden
tree lining the road, long leaves and aspens, fir and blue spruce
and the on-edge bushes. The purling road itself
where wheel lift tow trucks pull onto the hallowed ground of
another's suffering
with that thick steel cross leaned against the bed. The mistakes
breaking
us toward these three libraries we've never been and the books
on the shelves of all libraries. The hospital
was growing in my sight for eight short months; winter sits in; the
kings
and pawns show up, each relative and each relative's relative
and Emerson and the condescending snow and so many blue things.
And just now,
feeling the need for it, I walk out
to get air and look at the lights in the lot,
and the ignorant stars must have seen it too.

J.S. ABSHER's full-length book, *Mouth Work* (St. Andrews University Press), won the 2015 Lena Shull Book Award from the North Carolina Poetry Society. His chapbooks are *Night Weather* (Cynosura, 2010) and *The Burial of Anyce Shepherd* (Main Street Rag, 2006). He has published in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Third Wednesday*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, and *Tar River Poetry*. In 2018, Absher won the Clinton F. Larson Poetry Contest sponsored by *BYU Studies*. He lives with his wife, Patti, in Raleigh, N.C.

KYLE BOND {kyle.s.bond@gmail.com} earned his BA and MA in English and teaches secondary English in Orem, Utah. He has plans for a PhD in rhetoric and composition. Along with writing poetry, in his spare time, he researches Victorian and nineteenth-century literature, philosophy, and social movements, and writes about their modern and rhetorical influences. He lives with his wife, who is finishing her studies in speech language pathology at the University of Utah.

A. I. CHRISTENSEN {alexchristensen97@gmail.com} first got interested in words when his mom read the Bible to him and he couldn't understand its English. Later on, he was led to Spanish, and then to Latin, Italian, and Old English. He believes in understanding and interacting with God, people, religion, and the world primarily through words, and he further believes that poetry is the most important way of doing this. He is currently working on a bachelor's degree at Brigham Young University and working at the Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.

CONFESSION

Sylvette Wolfe

I'm not making excuses, Bishop, I'm really not. What I did, it's inexcusable. Reprehensible. I broke sacred vows. I totally crossed the line, and I'm sorry for that. All that stuff. But the thing I honest-to-gosh don't get is why my husband's so hot and bothered about it unless it maybe bruised his big fat little ego. Yes, I told him. A week ago. At first he went all Incredible Hulk on me—eyes bulging, face bloating. From there it was the Grim Weeper: "How could you have done this to me? To *us!*" Meanwhile I'm wondering who's this wonderful fairy tale *us* he's talking about?

No, of course not. That's why I'm here. I'm willing to do whatever to make things right, but I'm a little new to this. You know the parable about the workers in the vineyard? I showed up with the sundown shift, an hour before quitting time. Okay so maybe not quite that late. Twenty years ago next July. The second happiest day of my life except for the fact poor Elder Duncan couldn't quite get me all the way underwater. My toe popped up the first time, my elbow the second, and my hair came loose and surfaced on the third. By the fourth try I was seriously reconsidering, but it all worked out. In the end it all worked out.

So, no, I've never done this before. I guess I never had to until now. Courage? I don't know if it takes courage as much as desperation. And guilt. Lots of guilt. I want to make things right between me and the Lord. George? Well, yes, him too, but we'll get to that. No, this is the second tour for both of us. He lost his to cancer and mine took a permanent French leave—good riddance to bad decisions! What can I

say? The young and the restless and the dumb. I fell in love with Johnny Dangerous my senior year of high school.

So where should I begin? Because in my opinion it's not so much the incident itself as all the stuff leading up to it. It's more like this state of mind that developed over time. And it wasn't so much what he said but what he didn't say. Like whenever he saw me stepping out of the shower or squeezing into a dress or a swimsuit, heaven forbid. "Are you really wearing *that*?" Or: "Hey, when did you graduate to super-size?" Or: "Hey, do you want me to stamp 'Frigidaire' on your hindquarters now or after you dry off?" No, he didn't actually *say* that, but I could see it in his eyes; I could hear it in his voice even when he was saying something else.

The thing is, I know I don't look all that bad, especially for my age if that's a factor. I know I'm not twentysomething smooth. I've got a few more lumps and bumps—I get that. But dressed up in a pencil skirt and heels I'm good enough to get a second look. Maybe a third if it's not a close-up. I look nice. I think I even look, well, desirable. Is that bad, Bishop? Is it a sin to want to be wanted? Because that's the thing, I think, for women at least—maybe it's the same for men too—but once you stop feeling desirable, you're old. Well of course it's just a state of mind, but it's *my* mind and *my* body too. Throw the spirit in there and you've got the whole trifecta. No, but that's the whole point: it's not just physical, but that's part of it. Not all but part. For women, probably a bigger part than men. No offense, Bishop, but I've seen Humpty Dumpty's in Speedos and sunglasses parading around the beach like they owned every girl on it. Not pretty. Certainly not eye candy, if you catch my drift. Women are more discerning, I think. I mean, I get the whole love-me-as-I-am-all-300-pounds-of-it movement. I do. And maybe the whole plus-sized revolution is a good thing. My generation burned the bra; today's kids are junking bathroom scales and tape measures. Sweet freedom!

My point is, I know I'm no spring chicken, but I'm not on life support either. I'm not quite ready for mummification. So it's the little

digs, the unspoken insults, the *attitude*, Bishop, the attitude. I mean, how would you feel if you put your arm around your wife and she twisted away like she's breaking out of jail? Oh, he'll hold my hand in sacrament meeting and take me by the arm and open the car door and do all that chivalrous Sir Walter Raleigh stuff in public. But safe at home I'm invisible. I'm the chef—more like the short-order cook. I'm the laundry lady. I'm another paycheck, although not the big one, but still . . . I get shrugged and shunned and turned away from so often I start believing the rumors in his eyes: I'm fat. I'm ugly. The Colossus of Kern County. Excuse me? Specifics? Sure, here's specific. It's a Friday night, we've just finished a nice dinner, and I sit down next to him on the sofa with a blanket for two. I've got scented candles burning and a DVD on the screen. No, Bishop, it wasn't *Beaches*. Give me a little credit here. But it wasn't *Terminator 3* either. It was a nice little rom-com. Anyway, I spread the blanket over our laps and he doesn't scream "Fire!" and head for the exit, so I'm thinking, well that's progress. It's a step in the right direction anyway. I get braver; I put my hand on his thigh and start to rub a little, trying to generate some electricity, if you know what I mean. I'm sorry. Am I getting too graphic? Too much information? No, I didn't think so. You've heard it all, right? Broken marriages, runaway kids, sex, drugs, the works.

Anyway, George isn't reacting, but he's not giving me a double stiff-arm either, another victory. I get a little more daring, venture a bit higher up the thigh. He throws the blanket aside and says, "I need a drink!" and he's off to the kitchen. "A drink?" I say. I'm wondering if maybe he's having problems in the you-know-what department. They've got plenty of remedies now—pills, shots, all kinds of little inflation tricks. Maybe, but how would I know? It's been so long—look, if that's it, fine! Fine! He should just tell me. Because instead of thinking, *what's wrong with him* I'm thinking *what's wrong with me*?

Anyway, he gets his drink and goes off to bed while I go into the bathroom and have a little moment of truth with the mirror. I take a

cold, hard look at the little saddlebags under my eyes and the extra chin growing on my throat and confess the obvious: I couldn't turn on a light bulb.

So just when I'm about to emotionally retire to the elephant's graveyard, the first day of school some new kid shows up. I say kid, but he's thirty-five, give or take, no tats, no nose rings, clean-cut and sleek-cheeked. He looks like a returned missionary minus the baby fat and the little black badge. He's in the teacher's lounge and he's totally flirting with me and I don't even know it—that's what Barbara Mason the P.E. teacher tells me later. "It was so totally obvious," she says. He's waiting to use the microwave to heat up his little Tupperware of leftovers and so am I and he motions me forward: "Youth before experience," he says. It just happens to be my birthday, the dreaded Six-O, and I don't want people making a big deal out of it with black balloons and Styrofoam headstones on my door but they do anyway. "Congrats on number twenty-nine!" he says. "Oh, right," I say. "Tell it to the man on the moon!" It's such a flagrant line, but I'm loving every syllable of it. When I mention I've got four kids and six grandkids, he says, "Did you get married when you were ten?"

I wave him off, but I'm blushing—like totally blushing, according to Barbara. "Oh you so totally were," she says.

He's a nice kid, a nice man. Like me, he teaches fifth grade and his classroom's just across the hall, so we share kids for compartmentalized teaching: I do English and Social Studies, he does Science and Math. There are joint field trips, joint planning sessions, open house, evening events, and after-school stuff. My husband doesn't move a molecule over these extended hours and excursions. Never protests, never laments the lack of my company. Shrug. Yawn. Bite. Gulp. Swallow. Belch. Pass the remote.

One night after the science fair, everyone pitches in with cleanup—many hands make light work, as the saying goes—and before I know it the gym's vacant, the lights are off, the doors are locked, and it's just

the two of us, although we don't know that yet. I'm tidying up in the supply closet and he's just cut the light in the hall. "Diane?" he calls. "Everything all right?"

"In here," I say and he enters the walk-in closet where I'm standing on top of a stool trying to stack some jars on the upper shelf.

"Hey, that's dangerous," he says.

I turn and smile and say, "I'm fine." But there's something odd in his expression. I'm wearing a skirt and hose and a nice satin top with horizontal stripes that are supposed to visually aggrandize the bust, as if I need aggrandizement. And suddenly I'm wondering if I dressed this way on purpose, but who am I kidding? Lying to yourself is like lying to God: you can't. I know; He knows. Sorry. I guess I'm getting off track again.

"Is something wrong?" I ask, and he smiles like a little kid caught in the act.

"What?" I ask.

"I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but . . ." And he stops and it's like he's mulling it over whether or not he's going to commit and maybe make a fool of himself, and the whole time I'm thinking, say it, you fool; say it say it say it! And then he does: "You have the most beautiful calves. Like a dancer's."

Now I'm blushing as I step down off the stool and I almost stumble and then I do and he catches me like Superman snatching Lois Lane out of the sky. Or like a groom carrying his bride across the threshold. I smile awkwardly. Then I'm babbling like I'm back in middle school. There's that initial moment of contact where you can either break free and flee like Joseph from Potiphar's wife or you can summon Bathsheba to your bedchamber. And I know this should all stop right here and now and yet I'm also thinking this train may never pass through this old ghost town again. Then I've got the two puppets, Punch and Judy, arguing in my head: yes no yes no yes no; stay go stay go stay go. But he doesn't let me decide. He looks at my eyes like no one else has looked for

longer than I can remember; not like one of my puppy-eyed students or my polite friends for dinner or Brother This or Sister That at church or least of all my husband wondering why leftovers again? Not since the day I knelt at the altar in the LA Temple thinking, yes this is the man I want to walk that timeless, endless path through the eternities with—drunk, Bishop, love-sick drunk with that deep, aromatic mix of love and desire that was going to fuel us through all obstacles, fires, storms, ravages of any brand. And still might have with just a little work and forgiveness and oh my gosh maybe an ounce of imagination. But now in retrospect the biggest surprise wasn't that it cooled but how quickly. Overnight, it seemed.

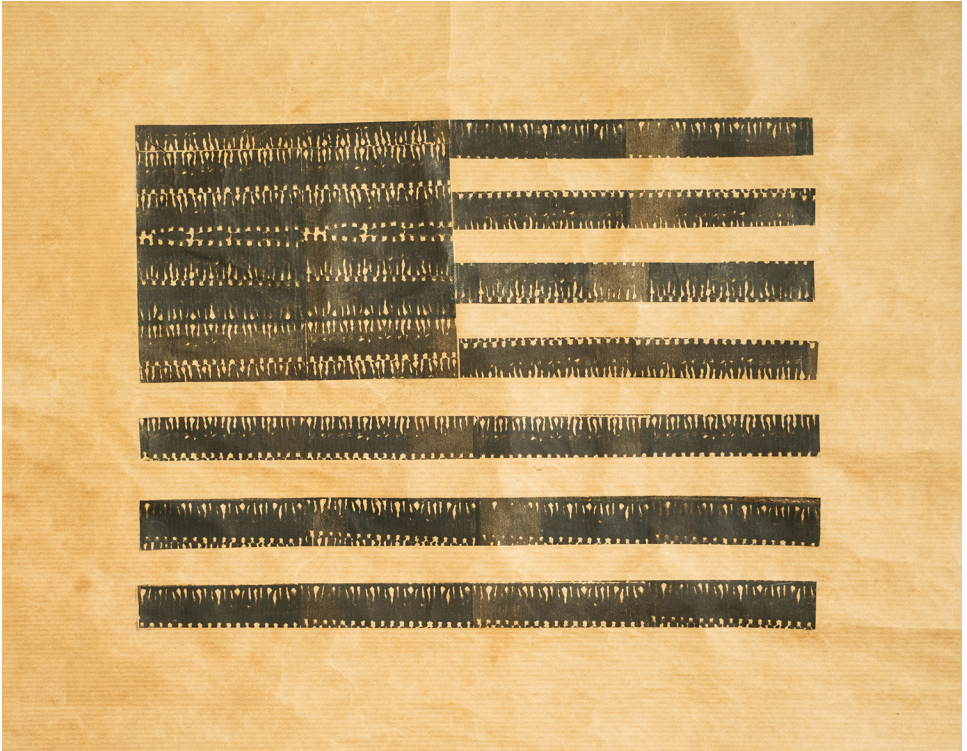
I know, I know, but Junior's not through. In fact he's just warming up. "And your eyes," he whispers. "The most beautifu—"

The rest I'll leave to your imagination. Let's just say it wasn't like in the movies where I leap into his arms and he slams me against the wall and drills me right there in the hotel lobby, fast and furious, in full view of a thousand security cameras. Not at my age. First, I question the physics of that particular posture. This was soft, slow, gentle, the old-fashioned way. It was delicate and lingering, starting high and working low—not working but delighting so you can actually feel it seeping deep into your blood and bones. A slow free fall and then suddenly he pulls the rip cord! Whoa! Then another fall and—whoa! And another! Whoa! And again!

And the whole thing, it was . . . ecstatic. Yes, ecstatic! Even when the angry little voice in the back seat was screaming, "Stop! Stop! You mustn't do this! You're violating covenants! You're throwing away your eternal inheritance! You are so totally blowing it!" And yet the other voice kept countering: inheritance with who? Time and all eternity with Mr. Frump? Elmer Fudd in slippers and a bathrobe? Every scripture and verse from every Sunday School lesson since my baptism was pounding on my head trying to get in: didn't hear it; didn't feel it; didn't care. The voice I heard was the silence of my husband; the voice I heard was no

and not now and I don't have time and I've got a meeting; the voice I heard was this young man breathlessly celebrating every pre-plowed inch of me, furrowed or fallow. And when I fell into his arms it was like the tolling of cathedral bells. Eternal bells. From the high Alps to the deep deserts. We clung to each other afterwards, the two of us alone on the floor of the walk-in closet, both of us knowing (and me saying over and over) that this would not (must not) ever happen again, yet lingering together for as long as we possibly could—or as long as my bladder allowed, which turned out to be about fifteen minutes.

No, no. Absolutely not. Not an excuse, Bishop, just an explanation. It's my fault, I totally get that. But don't you think there's at least a little bit of blame to share? Can I speak bluntly? Yes, I suppose I already have been. But do *I* have to shoulder all the blame for this while he walks away with a halo over his head? The poor, long-suffering, cuckolded husband diligently going about his church business while I'm tramping around the barnyard? Is that how it goes down? What about equally yoked, as they say, in the honeymoon suite or in the tar pits, equally yoked? Because it's a lonely life, Bishop. It's a lonely life, and we try our best to fill it with other things: kids, church, work, grandkids. Yes! Yes! Exactly! All the while trying to forget this other void that's supposed to be the heart of our eternal happiness. Excuse me? Or relegating it to prohibition? Wow! Interesting take, Bishop. Really interesting take. No, I had no idea. You two look so—so perfect together! I'm so sorry to hear that. Yes, that must be really hard. I can only imagine. I mean, at least I've got my book club.



"SOW, Patterns of America," ink print collage,
by Marlena Marie Wilding. 2020

EXCERPT FROM *ELEUSIS: THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD*¹

by R. de la Lanza

translated and introduced
by James Goldberg²

Introduction

In 2014, R. de la Lanza spent his morning commute feverishly writing. All through the long bus ride from his home in the southern part of Mexico City to his work at a university in the famed Roma neighborhood, he poured out a story that had been forming in his head for five years, he says, “like clouds gathering for the storm.”

And what a storm! Eleusis ranks among the most ambitious novels in Mormon literary history. Weaving together the tales of two multi-generational sets of Mormon characters, the novel embraces the grand sweep of Mexico’s Mormon history. There’s a cameo by Melitón González Trejo, a depiction of the divisions around the schismatic Third Convention, friendships formed at the Benemérito academy. Through it all, de la Lanza shows a consistent interest in both the earthy, messy realities of his characters’ lives and the spiritual longings that pull at them, no matter how they may drift from their principles. The novel’s name, a reference to the ancient Greek Eleusinian Mysteries, promises a sacred story of

1. R. de La Lanza, *Eleusis: The Long and Winding Road* (Mexico City: Ulterior, 2017).

2. With review from R. de la Lanza, Gabriel González Núñez, Ale Gossen, and Edna Cruz de Reyes.

descent and ascent. With the help of classical and scriptural allusions, R. de la Lanza keeps that promise, inviting us to take a look at the long and winding road through mortality to transcendence.

Writers who choose to depict Mormon experience all face fraught rhetorical and aesthetic decisions about how to navigate the minefield of Mormon audience sensibilities about profanity, sexuality, and anxieties about how we're depicted. The cover to Eleusis, a Young Women medallion over a woman's bare chest, makes clear that de la Lanza's novel follows the approach of David Farragut's famous naval order: "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!" There is plenty of sex, much of it desperate and lonely, some of it spiritually significant. As far as concern for how Mormon characters are depicted, the novel is unflinching. While aware that stigmatized minority groups may have reason to be concerned about what other people will think of them based on fictional depictions, de la Lanza resolved to "tell sincere and brutally truthful stories, even if they hurt."³

The result is a wild ride through the heights and depths of Mormon life, an invitation to look closely through our inevitable moments of ugliness to find a deeper beauty. In this issue of Dialogue, we present you with a translation of the novel's first two chapters to give you a taste of this exceptional literary work.

CHAPTER 1

We are divided beings. That is the great diagnosis of our existence. Above the vastness of our being hangs the power of Hephaestus's ax, poised to strike open the head of Zeus with a fateful blow—born either of supernal will or infernal caprice. This truth is at the root of the myth Plato placed (with a touch of acid humor) in the mouth of Aristophanes to explain our search for love: man and woman were once a single being but were divided by gods who envied the completeness of their joy. This

3. R. de la Lanza, email correspondence with author, May 30, 2020.

separation probably began, to be sure, with a slight division, like the first hint of cleavage between a young woman's budding breasts—yet ended up becoming as definitive as the severing of a cord at birth that makes a son no longer one with his mother. A brutal and profound incision is precisely the displaced and confusing state which is the sum of humanity: between oneness and multiplicity, between integrity and partition. It is the low plain between potential and action, adventure and nostalgia, past and future, entity and essence, ego and id, space and time, life and death, time and eternity. Between spirit and matter.

The only salvation from that topographic hell is the aching hope for a gathering of separated fragments, a restoration of oneness, a healing of the fracture. We must repair or replace ligaments to bind together a shattered whole. This re-linking of lost pieces is at the etymological root of what we call religion. Re-ligion, from the Latin *ligare*, is to help lost pieces find a connection, hook up, cleave together.

When he'd finished drafting dialogue for Aristophanes, Plato cast himself as the speaker to share another origin story for humankind. He said our souls are separated from the Supreme Soul and imprisoned in the body. And the only release from that captivity is death. But when we die, Plato said, our soul splits from the body to re-link itself to the God from whom we were sundered.

The Christian tradition followed Plato in this way of explaining the re-linking (the re-ligion) of the divided man to God, though leaving man still as a spirit, irrevocably separated from his material corporality to gain eternal union with the Father God.

Yet how should one definitive division save us from another existential separation? Perhaps the fundamental division of a human being, reflected even in the division of the brain into hemispheres, cannot be put to an end simply by asserting we should remain split from something we once had, be it Plato's ideal love, Epicurus's intellectual pleasure, or the physicality of our own flesh and blood.

Luz María, Moroni's grandmother, was a simple Spanish teacher in a rural secondary school who lived divided, in addition to all else, even between the phonological and semantic levels of words. From the time she was a child she couldn't stop thinking about the fact that *cima* and *sima*, whose sound was identical, meant things as different as top and bottom, summit and abyss. The division in which she lived became a bleeding wound when, from the height of her idyllic union with Antonio, her husband, she fell to the depth of widowhood and the orphaning of her two children.

Antonio was ten years older than Luz María, who had seen just seventeen springs when he began courting her. He was a charismatic taxi driver who dedicated his free time to singing ballads on a local radio program in the state capital: their courtship commenced at the precise moment when the radio waves lifted Antonio's voice out, dedicating a song "to Señorita Luz María, sister of Mr. Rafael, the primary school principal."

That afternoon, Luz María waited in the window for Antonio to come by. When he arrived, her brother the principal answered the door. The two men talked and after a few minutes that felt to Luz María like hours, Principal Rafael called to her. She had permission to go out to the park for an hour with Antonio.

Antonio and Luz María *connected*. They felt that connection like a myth of god-envied love. Like the root meaning of the word religion.

In less than a year, they got married. Only civilly, because the parish where Antonio's baptismal record was kept had been expropriated by the government and sold to a bank, causing his documents to be lost in the transfer to the archdiocese's headquarters. Even the couple's union, then, was suspended over the division between civil and ecclesiastical sanction—not that Luz María cared much, as she was Catholic in name only. That is to say: she was Catholic not by devotion but by a momentum that was already beginning to wane. Six of her eight brothers had decided to join an evangelical sect, holding

Protestantism to be, in Rafael's own words, "a more enlightened movement than tyrannical Catholicism." None of them made much fuss about missing the chance to see their sister show off her simple, impeccably white dress at the altar of the state cathedral: the steps of city hall, surrounded by merchants, social workers, and police, were enough.

Although Luz María and Antonio wanted them from the beginning, it took three years for the children to arrive. First Esteban and two years later Esther, Moroni's mother. In many ways, Luz María was a woman envied by others. Antonio was very popular for his songs, a cheerful man with twinkling eyes who made good company.

That camaraderie took him one day to march alongside students protesting in solidarity with tenants of the state capital's markets against the governor's voracious appetite for taxes. The protestors included Antonio, as an unofficial public figure, in the march's vanguard line, carrying the banner with their slogans. But when they arrived at the governor's house, an army squad charged the protestors, firing on them and brandishing bayonets. Screams filled the air, the cacophony of violence flooded the streets with its deafening roar.

Luz Maria, Moroni's grandmother, had begged Antonio not to go. But just like Hector refused to yield to his wife Andromache and her prophetic words about the son he would leave orphaned, so Antonio placed his honor before all else. A high and tragic sense of honor that now cost him a confrontation, man to man, with a diminutive soldier who sank his bayonet into Antonio's belly and, holding him fast with the blade, fired his rifle.

That afternoon only two people died: Antonio and the "Chente" Mandujano, a union leader for the School of Science and Arts. They were buried with honors, and the mob of their mourners caused such a riot that the governor fled as soon as he was notified that the President of the Republic was on his way to the state to find out in person what had happened. But just as Andromache knew that the glory of the

hero is never enough to shelter his family, Luz María's fate was hardly better than that suffered by the guileless Trojan princess with the snow-white arms. Rafael secured Luz María a place as a Spanish teacher in a high school on the outskirts of the city, although she had to attend her brother's school in the afternoon to study spelling, grammar, and literature while breastfeeding Esther and raising Esteban as much as possible.

It was in those lessons that she returned to the problem of *cima* and *sima*, the shared sound signifying summit and abyss, which without her knowledge had been the landscape of her life's tragedy.

Luz María, Moroni's grandmother, never resigned herself to the topographic hell of her division. After listening time and time again to the sympathetic cliché that Antonio's death had been God's will, she assumed the infantile attitude of official antagonism toward Him. But after long weeks of draining rancor, she realized that perhaps only God would be the answer: His will could not be so terrible. So she learned to hate Him with love. But the only way to search for Him was the Church. At least the paraphernalia, the imagery, and the solemn theatricality of the parishes had more effect than the austere rational examination of Protestantism in her soul, which hungered for some impression so strong that it would grant her escape from her horrifically sundered reality.

She read the Bible five times from cover to cover without understanding one jot. The only lingering impression came from the passage where a dead man, thrown almost carelessly into the ground, came back to life because he had fallen beside the grave of the prophet Elisha, which was linked in her mind to the sentence from the apostle Paul who dictated that, although the letter of the law kills, the spirit gives life. Inspired by the deepest tenderness for Antonio, she finally raised the massive sacred tome in a deranged frenzy and declared there must be more than this, there must be another book apart from this insufficient piece.

As she sought a revelation or reconnection, she turned to a medium to talk with Antonio and confirm his promises of love. "If he still exists," she thought, "surely he still loves me." But the medium, a flaccid and foul-smelling *gitana* who had once been in love with the troubadour taxi driver, could never make contact with him, much less communicate anything to his young widow.

But one day Luz María ran into two foreign youngsters in the street. They were very tall, with intensely yellow hair, light eyes of a color between gray and blue, and pink skin lacerated by the sun. They were dressed in white shirts and ties. Each one carried a simple black briefcase, and although one of them seemed barely able to think in a broken Spanish complete with foreign accent and alien grammar, the other had mastered even the local idioms. They said they were missionaries and that they wanted to talk to her about a book of sacred writing, complementary to the Bible.

Holy Scripture, until now incomplete, divided, was whole once again.

When Mormon missionaries taught Luz María that the resurrection, that is to say the re-union of her deceased husband Antonio's immortal spirit with his material body, would be definitive and final and that the same would happen to her, she felt an uncontrollable force that burned in her chest and at the same time brought tranquility to her mind. And when they related how, through ceremonies whose hopeful promise exceeded their exceptional nature, she could not only see him again but continue to be his wife and preserve their children as offspring forever, she felt in her whole being, without knowing if it was in her spirit or in her body or in both an indescribable peace that made her leave, once and for all, the spiritualism sessions in which she had tried to contact Antonio with the intention of knowing if he continued to exist on any plane of reality.

She was at last able to visualize salvation from the chasm between the sound and the sense of the word *religion*.

CHAPTER 2

He woke up to the sound of the phone ringing. He was so tired—even though he felt the impulse to answer, he didn't have the strength. Two more rings. Niza stretched out her arm over him and picked up the receiver.

"Hello? . . . Yes, one moment," she said into the phone. Then to him: "It's for you."

Moroni half-opened his eyes, frowning. He stuck the receiver to his cheek and cleared his throat without getting out of bed.

"Yes . . . How?" He fell silent for a long time. "OK, sister. Thank you."

He hung up. He lay there with his eyes wide open, staring at the phone. He knew it wouldn't be the last call that night and wished with all his might that he didn't give a crap.

"Sister? Weren't you an only child?" Niza started stroking him, trying to get him to turn over.

He was almost naked. The dark gray briefs that had made him feel so free now accentuated his sense of lack and orphanhood. He thought of his garments—the undergarments he had stopped wearing years ago, despite their sacred meaning. He missed them. All at once, the caress bothered him: it seemed to him that it was becoming obscene.

"I need to go."

"At this hour?"

"I have to leave."

Niza returned to her dream and Moroni got up.

All his impulses were amplified. From a hidden case, he frantically pulled out a long white pair of boxers, then a T-shirt that completed the set. They smelled of dust. Rushing like a schoolboy, he went straight into the shower and let the first stream of cold water fall on his head until the shower reached its usual warmth. He washed himself thoroughly, as if wanting to remove scents tattooed all over his skin. He wished he didn't have to carry the weight of his life—and decided that the most legitimate feeling he could hold onto to grapple with it would be an

intention to immediately remove Niza from his life: scream her out of bed and kick her out of his apartment in a luxury of violence, fueled by convulsive moral indignation.

But she was not to blame, when all was said and done. He had met her by fortunate coincidence, like his last three romantic partners. Romantic partners? What did that even mean? They weren't girlfriends. They weren't friends, either. Come on, they weren't even lovers, that was a word full of adventure, of cynical joy. Even "romantic partner" was off: it felt like just another euphemism to refer to the merely carnal. But in this case, it was not only carnal. There was a story. There were hours of conversation and mutual exchange, fertilizing the tensions that relaxed at night.

He devoted himself to reliving the vague moment when he decided that he would play the game Niza proposed—as if by doing so, he could purge himself of it. He found that he had entered the dynamic out of sheer boredom. Because his loneliness was weighing on him. Because he worried that people believed his isolation was a reflection of some perversion. He could not afford that social risk. While he didn't mind admitting to his associates and employees that Sandra had asked for a divorce, it was only because broken families are the most common thing in our world. Even among Church members. So "he who is without sin . . ."

But what the hell did it matter to the brothers and sisters if, since Sandra left, he moved further and further away from them? He laughed at himself and was filled with a self-inflicted reproach for not being able to fulfill his intentions to be strong, come out afloat, and demonstrate to his daughter, to God, and to himself that he would overcome adversity. And that he was better than many of those who pointed at him then, including Lenin, who—apparently unsatisfied with condemning him to the outer darkness with his petulant preaching—now came out on a whim to interrupt Moroni's first deep sleep in years: in the middle of an unexpected night of drunkenness, and in which he had just had almost two hours of passionate intimacy.

Moroni put on his white underwear, mumbling what little he remembered from the explanations given about its symbols. A musty scent of long storage still clung to them. For a moment, he thought that if he inhaled deeply enough to sigh, the dust from his garments would make him cough, so he held in his breath until it caused a yawn, accompanied by a gasp that almost sounded like a death rattle.

Wedged in between deodorants and sunscreens, there was an old bottle of Eternity For Men. He sprayed under and over his clothes, and the pungent sweetness not only covered the scent he had wanted to tear off his skin in the shower and the smell of dust, but also helped convince him that if he saw Sandra, she would recognize the fragrance of their first date.

From the next room, Niza followed him closely with her ears. He had been sleeping in the apartment for a couple of weeks. He clearly didn't live there, though: in the closet there was only one change of his clothes and shoes. They arrived together at night, after dinner, dancing, or fighting, and as soon as they crossed the threshold of the apartment, they ritually repeated what had happened the first time. An awkward silence enveloped them. They avoided the drawn-out process of sitting down, talking, and seducing each other: as if fleeing the living room, they took refuge in the bedroom with the speed and seriousness of a child sent to bed without supper. Between nervous smiles, they undressed and caressed each other feverishly before joining awkwardly in an unsavory paroxysm worthy of two stupid teenagers who believe that this feeling of doing everything wrong is a sign of doing things right. During the plateau of their trance, they pretended with screams and moans to achieve a peak of pleasure—which did really come, but in such an uncertain way that neither of them dared to ask or claim or apologize for anything. To her, he was a tender, soft, delicate, almost childish lover incapable of hurting her. So she was perfectly willing to forgive him for his low energy.

He was always very tired. And it was true. The only thing that made him respond was knowing that, if he failed to, the massive humiliation

would be a mark on his forehead that he could never erase, just like the aromas that were tattooed on his skin and that he had to disguise with the scent of Eternity.

The phone rang again. He ran into the living room to pick up the extension so Niza wouldn't bother answering. He raised the receiver to his ear without saying anything. After two seconds of waiting, he heard a "Hey? Is that you?"

He didn't respond at all.

"I guess they already told you."

More silence.

"I only wanted to know if you're OK."

Obstinate silence.

"Well, that was all . . . Bye."

It was his daughter's voice. Not the one he'd expected.

He put on an elegant white shirt without ironing it, a black sweater, and an Oxford gray suit with a fashionable cut that accentuated the width of his back and seemed to inflate his chest. From the tie rack, he took an old and bland tie. He hadn't worn it for more than fifteen years, but he never thought about taking it down to put it in a box of mementos, let alone of throwing it away. It was sacred, almost an amulet. As he tied the knot, he was surprised to find that it smelled not of dust but of memories.

Almost automatically, he poured himself a cup of coffee to wake up. But when he raised the cup to drink it, he saw himself reflected in the dark, trembling mirror in his white shirt, suit, and tie, and the vision caused him a sudden, startling fright, like the shock of finding a spider in folded clothes.

He took the car keys and yanked the door closed. It was still very dark outside.



CAPÍTULO 1

Somos seres escindidos. Ése es el gran diagnóstico de nuestra existencia. Sobre la vastedad de nuestro ser se cierne el poderoso e inminente golpe de hacha con que Hefesto partió la cabeza de Zeus, como una fatídica voluntad superna o como infernal capricho. Ya Platón ponía en boca de Aristófanes la etiología, no carente de humor ácido, de nuestra búsqueda amorosa: hombre y mujer habrían sido en algún momento un solo ser, dividido por los dioses por envidiar su gozo pleno. Esa separación pudo comenzar, cierto es, con una leve hendidura, como la que cursa a la mitad de un joven pecho femenino, y terminó siendo tan definitiva como la de un hijo que, tras nacer, no vuelve más a ser uno con su madre. Una brutal y profunda escisión es precisamente el extrañado y confuso estado que sume a la humanidad entre la unicidad y la multiplicidad, entre la integridad y la partición. Es la baja planicie entre la potencia y el acto, entre la aventura y la nostalgia, entre el pasado y el futuro, entre la entidad y la esencia, entre el *ego* y el *id*, entre el espacio y el tiempo, entre la vida y la muerte, entre el tiempo y la eternidad. En fin, entre el espíritu y la materia.

De ese infierno topográfico la única salvación es la añorada posibilidad de reunir las partes separadas, de restaurar su unicidad, de sanar su fractura, de restablecer sus ligamentos o, por lo menos, suplantarlos. Ligar, pues, los fragmentos, para que no se pierdan el uno al otro. Ligarlos una y otra vez. Ligarlos y re-ligarlos.

Según el mismo Platón, nuestra alma está separada del Alma Suprema y aprisionada en nuestro cuerpo. La única forma de que obtenga su libertad es la muerte. Pero al morir, nuestra alma se escinde del cuerpo para re-ligarse al Dios del cual se desprendió en un principio.

La tradición cristiana siguió a Platón en esta forma de explicar la re-ligión del hombre escindido de Dios, pero dejándolo todavía en calidad de espíritu, separado de su corporalidad material para siempre, aunque unido eternamente al Dios Padre.

¿Cómo es que un desprendimiento definitivo nos salva de otra separación? Quizás la limitada mente escindida del ser humano, reflejo de la naturaleza escindida en los dos hemisferios del cerebro, no termina por admitir que debamos permanecer escindidos de algo que ya hemos tenido, como el amor ideal, el placer intelectual y, mucho menos, de nuestro cuerpo.

Luz María, la abuela de Moroni, era una sencilla maestra de Español en una secundaria rural que vivía escindida, además, entre el plano fonológico y el semántico de las palabras. Desde que era niña no terminaba de conciliar el hecho de que cima y sima, cuyo sonido era idéntico, significaran cosas tan diversas como cumbre y abismo, respectivamente. La escisión en la que vivía se volvió una herida sangrante cuando, de la cima de su unión idílica con Antonio, su esposo, cayó hasta la sima de la viudez y la orfandad de sus dos hijos.

Antonio era diez años mayor que Luz María, quien contaba diecisiete abriles cuando él comenzó a cortejarla. Era un carismático taxista que dedicaba sus ratos de ocio a cantar baladas en un programa de la radio local, en la capital del estado. El cortejo comenzó, precisamente, con un mensaje por radio en el que Antonio dedicó una canción “a la señorita Luz María, hermana de don Rafael, el director de la escuela primaria”.

Esa tarde, Luz María esperó en la ventana a que pasara Antonio. Cuando llegó, don Rafael salió a la puerta, ambos hablaron un momento, y al cabo de unos minutos que a Luz María le parecieron horas, el profesor don Rafael llamó a Luz María. Tenía permiso de salir una hora al parque con Antonio.

Antonio estaba *ligando* con Luz María.

En menos de un año se casaron. Sólo por lo civil, porque la parroquia donde se guardaba la fe de bautismo de Antonio había sido expropiada por el gobierno para venderla a un banco, y sus documentos se extraviaron en el traslado a la sede del arzobispado. La pareja quedó, pues, unida, pero la unión misma quedó suspendida sobre la escisión

que media entre la sanción civil y la eclesiástica, aunque aparentemente a Luz María no le importara gran cosa, pues se decía católica. En realidad no era tan devota, sólo mustia. Seis de sus ocho hermanos habían decidido seguir una secta evangélica por aquello de ser el protestantismo “un movimiento más ilustrado que el tiránico catolicismo”, a decir del propio don Rafael. Nadie hizo mucho aspaviento por no ver a su hermana presumir su sencillo vestido, impecablemente blanco, en el altar de la catedral del estado, sino sólo a la entrada del palacio municipal, entre marchantes, limosneros y gendarmes.

Aunque los deseaban desde el principio, los hijos llegaron tres años después. Primero Esteban y dos años después Esther, la madre de Moroni. En cierto modo, Luz María era una mujer envidiada por las demás. Antonio era muy popular por sus canciones, de ojo alegre y muy buen compañero.

Esa camaradería lo llevó un día a marchar junto a los estudiantes que apoyaban las protestas de los locatarios de los mercados de la capital del estado, contra la voracidad tributaria del gobernador. Lo incluyeron, como una figura pública no oficial, en la línea de vanguardia, cargando la manta de las consignas. Al llegar a casa del gobernador, un escuadrón del ejército se abalanzó sobre el contingente, disparando y blandiendo las bayonetas. El griterío, con todo y que era generalizado, parecía un ruido ensordecido por las mismas calles.

Luz María, la abuela de Moroni, le había rogado a Antonio no ir. Pero, tal como Héctor no cedió ante Andrómaca ni por las proféticas palabras sobre el hijo que habría de quedar huérfano, así Antonio antepuso el honor ante todo. Un elevado y trágico sentido del honor que ahora le costaba su enfrentamiento cuerpo a cuerpo con un menguado soldado que le hundió la bayoneta en el vientre y, teniéndolo sujeto de esa forma, disparó el fusil.

Aquella tarde sólo murieron dos personas: Antonio y el “Chente” Mandujano, un líder sindical de la Escuela de Ciencias y Artes. Se les sepultó con honores y la turba hizo tales destrozos que el gobernador

se dio a la fuga en cuanto recibió la notificación de que el Presidente de la República estaba en camino al estado para enterarse en persona de lo acontecido. Pero, tal como Andrómaca sabía que la gloria del héroe nunca basta para cobijar a su familia, la suerte de Luz María fue apenas mejor que la sufrida por la hermosa princesa troyana de los cándidos brazos. Don Rafael le consiguió a Luz María una plaza como maestra de español en una secundaria de las afueras de la ciudad, aunque ella tuvo que asistir a la escuela normal por las tardes y aprender con su propio hermano ortografía, gramática y literatura, mientras amamantaba a Esther y criaba a Esteban como podía.

Fue en esas lecciones donde volvió a disertar para sí misma el problema de la cima y la sima, que, sin que ella lo supiera, no era otra cosa que la geología de su peripecia trágica.

Luz María, la abuela de Moroni, nunca se resignó al infierno topográfico de su escisión. A fuerza de escuchar tantas veces que la muerte de Antonio había sido la voluntad de Dios, asumió la actitud infantil de enemistarse oficialmente con Él. Pero tras largas semanas de desgastante rencor, supo que quizás sólo Dios sería la respuesta: Su voluntad no podía ser tan mala. Así, aprendió a odiarlo con amor. Pero la única forma de buscarlo era la iglesia. Al menos la parafernalia, la imaginería y la grave teatralidad de las parroquias surtían más efecto que el austero examen racional del protestantismo en su alma hambrienta de alguna impresión tan fuerte que le hiciera evadirse de su horrorosa realidad escindida.

Leyó la Biblia cinco veces de cabo a rabo, sin entender ni jota. Sólo la impresionó el pasaje en el que un hombre muerto, arrojado casi sin cuidado a tierra, volvió a la vida por haber caído cerca del sepulcro del profeta Eliseo, y lo enlazaba con la sentencia del apóstol Pablo que dicta que, aunque la letra de la ley mata, el espíritu vivifica. Inspiró en Don Antonio la más honda ternura, y la consideró desquiciada, cuando levantó el mamotreto sagrado y solemnemente declaró que debía existir otro libro aparte de ése, que era insuficiente.

En su forma particular de religarlo todo, buscó a una médium para hablar con Antonio y refrendarle sus promesas de amor: “Si sigue existiendo, tiene que seguir amándome”. La médium, una gitana flácida y apestosa, que en otras épocas había estado enamorada del taxista trovador, nunca pudo hacer contacto con él, ni mucho menos para comunicarlo con su joven viuda.

Pero un día Luz María se topó en la calle con dos jovencitos extranjeros. Eran muy altos, de cabellos intensamente amarillos, ojos claros entre el gris y el azul y una rosada piel, lacerada por el sol. Vestían camisas blancas y corbata. Cargaban cada uno un maletín sencillo y negro, y aunque uno de ellos parecía apenas rumiar un español despedazado por la gramática ajena y el acento foráneo, el otro parecía dominar incluso los modismos locales. Dijeron ser misioneros y que querían hablar con ella de un libro de escritura sagrada, complementario de la Biblia.

La Sagrada Escritura, hasta ahora incompleta, dividida, estaba junta otra vez.

Cuando los misioneros mormones le enseñaron a Luz María que la resurrección, es decir la reunión del espíritu inmortal de Antonio, su esposo fallecido, con su cuerpo material sería definitiva y que lo mismo pasaría con ella, sintió una fuerza incontrolable que ardía en su pecho y al mismo tiempo tranquilizaba su mente. Y cuando le contaron que, mediante unas ceremonias cuya esperanzadora promesa sobrepujaba su rara naturaleza, podría no sólo volverlo a ver, sino continuar siendo ella su consorte, y preservar a sus hijos como hijos eternamente, sintió en todo su ser, sin saber si era en su espíritu o en su cuerpo, o en ambos, una paz indescriptible que la hizo dejar, de una vez por todas, las sesiones de espiritismo en las que había intentado contactar a Antonio con la intención de saber si él seguía existiendo en algún plano de la realidad.

Pudo al fin visualizarse salvando el abismo que hay entre el plano fonológico y el semántico de la palabra religión.

CAPÍTULO 2

Lo despertó el teléfono. Estaba tan cansado que a pesar de sentir el impulso de contestar, no tuvo la fuerza para hacerlo. Dos timbrazos más. Niza estiró el brazo por encima de él y levantó la bocina.

—¿Bueno? . . . Sí, un momento. Te buscan.

Moroni entreabrió los ojos frunciendo el ceño. Se pegó el auricular al cachete y carraspeó, sin levantarse de la cama.

—Sí. ¿Cómo? —Larga pausa—. Está bien, hermana. Gracias.

Colgó. Se quedó acostado con los ojos muy abiertos mirando al teléfono. Supo que no sería la última llamada en la noche y deseó con todas sus fuerzas que no le importara un pepino.

—¿Hermana? ¿No que eras hijo único? —Niza comenzó a acariciarlo con la intención de hacerlo voltear.

Estaba casi desnudo. La trusa gris oscuro que tanta libertad le hacía sentir, ahora acentuaba su carencia y su orfandad. Pensó en sus gárments, esas prendas interiores que había dejado de usar hacía años, a pesar de su significado sagrado. Los extrañó. De pronto lo molestó la caricia: le pareció que se volvía obscena.

—Me tengo que ir.

—¿A esta hora?

—Tengo que salir.

Niza volvió a su sueño y Moroni se levantó.

Todos sus impulsos estaban amplificadas. Frenéticamente sacó de un cajón recóndito un largo bóxer blanco y una camiseta que completaba el juego. Olían a polvo. Con la prisa de un colegial se metió a la ducha y dejó que el primer chorro de agua fría le cayera en la cabeza hasta alcanzar la tibieza usual del baño. Se lavó minuciosamente, como queriendo eliminar aromas que tenía tatuados por toda la piel. Deseó no tener que cargar el peso de su vida y decidió que el sentimiento más legítimo que podría tener para lidiar con él, sería la intención de sacar inmediatamente a Niza de su vida: levantarla a gritos de la cama y echarla de su departamento con lujo de violencia, impulsado por una convulsiva indignación moral.

Pero ella no tenía la culpa, a fin de cuentas. La conoció fortuitamente, como a sus últimas tres parejas sentimentales. No eran novias, tampoco amigas. Vamos, no eran siquiera amantes, esa es una palabra muy cargada de aventura, de cínica alegría. Es más: eso de “sentimentales” era uno de tantos eufemismos para referirse a lo meramente carnal. Pero en este caso no era solamente carnal. Había una historia. Había horas de plática y compenetración fertilizando las tensiones que se distendían en la noche.

Se dedicó a revivir, como si al hacerlo pudiera purgarse de ello, el difuso momento en que decidió que jugaría el juego que Niza le proponía. Descubrió que había entrado en esa dinámica por puro aburrimiento, porque su soledad le estaba pesando y le preocupaba que la gente creyera que ese aislamiento era el reflejo de alguna perversión. No podía permitirse ese riesgo social. Si bien no le importó admitir ante sus socios y empleados que Sandra le había pedido el divorcio, fue únicamente porque las familias rotas son lo más común de nuestro mundo, aún entre los miembros de la iglesia. De modo que “el que esté libre de pecado . . . “

Pero qué demonios importaban los hermanos si desde que Sandra se fue, él se alejó cada vez más de ellos. Se rió de sí mismo y se llenó de un reproche autoinfligido por no ser capaz de cumplir sus intenciones de ser fuerte, salir a flote y demostrarle a su hija, a Dios y a sí mismo que se sobrepondría a la adversidad y que era mejor que muchos de los que entonces lo señalaban, incluido Lenin, quien no conforme con haberlo condenado a las tinieblas de afuera con sus petulantes predicaciones, ahora le salía con el capricho de interrumpirle el primer sueño profundo en años, a la mitad de una noche inopinada de embriaguez, y en la que acaba de tener casi dos horas de apasionada intimidad.

Se puso su ropa interior blanca mascullando lo poco que recordaba de las explicaciones que se dan sobre sus símbolos. Seguían oliendo al polvo que se acumula cuando la ropa queda mucho tiempo guardada. Por un momento creyó que si tomaba suficiente aire para emitir un suspiro, ese polvo de sus gárments lo haría toser, así que reprimió su

aspiración y ello le provocó un bostezo que acompañó con un jadeo sonoro rayano en estertor de muerte.

Arrinconado entre los desodorantes y los protectores solares, estaba un viejo frasco de Eternity For Men. Se roció debajo y encima de la ropa, y el penetrante dulzor no sólo cubrió el aroma que se quiso quitar de su piel en la ducha y el olor a polvo, sino que lo ayudó a convencerse de que, si veía a Sandra, ella reconocería la fragancia de su primera cita.

Niza lo seguía atentamente con sus oídos. Llevaba durmiendo ahí un par de semanas. No vivía ahí. En el clóset sólo había una muda de su ropa y zapatos. Llegaban juntos en la noche, después de cenar, bailar o pelearse, y apenas cruzaban el umbral del departamento, repetían ritualmente lo que pasó la primera vez: un silencio incómodo los envolvía. Eludieron el trámite de sentarse, platicar y seducirse, y como huyendo de la sala, se refugiaron en el dormitorio con la rapidez y la seriedad con la que un niño maltratado se va castigado sin cenar. Entre sonrisas nerviosas, se desnudaron y se acariciaron febrilmente antes de unirse con torpeza en un desagradable paroxismo digno de dos estúpidos adolescentes que creen que esa sensación de estar haciendo todo mal es señal de estar haciendo las cosas bien. Durante la meseta de su trance, fingían con gritos y gemidos alcanzar el máximo placer, que ciertamente llegaba, pero de un modo tan incierto que ninguno de los dos se atrevía a preguntar ni a reclamar ni a disculparse por nada. Para ella, él era un amante tierno, suave, delicado y casi infantil incapaz de hacerle daño. Por eso estaba perfectamente dispuesta a perdonarle su poco ímpetu.

Él estaba muy cansado siempre. Y era verdad. Lo único que lo hacía responder con ella era saber que, de fallar, la más grande humillación sería una marca en su frente que nunca podría borrar, como los aromas que llevaba tatuados en su piel y que tuvo que disimular con Eternity.

El teléfono sonó de nuevo. Corrió a la sala a descolgar la extensión para que Niza no se molestara en contestar. Se llevó la bocina a la oreja sin decir nada. Tras dos segundos de espera, escuchó un “¿Bueno? ¿Eres

tú?” al que no respondió para nada. “Supongo que ya te dijeron”. Más silencio. “Sólo quería saber si estás bien”. Obstinado silencio. “Pues eso era todo. Bye”.

Era la voz de su hija. No la de quien esperaba.

Se puso una elegante camisa blanca sin planchar, un suéter negro y un traje gris óxford con ese corte tan de moda que le hace resaltar la anchura de su espalda y parece inflarle el pecho. Tomó del corbatero una vieja e insulsa corbata que no usaba desde hacía más de quince años. Nunca pensó en descolgarla para guardarla en alguna maleta de recuerdos, mucho menos en tirarla. Era sagrada, casi un amuleto. Mientras se hacía el nudo le sorprendió darse cuenta de que no olía a polvo, sino a recuerdos.

Casi de modo automático se sirvió una taza de café para despabilarse, pero cuando la alzó para tomarlo, se vio reflejado en el oscuro espejo tremolante, donde aparecía con su camisa blanca, traje y corbata, y la visión le causó un espanto instantáneo, similar al sobresalto que llega cuando se descubre una araña entre la ropa doblada.

Tomó las llaves del auto y cerró de un jalón la puerta. Aún estaba muy oscuro afuera.

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THE MASK WE MUST WEAR IN A RACIST SOCIETY: REFLECTIONS OF BLACK SUFFERING IN THE LDS CHURCH THROUGH ART

Darron T. Smith

I reflect upon a work of art by Marlena Wilding, a Black female artist with ties to Utah and Mormonism.¹ Her artwork is a stark representation of the complex nature of living while Black in a racialized society. Specifically, in “Untitled” (the cover of this issue), Wilding’s artistic rendering of a vintage photograph of an incarcerated Black man speaks to the historical suffering and contemporary realities of white supremacy unleashed in thought and practice on Black people, especially Black men and boys.

With a streak of white paint across the subject’s mouth, Wilding forces the viewer to reflect on the saliency of his prison number and the blank stare in his eyes, which are often described as the window to the soul. “Untitled” grapples with the centuries-old white racist framing of Black men as rapists, criminals, and violent thugs.² The irony being that the historical context in which these stereotypes derived were

1. You can learn more about Marlena Wilding and view some of her work at her website, www.marlenawilding.com.

2. Darron T. Smith, “Images of Black Males in Popular Media,” *HuffPost*, Mar. 14, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/black-men-media_b_2844990.



"Untitled," acrylic collage,
by Marlena Marie Wilding. 2014

falsely reported crimes after emancipation as a means to justify the death or imprisonment of Black men. These racist ideas are ingrained in American society; they are not only seared into the minds of white people, but these frames deeply affect Black people's sense of self-worth as well as their connectedness and belonging in the world. The coupling effect of both the Black and white psyche has made upward mobility for Black men nearly impossible and downward mobility into the school-to-prison pipeline more likely.³

These unchecked white racial frames were handed down generationally and provide the backbone for anti-Black racism embedded within the "justice" system that keeps Black men in prison at an alarming rate. As Wilding's collage suggests, even those who manage to break through many aspects of white racism and gain some material "success" still remain imprisoned. They are held captive to the schizophrenic whims of white society's toxic institutions and must navigate the terrain of white ignorance and cruelty. "Untitled" symbolizes the exhaustion of emotion work performed by Black people who live, work, or worship in segregated white spaces. Within these lethal places, Blacks painstakingly work to project safety to whites through smiles and affability while avoiding inflammatory rhetoric and practicing self-restraint in the face of racist comments and even comic relief at their expense. This is the mask we wear.

As a Black Latter-day Saint, I can relate in part to what Wilding must feel as she pours her soul onto her canvas. In a community that is supposed to affirm you, Black members of the LDS Church often find themselves apologizing or making excuses for blatant racist folklore perpetuated by white men who are enabled by white women. The LDS Church is a conservative, top-down leadership consisting entirely

3. Darron T. Smith, "Schooling While Black: Discipline in U.S. Public Schools and the School-to-Prison Pipeline," Dec. 5, 2012, <http://www.darronsmith.com/2012/12/schooling-while-black-discipline-in-u-s-public-schools-and-the-school-to-prison-pipeline/>.

of men, over 90 percent white and less than 2.5 percent Black. The expectations are that Blacks subscribe to white norms and foundational racist beliefs of the Church. The politics of the LDS Church have oppressed, punished, and stigmatized Blacks.⁴ Being made to live with such madness where white-skin privilege exists and white culture is more highly valued is a form of psychological violence.

Many Black Latter-day Saints have admitted they suffer from imposter syndrome, where they have very little contact with the wider Black community (through no fault of their own) and, thus, feel like a fraud. They also find themselves struggling to understand the codes (language, culture, norms) in Black spaces, which leaves them vulnerable to intergroup prejudice from other Blacks, especially in school-aged children. Being too white for Blacks and too Black for whites, Black folk who live in such places withstand the pain of racial discrimination (conscious or unconscious) from white supremacy in all areas of life while grappling to figure out who they really are under the mask.

This piece of art was created during Wilding's time as a student. She was met with stark criticism from her art professor at Brigham Young University, who referred to her work as "shock art." In his disregard of her work, she felt a humiliating rejection of her expression of the Black experience, particularly coming from someone whose opinion she respected and valued. And based on that interaction, she hid this piece for the next six years. His inconsiderate remark plays on the white supremacist thinking that Black folk should only be seen rather than heard. Not ironically, the stroke of white paint across the subject's mouth represents the silencing of the Black voice.

Indeed, the silencing of Black people who dare to use their talents in the service of social justice is commonplace. White Americans live

4. Joanna Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and the Problem of Racial Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

and operate in a social milieu that buffers and insulates them from the race-based trauma that Black Americans face. White people, according to Robin DiAngelo, are fragile beings in the sense that they construct elaborate defense moves to preserve a racial equilibrium that advances their own white interests.⁵ For white people, these actions include outward displays of anger, violence, fear, guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation and denial, all meant to avoid stress-inducing “racetalk” many are unprepared to address. Yet, Wilding and other Black artists continue their perilous work in the face of white resistance.

The mask that Black LDS members wear forces them in one of two directions—either capitulate to the racist ideology in the Church or fight with half-hearted activism in a sea of Republican-style opposition. Those who chose to fight often eventually leave out of sheer frustration. Those who stay find themselves embattled in a faith blind to the realities of racial oppression. Both come at a cost, the effects of which play out on the Black body and mind. W. E. B. Du Bois penned, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on.” He went on to further explain, “One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”⁶

One way to blunt the impact of everyday discrimination is through art, poetry, music, and dance. Black people have used these media to survive the horrors of chattel slavery, emancipation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and other forms of racial marginalization. Wilding made

5. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

6. W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), chap. 1.

herself vulnerable, diving into the trauma of Black suffering in search of her voice and in the hopes of healing. But she is not alone in her efforts to capture the brutal reality of life in the margins for Black people. She has an entire artist community that came before her, and many more will continue to fight against systemic racism through expression of art alongside her.

Joanna Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and the Problem of Racial Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) 240pp.

Mormonism and White Supremacy as an Explanation of Mormonism's Relationship with White Supremacy

James C. Jones

Mormonism and White Supremacy is almost exactly what you would expect from a book with such a title. A brilliant and well-researched thesis analyzing the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to its present showing how we went from a revolutionary and even progressive faith to one that embraces the traditions and conventions of white supremacy, despite our theology condemning it.

One of the first things I look for in any work addressing any facet of white supremacy by a non-Black author is for the author to name their positionality. While it is true that white supremacy negatively affects all people, those without racial obstacles to power, access, and other means to an abundant life (i.e. white people) are not conditioned to address it, either because of ignorance or, as Dr. Brooks regularly quotes George Lipsitz, the possessive investment in whiteness. In other words, a white author needs to acknowledge that regardless of their academic credentials, they are examining white supremacy through a white lens, which makes for a less than perfect analysis. Dr. Brooks does so fairly quickly.

The second thing I was looking for was an articulation of something that myself and many other Black members have always at least

suspected: that the lack of Black people in our congregations is not coincidental or accidental. The thesis of the book actually seems to be that Mormonism's overwhelmingly white congregations and white politics is a result of a habit of choosing white comfort and power over Black humanity and solidarity, analyzing some key moments in Mormon history to demonstrate this.

Brooks also makes it clear that the whole church ought to know its racial history and why the church is in its current position with Black folks. But the reality is the church is resistant to doing that work. As I write this it has been about a month since the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd shook the U.S. In the midst of the subsequent civil unrest, the church made public statements twice where they have been able to condemn looting and property destruction, but not police brutality and white supremacy. Many members followed suit. This situation continues to show how necessary a work like this is for Latter-day Saints.

Brooks sees an opportunity and responsibility to inform Latter-day Saints of the church's problematic history and also what that knowledge will require of them. Though the latter is not accomplished in very specific terms, it's still more than I am conditioned to expect from LDS scholars on LDS subjects.

That said, there's little, if anything, that is new in this work when it comes to the conversation on race in Mormonism's history. While well timed, well researched, and probably the most efficient resource on this subject, she frequently quotes scholars and other public figures who've done work on the subject and the thesis is a foregone conclusion to anyone who has been having this conversation or reading from authors who've discussed race and the church at length.

Further, those already engaged in these conversations are seeking a way to move them forward and dismantle the white supremacy present in Mormonism, but, at most, this gets a single chapter treatment to the amount of seven pages in a 200+ page work. In those seven pages, she outlines three methods of social transformation and the model

that got the highest word count of the three depends on the highest church leaders. Unless any of them are anti-racism activists I don't quite understand why a chapter on dismantling white supremacy would give so much airtime to what those preserving it can do, considering the church's history and considering that those in positions of power and privilege don't just relinquish it because those on the margins ask. Another model briefly mentions Ordain Women as a possible and stronger model of direct activism which felt a bit off, given their habitual centering of white feminism. Our movement, which Brooks rightly acknowledged has not chosen such a path, is currently led primarily by Black women. That is not an accident.

As implied by the brevity of the chapter, none of these models are explored at length. Her intention was to explain Mormonism's relationship with white supremacy rather than be an activist. Even still, she seems to make it clear that she's on board with breaking white supremacy's hold on the church, but to make it all the way to the final chapter without getting a specific "how" was slightly disappointing. It may not be her place to do so, but if she was capable of quoting the work of others to explain white supremacy in the church, surely she could've used the words of the movement's leaders in the chapter she included on dismantling it.

I would recommend this book to anyone new to conversations on racism in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It's critical to understand how we got here, come to terms with the church's anti-Black racism, and normalize conversations about the church's problematic past and present if we are to properly reckon with it. Fulfilling the church's mission to "proclaim the gospel" and "perfect the saints" depends on it.

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Mormonism and White Supremacy as Cultural Critique

W. Paul Reeve

In *Mormonism and White Supremacy* Joanna Brooks sets out to tell the Latter-day Saint racial story refracted through the lenses of white supremacy and racial innocence. As she describes it, her book “seeks to use the tools of historical research and critical analysis to identify how anti-Black racism took hold in Mormonism” (p. 13). She hopes that understanding how systems of inequality were historically built within the faith will then help twenty-first century Latter-day Saints to dismantle them. Her book is consequently more about the present than the past—an incisive cultural critique of Mormonism’s fraught racial narrative aimed at moving the faith forward. This book should thus be viewed as an effort to raise awareness and prompt change more than a rigorous history of race in Mormonism.

In a series of mostly chronological chapters, weighted more toward the twentieth than nineteenth century, Brooks deploys “critical analysis” to unpack key events that developed into Mormonism’s racial priesthood and temple restrictions and their entrenchment behind walls of prophetic infallibility. For students of Mormon history the selected events will be familiar. This retelling is not based on archival research but is principally grounded in secondary sources and published documents. It is told from the vantage point of decisions made from within the faith without grappling with race as something also ascribed from without.

The strength of Brooks’ work is as a cultural critique grounded in her willingness to make the past relevant to the present. What emerges is a series of deep dives into moments of historical contingency wherein Latter-day Saint leaders had choices and consistently chose their own whiteness over equality and social justice. Her focus is not only on Latter-day Saint leaders who dug in their heels, but also on

members such as Lowery Nelson, George Romney, George P. Lee, Byron Marchant, and Stuart Udall who stood up to the hierarchy and demanded change. Leaders had choices, in other words, and they chose white supremacy.

Brooks borrows from critical race theory to explain how these decisions were grounded in a “possessive investment in whiteness” which she argues was reinforced by a corresponding “possessive investment in rightness.” What that meant in practice was that Latter-day Saint leaders sought to bolster their own whiteness at the expense of their Black brothers and sisters. They reinforced their decisions by creating a narrative over time that suggested that Mormonism’s racial priesthood and temple restrictions were in place from the beginning, God put them there, and white leaders were not involved. As Brooks keenly notes, the narrative was built on a foundation of “racial innocence” that simultaneously blamed God for the restrictions and excused the white men who actually put the constraints in place.

Brooks’ most significant chapter covers the 1880s to the 1940s, a period wherein she describes the “institutionalization of white supremacy.” Here she traces the process whereby racial justifications became enshrined in Latter-day Saint curriculum. The institution thus produced, published, and taught racism and thereby ensured that it was passed on to the next generation. It is a compelling—if not painful—story and Brooks analyzes it well.

In that same chapter she introduces prophetic infallibility as the guardian of the newly enshrined narrative. Here her analysis misses a more complicated Latter-day Saint understanding of fallibility, one that has existed in tension with notions of infallibility over time. It is one of Mormonism’s unresolved paradoxes. Even Brigham Young, for example, sometimes seen as a strict authoritarian, warned his flock against “blind self-security trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence.” Other Latter-day Saint leaders have made similar statements, including as recently as 2013 when, as Brooks notes, Dieter F. Uchtdorf admitted to past “mistakes.” Rather

than engage such paradoxes and how they might have shaped and even fostered some of the dissent she chronicles in the twentieth century, Brooks describes a monolithic notion of infallibility.

Of her two methodological tools, Brooks is much better at critical analysis than historical research. In fact, Brooks sometimes relies on sources such as recent newspaper articles more than archival research and as a result occasionally makes unsupported claims or factual errors. She draws upon a 2012 *Salt Lake Tribune* article, for example, to suggest that Robert Dockery Covington, one LDS bishop who helped to settle the Cotton Mission in Southern Utah “recounted to fellow settlers (according to a contemporaneous record) stories of his physical and sexual abuse (including rape) of African American men, women, and children. His statue stands today in downtown Washington, Utah” (p. 49).

The “contemporaneous record” was that of George Armstrong Hicks, a fellow settler of Southern Utah whose autobiography was published in 2011. Hicks actually suggests that it was Covington’s counselor, Albert W. Collins, also a former slave driver, who had a reputation for bragging about his previous violent exploits and his rape of enslaved women, not Covington. There is no statue to Collins in Washington, Utah. Hicks did call Covington a “Rebel sympathizer” and said that he “rejoiced whenever he heard of a Southern victory” during the Civil War. Perhaps Brooks would have arrived at the same conclusion about the settlement of Southern Utah had she read Hicks’ account, but her uncritical reliance on a 2012 newspaper article over Hicks’ autobiography leads to an unnuanced assessment.

Brooks similarly relies on two twenty-first century newspaper accounts (*Deseret News* and *New York Times*) for the lynching of miner Robert Marshall in Price, Utah, in 1925. She calls Marshall “an African American miner and a fellow Mormon,” (p. 60) presumably indicating that the crowd of over 1,000 people in one of Utah’s most ethnically and religiously diverse counties (sometimes called Utah’s Ellis Island for the number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe who migrated there at the turn of the twentieth century) was comprised of

Latter-day Saints who gathered to witness a coreligionist hang from a tree. There was no excuse for Marshall's lynching. It was clearly wrong no matter the religious affiliation or lack thereof of those involved. But Brooks uses the event to assert Mormon white supremacy when neither newspaper source mentions Marshall's religious affiliation or that of the crowd, and Brooks cites no evidence to support her assertion that Marshall was Mormon.

Brooks also goes beyond what historical evidence can support in her retelling of Abraham Smoot's and Zebedee Coltrin's testimony at the 1879 investigation into Elijah Abel's priesthood. She describes Smoot's involvement in the enslavement of black people in Utah and suggests that he took Jerry, one of his enslaved men with him to Utah County when he moved there in 1868. Jerry, however, drowned in 1861. More importantly, Brooks suggests that Coltrin and Smoot "jointly agreed to arrange their recollections to support a position opposing Black ordination and temple participation" (p. 45). In Brooks' retelling, Smoot "effectively owned Coltrin's land, home, and life chances" (p. 46) as he presided over the United Order effort in Utah County which included Spanish Fork where Coltrin lived. Smoot thus allegedly used his control over Coltrin's assets to secure his cooperation in lying to LDS leaders in 1879.

To be clear, Coltrin's testimony at the 1879 investigation into Abel's priesthood was a misremembrance at best and outright lie at worst, something that historians have long noted. Even still, there are no surviving documents that support a prearranged conspiracy with United Order assets as the fulcrum. This retelling demonstrates a lack of understanding of the fluid nature of United Order involvement in the 1870s and does not include evidence from the Utah County United Order. Historians who studied the Utah County Order concluded that "There was no leveling in Spanish Fork or Pleasant Grove—no effort to take all resources into the Order and redistribute them according to need. Real estate was never deeded to the Order." In evaluating Coltrin's testimony, racism more than conspiracy seems to be his most powerful

motivation, an assessment that would support Brooks' overarching thesis without a need to go beyond the evidence. Because Brooks' message is relevant and forceful, getting the history right matters so that the meaning does not get dismissed in the muddle.

Brooks' ultimate goal is to know how to dismantle systems of inequality within Mormonism. A frank confrontation with the power of whiteness in Mormon history is one facet of Brooks' hoped for dismantling. Her call to action is thus grounded in a rejection of racial innocence and proposes instead a racial reckoning—one that *Mormonism and White Supremacy* demonstrates is long overdue.

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Mormonism and White Supremacy as White Mormon Scholarship

LaShawn C. Williams

Joanna Brooks' *Mormonism and White Supremacy* is certain to engage readers who have opinions about (white) Mormon theology, (white) Mormon culture, (white) Mormon people or white American, anti-black supremacy as a concept and sociohistorical practice. This is because of the unconscious ways that her use of "Mormon" is often conflated with "White" despite the growth of Mormon congregations internationally since the 1970s. This type of oversight is similarly rooted in the same unknowing "racial innocence," the concept that holds white people immune from taking responsibility for practicing racism. Brooks associates this with the continued unconscious actions of white

supremacy within the institutional Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For readers inside Mormonism and outside of whiteness, this work will read very similarly to other white Mormon scholarship. This should not be a deterrent to readers who may find themselves fatigued to read another racially innocent Mormon history review.

Before expanding on the shortcomings in Brooks' approach in this book—I do want to state support for the obvious: Brooks is one of the first, if not the only, white woman scholars to toss her hat (or bonnet?) in the ring to discuss racism, white supremacy, and Mormonism—as a ripe opportunity, on purpose, and with intention. While the intentions may not be fully prepared to disrupt the systemic white supremacy so much as encourage more reflection on the system's existence, the words of her work must be acknowledged for their positioning within the genre.

Its most helpful presentation of information, that simultaneously is certain to foster distress in some progressive Mormon feminist readers, is the outlining of Eliza R. Snow's damaging words that upheld white supremacist patriarchy as a weapon against Black people. Snow is an active demonstration of internalized sexism (adopting ideas from "whatever source she trusted," namely Joseph Smith, p. 36) and externalized racism acting to protect her white feminist position just above that of Black members of her shared faith. In her treatment, Brooks opens up a crack in the foundation of modern white Mormon feminists who revere Snow's words and works. While certainly disheartening for a hero's pedestal to wobble, this is an excellent point to engage, deconstruct, and begin the work of repair for all Mormon women and any person committed to the deep exercise of feminist consciousness-raising—and to do so *knowingly* versus innocently.

In its historical narrative, the book repeats most of the well-known information of historical white Mormon racism in previous scholarship. For readers who are new to white Mormon scholarship on white Mormon racism, they may be encouraged when Brooks states her goal in this book is to, "move the conversation yet another step by exploring how the predominantly white venues and denominations

through which we have pursued the sacred and hope to pursue mercy and justice have themselves contributed—if unknowingly—to white supremacy” (p. 3). The use of the word “unknowingly” is a key that will clue the reader in to the unfortunate “more of the same” narratives of many white Mormon scholars who refuse to name the Church as a racist institution on its own. This is the concept of racial innocence in action that at once implicates and then absolves the Church from its participation in and perpetuation of white supremacy. White Mormonism, then, is as much a victim of “the times” as the Black people on the receiving end of Mormonism’s brand of white supremacy. This is a significant wound to readers—white and of color—who want to see a more critically racially conscious, and thus hopeful, lens from which to engage the Church.

Brooks’ use of “unknowing” racial innocence asserts the minoritized experience of early Latter-day Saints is an explanation that excused early Mormonism from doing what is right (choosing to betray whiteness and steadily pursue efforts to maintain itself as an inclusive, multicultural church) and letting the consequence follow (continue to be ostracized, penalized and marginalized by American whiteness). Brooks sets for herself a limit. She does not “wish to impugn the character of individuals” (p. 16), namely, the church leaders who built an international religious organization by impugning the character of Black communities. Racial innocence is what protects Mormonism in its victimizations while it is actively victimizing by seeking reprieve on the occupied lands of peoples indigenous to this country.

This limit poses some problems in the analysis and contributes to the perpetuation of the problem she is encouraging us to engage. In one passage, she notes the problem of infallibility as a condition for leadership and its followers:

Infallibility kills: it kills the bodies of those marked expendable, it kills relationships with those who dissent, and it kills the souls who suffocate on their own ignorance and privilege. It kills courage, it kills hope, it kills faith, and it kills the kind of historical memory that helps

a religious community understand itself and find its next steps toward holiness. (p. 111)

However, Brooks' commitment not to impugn the character of Church leadership in her review of their words and their works contributes to the belief in their infallibility that must be deconstructed. This is an example of the struggle every Mormon must *knowingly* engage. While it is not done so by the white historians and scholars credited in Brooks' work, it can be seen in the public writing, activism, ongoing media advocacy and education efforts of Black members, named and unnamed in her book, but who, unfortunately, are not seen as scholars of their lived Mormon experiences or their published works to date. While painful, it too, is another area for committed Mormons to knowingly engage for change.

The book primarily focuses on church leaders and on the choices they made in pursuing, versus dismantling, white supremacy, not only in their failures but also "successes." It is important to note that the successes she directly names, the BeOne Priesthood Celebration event and the Legacy of Black Pioneers (aka Black LDS Legacy) conference that preceded it months prior and continues annually, are actually the results of grassroots efforts of Black community members. The work that went into creating both the Legacy Conference and the Priesthood restoration events were not agitations of direct action. Brooks recommends the activist behaviors of Ordain Women, the feminist direct action from the 2010s that petitioned the church to extend priesthood ordination to women, as one model for transformation. But these methods do not transfer seamlessly to Black communities. Instead, they can be regressive and damaging. The brief suggestion is evidence of the same privileges and challenges of internalized sexism, coupled with aggrieved entitlement, endemic to many efforts of white feminists who feel that Black communities' experiences of racist oppression are similar to white women's experiences of sexism. To suggest Ordain Women's approach as beneficial to Black Mormons today, is shortsighted.

Finally, Brooks offers recommendations for the institutional church itself to change from the top by using suggestions from Black people at the margins. This is burdensome on marginalized people, though well-intentioned as it clearly values the suggestions given. However, the institutional church is not the only organization or group that needs to change. Brooks acknowledges that in order for liberal Mormon organizations to confront racism in the church, they have to see their investment in white-identity politics as “corrosive to the tradition.” A clear call to action requires a reckoning; White privileged and white proximal groups actively benefit from the Mormon white supremacy of “not being Black” and as such must stop comparing their present-day oppression experiences to pre-1978 priesthood and temple practices denial. It perpetuates white racial innocence and prohibits them from seeing their active racism against Black communities within the Church’s feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements. Thus, change must come from the top and especially from the middle because the middle is what works hardest to stay higher than the bottom and away from the margins.

I appreciate Brooks’ work in *Mormonism and White Supremacy* for the continued talking points it presents its readers to *knowingly* engage in critical race consciousness raising, even when it is a byproduct of the book’s shortcomings more than by design of the book. May those with eyes to see and ears to hear, who do justice and love mercy, put their shoulders to the wheel.

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Recent Collections, In Three Movements

Reviewed by Eric W Jepson

R. A. Christmas. *Leaves of Sass*. Self-published: 2019. 148 pp. Paper: \$19.51. ISBN: 9780359896400.

Colin B. Douglas. *Into the Sun: Poems Revised, Rearranged, and New*. Salt Lake City: Waking Lion Press, 2019. 292 pp. Paper: \$14.95. ISBN: 978-1434104199.

Jan G. Otterstrom F. *Move On*. Self-published: 2019. 152 pp. Paper: \$15.00.

Kate Piersanti. *Life in Poetry*. San Pablo, Calif.: Headland Productions, 2020. 108 pp. Hardcover: \$19.95. ISBN: 9780578573083.

It has been more than a month since I've visited a grocery store or my ward building as this series of reviews is being written. Sacramento meeting has migrated to the web and my parents and siblings have been more in contact than usual. Exercise consists of walking across streets to avoid neighbors on the same sidewalk. And much of my thoughts have been directed to those at the greatest risk.

Even before social isolation kicked in, I had planned to group these four collections together, simply because they are all written by older writers, each of whom, to some degree, is staring age and mortality in the face with the structure and intent of their latest works.

Christmas, I believe, is the eldest, and in his introduction, he sets an exaggerated stage for a twilight collection. He leaves the impression that he is more concerned with getting every poem that's left in him to print without worrying too much whether they are quite ready. Which is not to say there are not excellent poems in the collection. The final

two poems in particular—the twenty-four-page “Taps for the BSA” and his thirty-one part translation of Paul Valéry are both excellent.

Sass thus makes for a frustrating read. Some poems are excellent, some are rough drafts, passing thoughts that could have been the raw material of something better. When he takes on a form (e.g., the sonnet), Christmas tends to do better work—the constraints force him into greater care.

A similar crisis of volume devalues Otterstrom’s latest collection. It too has occasional flashes of excellence buried by everything else. Otterstrom even labels each poem with a date, presumably the date it was written then forgotten.

This is frustrating. Two poets of great merit with a lifetime of excellence behind them. Two collections that garnered introductions from fellow poets of merit and skill who admire their body of work. Yet two collections that aren’t really collections at all, but hurried shoveling as the ultimate deadline looms.

A different but related issue comes into Douglas’s collection, which includes a lifetime of poetic work dating back to 1979. The poems often revisit and renew old themes, yet here each poem has been crafted into a final form. One can argue that the poems are too many when you have over thirty discussing alphabets/letters/glyphs, or when you have about ten featuring crystals and ten featuring spheres, making about five with crystal spheres, at least two of which grow inside someone’s breast. It’s not that I can easily declare one of these poems superior to another—each poem is a crafted marvel worthy of our attention. It’s more that this is a collection to spend years reading (rather than the ten days I spent) in order for them to layer rather than suffocate. Or, perhaps, this is a collection that could have been refined had the poems already been out in the world, only the fittest surviving.

Startlingly different in form from the above collections is Piersanti’s *Life in Poetry*. Shaped and illustrated and designed like the sort of gift book you might find at a grocery store (if we still went to grocery stores) next to the get-well-soon cards, Piersanti’s second collection almost

feels as if it is in disguise. The poems often skirt against the sort of sentimentality expected from poems printed atop photographs, but the collection as a whole stares directly at such themes as sex, pain, spiritual hope, and confusion. The combination makes for a frisson I could never resolve.

In the end, all four made me think about other recent collections I've read from twilit authors—the likes of Donald Hall or Billy Collins. And each of these four books suggests the same conclusion: the poetry ecosystem they are part of has not provided them with the same editorial tools that made Hall's or Collins's collections so strong. Having read these collections, I'm convinced that all four are excellent poets—excellent poets without a support system consisting of years of sufficient input and feedback to help them reach their fullest measure. Christmas offers thanks to “Lulu, my self-publisher for over twenty years, for helping me keep my literary output at least marginally accessible.” And Douglas has written that he withdrew from attempting to publish after 1989 (thirty years ago!). And why? Because he had decided “to write openly and unapologetically from my experience and sensibility as a Latter-day Saint, however that might restrict my readership and prospects for publication.”¹ Which, as any Latter-day Saint writer so decided can tell you, it certainly may.

And so we have four writers who—not to be morbid, but we are in the midst of a global pandemic aimed directly at the elderly—may have just published their final collections. Three of them self-published, and the fourth has been published by a press owned by a one-man software company that otherwise focuses on work in the public domain. This is not an ecosystem designed to help our poets leave behind great legacies. It feels more like “a fatal, irretrievable ending” (Otterstrom, “Lose Oneself,” 19) as we all look away.

Our poets deserve better.

1. Colin B. Douglas, “Colin B. Douglas on ‘Into the Sun,’” *Dawning of a Brighter Day* (blog), Feb. 28, 2020, <http://associationmormonletters.org/blog/2020/02/colin-b-douglas-on-into-the-sun/>.

Michael Lavers. *After Earth*. Tampa, Fla.: University of Tampa Press, 2019. 89 pp. Paper: \$14.00. ISBN: 978-1-59732-172-3.

Sunni Brown Wilkinson. *The Marriage of the Moon and the Field*. New York: Black Lawrence Press, 2019. 65 pp. Paper: \$16.95. ISBN: 978-1625570048.

Lavers and Wilkinson know they deserve better and have left the exclusively Mormon world of letters in search of it. Each of these collections concludes with a long list of journals where poems were first published, and the collections, filled largely with these vetted works, are uniformly strong. The percentage of the work that is, on the surface, Mormon in content is low, but when these poets engage with Mormon ideas or themes, they do so in striking and original ways. As Wilkinson's book had a standalone review in the Fall 2019 issue of *Dialogue*, I will focus more on Lavers here, but know that both books are strong entries overall and in their Mormon content specifically, and both stand as striking rebuttals to the institutional difficulties mentioned in part one of this review.

Although, in his acknowledgments, Lavers acknowledges at least five Mormon poets (at least two of whom bristle at the term), I don't know that the notes in my copy's margins comparing him to R. A. Christmas and Michael R. Collings reflect the poet's own intentions or are merely an unavoidable aspect of being a Mormon poet—we wade through the same waters—which is what makes the originality of his Mormon pieces all the more important.

To simplify the task, let's examine a smattering of poems addressing creation. The titular angel of "The Angel in Charge of Creating Earth Addresses His Cohort" begins by asking "Who cares if more important worlds have been / assigned to those more skillful, who make crusts / that never crack" (1–3) and ends by advising, "Don't envy them . . . let them / envy you, not doomed to mastery, / still stunned by your mistakes . . . the accidents of beauty, which, once realized, / can never be forgotten or undone" (32–34, 36–37).

One of the primal tensions in Latter-day Saint doctrine is its confluence of flawed humanity with eternal godlikeness. The notion

that a perfect being desires our company is an offshoot of this sublime absurdity, and one of the great tasks of “‘Mormonism,’ so-called”² is to navigate this familial/worshipful relationship, as Lavers does in his “Alberta Psalm”: “Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me” (Psalm 50:23), notes the epigraph, and Lavers responds, “I get it, Lord. Who doesn’t want to be loved?” (1) before wondering first at creation then at “what else am I supposed to say? Well done? / Kudos to you? What do you need with all / that flattery? What is a trout’s hymn / to a hawk?” (16–19). Or, to turn the head further away from worship and toward familiarity, “Just how savvy can you be to make me / thrilled by so much less than you?” (21–22).

This is risky theology. “The stars look so close, but are not. // This is Earth. We must walk” (“Daedalus to Icarus, if He Had Survived,” 13–14). While the angel, standing in for God, created a flawed earth, then God apparently created an earth so perfect that we are more awed by it than by him, in “Linnaeus’s Prayer,” the great taxonomist suggests a way toward a partnership when he prays, “thank you Lord for creations so numerous we have something to do with all these words” (1) and begs forgiveness for “thinking your great work unfinished. . . . I do not express myself. . . . [T]each me to speak so that they will rise and greet us . . . that this work might continue *in excelsis* forever amen” (6, 10, 17, 21).

This co-creative, child-of-God task, Lavers expresses again and again, is the role of the poet. To be like God, creating flawed creations—because they are the truest, most beautiful creations—but also because the work was left to us, as “azaleas can’t see themselves” (“The Burden of Humans,” 15).

Thus, while Lavers—and Wilkinson—do not often let their Mormonism surface, there is a suggestion of a perhaps-teleology throughout their collections. Certainly, there is a sense of cohesion and focus—as opposed to merely completeness, as we saw in the collections by Christmas, Otterstrom, Douglas, and Piersanti.

2. Brigham Young, *Discourse of Brigham Young*, compiled by John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1925), 4.

Dayna Patterson. *If Mother Braids a Waterfall*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020. 118 pp. Paper: \$10.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-280-3.

Dayna Patterson. *Titania in Yellow*. Cincinnati: Porkbelly Press, 2019. 44 pp. Paper: \$10.00.

If the purpose of this review is a plea for a) respect for our great poets in the form of b) a publishing system that helps our poets ascend their peaks and thus c) bolder Mormon-themed work, then Patterson's two collections suggest a possible way forward.

Both of these volumes include much previously published work. The chapbook was published by a small press specializing in such; the full-length collection was published by Signature, which, until the advent of BCC Press (with three solid volumes of poetry published in 2019), stood unchallenged as the premier publisher of Mormon-themed single-author collections, even if such publications were infrequent (infrequent, but perhaps accelerating—their seven previous collections came out in 2005, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2018—which is promising).

Patterson is part of the long tradition and current explosion of Mormon poetry on the feminine divine. She was a coeditor of the seminal *Dove Song* (Peculiar Pages, 2018), which demonstrated for a broad audience both that this history predates even Eliza Snow's "Invocation" and that the tradition is flowering and expanding today like the first three seconds of the universe.

Both collections present poems that can be arranged into categories. *Titania*, for instance, even with only fourteen poems, can be broken into goddess poems, ovum poems, and home poems, or self-portrait poems, classics poems, and nature poems. While *Mother*, being so much longer, can be unshuffled into more suits than I have space to consider—even (or especially) considering that poems will fall into more than one category. My first draft of categories consisted of post-Mormon, polygamy, Mother, missionary work, and Mormon childhood.

But that didn't satisfy. So then I tried thinking about forms—there are the letters to ancestors, for instance; there is defamiliarized nostalgia. I tried thinking of the collection as a series of interwoven love stories: the poet's, the gods', the ancestors'. That love-story angle was attractive and, if I had twenty more pages, I might tackle it. Instead, I've decided to simplify my task by returning to the post-Mormon category and tracking its development. But while I'll be focused on one, remember that the collection covers much more ground much more richly than this narrow focus may suggest.

Part of the reason I've selected the post-Mormon as focus is because Patterson's means of exploring the topic mature over the course of the book. I don't know if they are arranged as originally written or by some other strategy, but the effect is largely one of personal growth, if one interprets the poems as sharing a speaker. I'll briefly touch on nine poems, including the book's first and last.

"The Mormons Are Coming" is a four-page list of details (a poem type Patterson will return to). These details of Mormons seem friendly ("They surprise you with a two-foot Christmas tree, white / lights, red balls, and a golden star" [7–8]), but over the course of the poem, the details shift from positive to negative ("Alcohol, never" [16]) to othering ("white undergarments woven with folkloric / magic" [34–35]) to threatening ("The Mormons are coming. // Mormons put up Prop 8 signs" [78–79]). Each of these examples is at least ambivalent and possibly ironic, but the general swing is reinforced by the speaker's family's words—from reciting pioneer ancestry to questioning history to coming out as bisexual—alongside the litany of increasingly oppressive details.

"Post-Mormons Are Leaving," however, comes off not as a journey but a manifesto. But, while the phrasing is as if representative of post-Mormons at large, the speaker has an intensely personal focus, leading her to mistake her opinions and feelings as representing post-Mormons at large. This is perhaps most obvious when she tries to state authoritative distinctions between post-Mormon and ex-Mormon; or in claiming that, free of faith, each and all are now trying their first

margaritas and lattes; or that all post-Mormons are now religion-free rather than turning to Unitarianism or the Episcopal Church as (anecdotal evidence alert!) I have often observed. It is the voice of someone who, escaping a perceived authoritarianism, replaces it with one of her own.

“Ring Tricks” is not so much poetry as an essay with line breaks until a sudden volta appears, blossoming near-prose into poetry at its denouement (this is true of a few poems in *Mother*—one may debate whether it is a “good” form, but Patterson wields it effectively). The poem turns to the intensely personal, revisiting wife and husband’s exchange of rings imbued with section-132 power. The rings were to signify that, “if good enough, / we’d have each other. Always” (7–8) yet “We couldn’t foresee, thirteen years later, / our rings would end up on the fingers of // diametrically different people . . . our palimpsestuous selves” (37–39, 43).

With this settling understanding of self, “Former Mormons Catechize Their Kids” into this new faith/nonfaith. The catechism is a temple ritual-shaped Creation story borrowing without hesitation from multiple world traditions. Jesus is still part of the “pantheon of gods” (33), but this Jesus is “unscrolling the skin of his chest to reveal / his sacred heart, sword skewered and aflame” (44–45). The gods are followed by the goddesses, who are followed by the creation of humans, who are followed by their purpose, their relationship with the deity (as it grows to “that multihue ribbon arcing across the blue” [121]), their future, their redemption. And the teachers of redemption are Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Elijah, Joseph Smith, Miriam, Deborah, Anna, Eliza R. Snow, Emily Dickinson, Mother Teresa, Jane Goodall, Malala, parents (138–57). Teaching her own children of redemption, the speaker, rather than closing doors, has found a post-Mormonism defined by opening as many doors as she can find. This is an openness made possible by the realization of “a nude / *I don’t know*” (“Revision,” 27–28).

Unlike the other letters-to-ancestors poems, “Dear May” is not addressed to a blood ancestor but to an adopted ancestor, May Swenson,

whom the speaker imagines traveling a similar path (“Sister—can I call you that?—I wonder if it was hard for you / as it was for me” [16–17]), leaving her childhood faith to be “rebaptized . . . with language, reconfirmed a tongue / of fire settling Pentecostal on your word-wilding [*sic*, and gloriously so] art” (27–28).

This post-Mormonism’s foundational theme of Keats’s negative capability means a new “Study for Belief with Lines from *Star Trek: The Original Series*” makes ready sense, flowing as it does from the science-founded skepticism of *Star Trek* (as opposed to the religiously oriented *Star Wars*, which has always been about converting skeptics to its “hokey religions”). Patterson’s speaker has established that she watched this series with her father, and now it is the inherited scripture she catechizes herself with. The poem forms a loop; the final line’s punctuation appears at poem’s outset, meaning not only will this poem and “every sentence begin: I have been grossly mistaken” (1), but that—and every other statement of humility in the face of the awesome endlessness of space and discovery—will recur again and again as we return from end to beginning in one eternal (secular) round.

“We Christen the Canoe *Sunday School*” completes the passage from torture to rebellion to uncertainty to humility to peace. The poem takes the form of a prayer—perhaps a psalm, without the groveling—thanking an unnamed “you” for the beauty of the day and the pleasure of being upon the waters. In case the completeness of transition to post-Mormon is not obvious enough, the speaker then offers thanks for “a rainbow caught on a dry fly” (17) and the “careful knife inserted in the fish’s anus, / for a silent score to accompany the gutting . . . fish viscera drift[ing] off” (21–22, 24). I write as if the significance of this image is obvious, but, to be honest, I did not recognize *ἰχθύς*³ until my third or fourth read. This is a far road from the early poems’ belligerent cries of pain.

3. The Greek word for “fish” and the basis for the *ichthys* symbol, used since ancient times by Christians to represent Jesus Christ.

Which brings us to “Still Mormon,” the conclusive poem, where the speaker we have been travelling with now for fifty-two poems reveals she is “Mormon the way stars—rubbed out at noon . . . still burn” (1–2) or “The way a geode empty of its quartz / is still stone” (3–4). A new comfort and satisfaction—an understanding—has been reached. This final poem is broken into thirty-three pieces—not the first poem to reach this number, either in numbered portions or in the listed ages of its apostasy-bound characters—a final gesture in the direction of a Jesus who may now be little more than shadow, but a shadow by which we still define the edges of ourselves.

Of these nine cited poems, six were previously published: four in Mormon outlets (*Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, *Exponent II*), the other two in *Amethyst Review* and *Poetry*—a slightly different percentage than the poems as a whole (of the forty-four prepub credits, twenty were explicitly Mormon outlets). A cynic may conclude Patterson has had an advantage, developing her explicitly Mormon voice in the national space, as she is, after all, explicitly post-Mormon. But anecdote is not evidence, and some of her most Mormon works (e.g., “Hyrum Smith’s Death Mask,” “The Disposal of Mormon Garments”) appeared in non-Mormon outlets—suggesting that national audiences can have interest in well-crafted Mormon work.

Ultimately, the problem may not be with our poets—who are skilled and reveal a breadth of styles and angles and interests—but with their availability and us, their audience. With so few explicitly Mormon outlets for explicitly Mormon work, poets looking to grind themselves against the whetstone of editorial input must reach outward. Then, as they grow, whether we grow with them or not, perhaps they will finally publish the sort of valedictory collections they deserve and we so dearly require.

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The Pearl's Price

Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid. *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 296 pp. Hardcover: \$34.95. ISBN: 9780190603878.

Reviewed by Jenny Webb

Givens and Hauglid are direct: their goal is to provide a sustained, academic, and nuanced treatment of the Pearl of Great Price [PGP]. Their motive lies in the fact that this volume has received relatively little in terms of such engagement compared to the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, and their assessment that Mormonism “is absolutely inconceivable apart from this collection of scriptural texts [the PGP] that provided the faith’s theological core from the beginning” (4). In the course of the volume, Givens and Hauglid thus provide an amply researched and thoughtfully articulated history of the production of the PGP, as well as insight into the ways these components then reflect back onto Joseph Smith’s developing understanding of his own role as a prophet and seer whose work increasingly centered around an expansive notion of translation and its accompanying scriptural production. In this sense, *The Pearl of Greatest Price* is as much about the development of Smith’s prophethood as it is about the PGP itself, and it is this dual focus that, for me, at least, allows the book to succeed.

The Pearl of Greatest Price is structured around its own disparate components: the book of Moses (inscribed within the larger project of Smith’s translation of the Bible, and thus including Joseph Smith—Matthew), the book of Abraham, Joseph Smith—History, and the Articles of Faith. Each section examines the historical conditions of its composition and pays particular attention to its various doctrinal and theological developments. Givens and Hauglid provide a compelling reading of these texts, arguing that many of Mormonism’s distinctive

theological divergences from mainstream Christianity are textually centered in the PGP and that without these marks of difference, the rise of Mormonism would be categorized in terms of a restoration of the primitive church rather than shifting into the continued novelty of a church grounded in ongoing revelation. Their treatment of traditionally problematic topics, such as the papyri of the book of Abraham and its accompanying images, is thorough and relatively balanced; I would have no hesitation recommending this volume to a reader interested in gaining a better historical grounding of the events and contexts, including the controversies, surrounding the PGP.

And yet, to focus on *The Pearl of Greatest Price* as a comprehensive, balanced documentary history misses the larger project Givens and Hauglid develop with respect to Smith's own understanding of his divinely commissioned role. Throughout the volume, Smith's own focus becomes increasingly textual: beyond the Book of Mormon, Smith finds himself drawn to projects he characterizes as "translation." The evidence left behind from his efforts suggests that Smith's concept of translation as a prophetic project began to extend, leaving behind concepts of strict word-to-word correspondence and instead expanding into oracular experience precipitated in some way through sustained, prophetic attention upon a particular text. The underlying question Givens and Hauglid bring into focus is this: what do these particular, divergent, canonized texts found in the Pearl of Great Price tell us about what Smith understood regarding the relationship between revelation and translation in terms of his own oracular voice and visionary project? It's a fascinating lens through which to engage the PGP, and this thread of argumentation and exploration enriches the entire volume in useful ways.

One final thought: these questions concerning the relationship between history, theology, texts, and doctrine are particularly productive here when focusing on the PGP due to the book's own inherent tensions. As Givens and Hauglid note, "The irony of the Pearl of Great Price is that it is the source, at one and the same time,

of Mormonism’s theological treasures and its most vexing historical dilemmas” (273). It is this intrinsic irony at the heart of the PGP—the thrilling push of creative theology that only arrives through a history vulnerable to charges of fraud and deception—that informs the title of the book itself: *The Pearl of Greatest Price*. That greatest price—the flexible availability of revelation and its corresponding price of faith—grounds not only the PGP but the religion itself. It is a price well worth exploring, and *The Pearl of Greatest Price* proves to be an excellent guide for the journey.

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Politicking with the Saints: On Reading Benjamin Park’s *Kingdom of Nauvoo*

Benjamin E. Park. *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier*. New York: Liveright, 2020. 336 pp. Hardcover: \$28.95. ISBN: 978-1631494864.

Reviewed by S. Spencer Wells

In an era awash in a sea of reboots and re-examinations, one may be forgiven for initially wondering why yet another treatment of Mormon Nauvoo is strictly necessary. The city, after all, has received its fair share

of analysis over the years. Scholars examining religious persecution, Jacksonian economic policy, antebellum sexual practices, historical archeology, and even counterfeiting have all gravitated toward the city in turn. Fortunately, Benjamin E. Park's recent addition to the ever-expanding literature, *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier*, offers a remarkable reappraisal of a story that many Latter-day Saints feel they already both know and understand. The Nauvoo Park paints is neither completely familiar nor comforting. But it is endlessly fascinating.

For many, the book's analysis of Joseph Smith's creation and use of the secretive Council of Fifty will be well worth the price of admission. Employing recently released documents from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Park details the decisive role the council played in helping the Saints seek a haven beyond the borders of the United States—primarily in Texas and Oregon Territory—as well as the ways in which members sought to reconceptualize the place of religion in nineteenth-century politics. What sets Park's book apart, however, is not the verve with which the council's doings are narrated. The real payoff lays in the way in which the reader is brought to understand why such radical political endeavors were contemplated and seen as rational by early Mormons in the first place.

Indeed, one of the reasons that Park's book succeeds so admirably is that because under his steady hand, the story of Mormon Nauvoo is never about Nauvoo—or Joseph Smith—alone. Park does detail the rise of the Mormon kingdom on the Mississippi, from its first ill-fated, malaria-ridden years to its growing religious, social, and political prominence, as well as its eventual abandonment. Yet, in the end, he is much more concerned with what the experiences of Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo teach us about the contours of national belonging in the decades directly preceding the Civil War. Escaping the temptation to view the trials that the self-proclaimed Saints underwent in Nauvoo solely through the oft-employed lens of “religious liberty,” he reminds us that the story is also, at its root, a story about the “limits of American

democracy” (278). In Park’s reworking, the story of Nauvoo becomes a rich meditation on the reasons why nineteenth-century Mormons felt compelled to rework the political and religious culture of their day and age in an attempt to erect a theocratic system of governance on the far reaches of the nation.

And it is here, in the rough-and-tumble world of early national American politics, that Park’s book truly shines. First introduced as religious émigrés into Commerce, Illinois, at the tail end of the 1830s, Park’s Latter-day Saints come across as a people still very much wedded to America’s political settlement. Following the example of countless US cities before, Joseph Smith sought out—and eventually obtained—an assurance of local protection through the creation of a liberal city charter. Recognizing the power of engaging in electoral politics at the local level (even as they increasingly set common politico-religious assumptions of the day at naught by largely voting as a bloc according to Smith’s will), Mormons continuously sought to improve their lot through the vote. Likewise, Park notes, Mormons made a concerted effort to petition the federal legislature in a daring yet doomed effort to receive both reparations and protection for the abuses they had experienced at the hands of Missourians just a short time before. Placed in such a light, Smith’s eventual run for the presidency of the United States looks a lot more understandable. As Smith found local, state, and national governments unwilling to protect Latter-day Saints in the ways he deemed essential, assuming executive power seemed the only way to assure reform that could reasonably be taken within the nation’s political system.

It also, in the end, helps explain Mormons’ increasing ambivalence toward the democratic process they were engaging. As governmental structures at all levels of society refused to accommodate Mormons’ pleas, nothing less than a rejection of the democratic process appeared reasonable. In such a milieu, Latter-day Saints came to believe that only government under God through divine priesthood promised the Saints the protection they sought. Only then would the literal kingdom of God

on earth be realized. Even as Smith and others created a constitution within the Council of Fifty in an effort to flesh out their own theocracy, they went well beyond traditional American beliefs regarding the separation of church and state. And yet, even as Park emphasizes the breakdown in democratic processes that led Mormons to make the claims they did, the Saints never come across as completely unfamiliar. Indeed, it is a mark of Park's wide-ranging mastery of his subject that he is both comfortable and capable of comparing Mormonism's increasing suspicion of democratic governance to other social groups, such as abolitionists, making similar claims at the time.

Just as importantly, however, the book gives those who looked askance at Mormon politicking their due. Because Park centers his research on democratic discontent as a social phenomenon, the grievances of those beyond the Latter-day Saint pale are also concomitantly given more weight. Concerns over Mormons' penchant for bloc voting make increased sense after reading *Kingdom of Nauvoo*, as does "gentile" fury over Mormons' eventual assertion that the city of Nauvoo carried more sovereignty than other states in the Union. In an era beholden (at least in theory) to Jackson's purported "common man," the power that the Mormon kingdom sought to wield could appear threatening indeed. And, while some readers may find Park's willingness to question the purity of Mormons' political motives and practices disconcerting, it is a refreshing corrective to a field that still, at times, goes out of its way to excuse early Latter-day Saints for indiscretions both real and imagined.

While Park excels at uncovering the larger political significance of Nauvoo, he does not ignore the proverbial elephant in the room: polygamy. Indeed, the book is to be welcomed for the clear and cogent way in which it lays out the rise of a practice that Smith clearly attempted to keep secret—from the prophet's initial forays into plurality to Hyrum's and Emma's campaigns against the principle (through use of the Nauvoo High Council and Relief Society, respectively). Perhaps

most provocatively, Park argues that Smith initially introduced the doctrine of eternal sealings to deceased spouses in an effort to convince others, including Hyrum Smith, to accept the practice of celestial marriage.

Yet, even in these discussions of plural marriage, questions of democracy are never far from the surface. Throughout, Park employs Smith's growing practice of polygamy to illuminate why non-Mormons came to see Latter-day Saints as a growing threat in the political arena. This is most forcefully discussed in relation to the political frictions that Smith's destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* raised in Nauvoo and beyond. Though the paper was originally published, Park notes, in an effort to illuminate the prophet's polygamous relations, its accusations did not stop there. Rather, its contributors also made their case against the upstart prophet by listing his abuse "of habeus corpus . . . making unholy alliances with politicians, directing the Mormon vote, and merging religious and civic spheres" (227). Uneasiness about polygamy was never only about polygamy alone but also the health of democracy within both city and nation writ large.

The one area of plural marriage that deserves more attention than it receives, however, is the unfolding of the practice within Nauvoo itself. Understandably, Park chooses to focus his energy on explicating the role Smith played in the expansion of the principle. Yet, increasingly, as Smith unveiled the notion of celestial marriage to others within his inner circle, the foundations of broader marital and social institutions were being laid out. As such, a closer scrutiny of those beyond Smith who eventually accepted the prophet's call seems in order. Why did Smith's followers accept such heterodox views? Why did Smith choose whom he did, when he did, to enter into the practice? What, if anything, distinguished the women who were brought into relationships of plurality? Such questions often lurk just beneath the surface. To be sure, Park does not completely skirt such issues. He writes of Hyrum Smith's growing acceptance of plurality, of Brigham Young's first attempts

to find a second wife, as well as the pregnancy resulting from W. W. Phelps's polygamous union. Yet, a more sustained treatment would further cement in readers' eyes the fundamental importance of the experimental practice in the rise and fall of Nauvoo.

Even so, such critiques may be overstated. For, in the end, *Kingdom of Nauvoo* is a *tour de force* of scholarship. It is also a remarkably good yarn. For both the style of its prose as well as its determination to analyze Mormonism through the lens of broader historical contexts, Park's work is deserving of the highest praise a reviewer can give: "I'll be using this book in my classroom for years to come."

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God and Politics

Matthew L. Harris, ed. *Thunder from the Right: Ezra Taft Benson in Mormonism and Politics*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2019. 260 pp. Paper: \$27.95. ISBN: 978-0252042256.

Reviewed by Amanda Hendrix-Komoto

In the mid-twentieth century, Ezra Taft Benson was an important political figure who despised communism and feared that the United States was on the road to moral decay. He decried the rise of feminism and advocated for a full-throated embrace of patriarchy. The deeply

controversial figure served as secretary of agriculture under Dwight Eisenhower while he was a member the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Other members of the Quorum attempted to discipline Benson for allowing his political views to infuse his religious leadership. Starting in the 1960s, Benson became known as an advocate for the John Birch Society and other radical causes, even as he served within a religious institution that theoretically remained politically neutral.

Matthew Harris's edited collection *Thunder from the Right: Ezra Taft Benson in Mormonism and Politics* places Benson within his historical context and analyzes the influence that he had on the LDS Church and the United States as a whole. The essays it contains explore Benson's childhood in the small farming community of Whitney, Idaho, his tenure as secretary of agriculture, and his advocacy for the John Birch Society and far-right politics. The result is a tightly focused, well-argued volume that explores the tensions within the Mormon hierarchy over Benson's political prominence and the conservative views he espoused.

Brian Cannon's essay leads the collection with an examination of the relationship between Benson's childhood in southeastern Idaho and his agricultural policies. According to Cannon, Benson saw the "family farm" as "an ideal incubator of virtue and democracy" (24). He believed, however, that individual farms must be self-sufficient and that some families needed to find other employment if they were on submarginal or less desirable land. The themes of self-sufficiency and suspicion of government aid found in this essay are important themes throughout the volume. Matthew Bowman's article on Benson's theology suggests that the Church leader came to see human agency as "fragile" (173). He feared that dependence on government aid would render individuals unable to exercise their free will. Although these ideas had not necessarily fully flowered during his tenure as secretary of agriculture, we can see their beginnings in his work during the Eisenhower administration.

Although Benson's tenure as secretary of agriculture was important, Benson became best known for his advocacy of conservative causes and embrace of the John Birch Society. Several of the essays explore Benson's political ambitions and his embrace of right-wing causes. Gary Berger's article traces the origins of Benson's claim that Nikita Khrushchev told him that the Russians planned to slowly introduce communism into the United States, while Robert Goldberg examines Benson's attacks on the "creeping socialism" of the 1960s and '70s. Matthew Harris's article on Benson's rejection of the civil rights movement reminds us of the effects that his conservatism had on Utah and Idaho. His suspicion that Martin Luther King Jr. was a communist contributed to Utah's refusing to recognize Martin Luther King Day as the name of the holiday until 2000 (140). The volume of essays will prove important for scholars seeking to understand the conservative politics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Intermountain West. It also raises important questions about the Church's role in politics. Newell Bringhurst's essay creates a portrait of a man who desired political power but was constrained by the desires of the president of the Church. J. B. Haws suggests that Benson was also a much milder figure than people feared when he became the Church's prophet. Ultimately, the conservative backlash that many worried would accompany his presidency did not occur.

Like all projects, however, the book left some questions unanswered. As I was reading, I found myself wanting fuller attention paid to Idaho. In the book, Idaho becomes a stand-in for a conservative, rural upbringing that emphasized the importance of the family and community. I wondered how much this image fully captured the nuances of Idaho history. The Union Pacific Railroad contracted large numbers of immigrant men to work in its railyards throughout the state. In 1905, radical unionists assassinated Idaho's governor and miner's strikes were not uncommon in the region. During Benson's tenure as a county extension agent, he would have had to deal with increasing concerns about the amount of labor needed to produce sugar beets and the advisability of using

migrant labor for the task.¹ A fuller examination of Idaho's history would have brought into light whether or not Benson engaged these issues, and if so, how they influenced his understanding of politics and religion.

As a women's historian, I also wanted more gender analysis. Andrea Radke-Moss's "Women and Gender" is a welcome addition in this regard. Most of the essays in the volume touch lightly upon the experiences of women and questions about gender roles. Radke-Moss, however, takes the question of how Benson imagined the family as her central focus and argues convincingly that the proclamation on the family may be one of Benson's lasting contributions to Latter-day Saint culture and theology, even if it was published after his death. As a scholar of women and gender, I appreciated her deft handling of Benson's decision to enter into a polygamous marriage by having himself sealed to his cousin Eva after her death and her willingness to explore its ramifications for Benson's wife Flora.

Reading her essay, however, raised uncomfortable questions. I found myself wondering, for example, what might have happened if more women had been included in the anthology. What questions might they have asked about the role of women in the John Birch Society? What might they have uncovered about Flora's role in DC politics? What might be gained by comparing Benson's understanding of masculinity to that of other members of the Quorum of the Twelve? A more diverse list of contributors that included people of color, women, and individuals from the LGBTQ community might have produced a very different edited collection.

1. See Nicole Foy, "We Do Not Like the Mexican': Racist Chapter of Idaho History Revealed," *Idaho Statesman*, Dec. 20, 2019, <https://www.idahostatesman.com/article238330788.html>. Foy is partially citing Matthew Godfrey's 2018 presentation at the Mormon History Association conference. See Matthew Godfrey, "Much Suffering Among the Mexicans: Migrant Workers in Idaho and the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company, 1917-1921" (paper presented at Mormon History Association Annual Conference, Boise, Idaho, June 7-10, 2018). Godfrey's paper was recently published in *Agricultural History* 94, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 608-28.

Of course, the field of Mormon studies makes recruiting these contributors difficult. In 2018, I helped organize a roundtable on the experiences of women within Mormon history. It became clear that Mormon studies needs to do more to cultivate scholars from a diversity of backgrounds. This anthology reflects the field as a whole and, in addressing questions of race and gender at all, is doing more to address questions of diversity than some other works.

It also points to the reasons why Mormon history is sometimes homogenous. General authorities like Benson emphasized the importance of the patriarchal family and distrusted the civil rights movement. As a result, places like Idaho and Utah could be inhospitable for people of color, the LGBTQ community, and feminists. Most scholars of Mormonism come from this region. The histories that they write are shaped by the stories this anthology tells. This anthology traces the histories that created the world scholars of Mormonism inhabit, and for that, it is to be commended. The racism, extreme conservatism, and sexism evidenced in this volume have not completely dissipated from Mormon culture, or from that of Idaho and Utah, and it is important to tell the stories behind our own troubled present.

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I WAS A STRANGER . . .

Keith Norman

One hundred seventy-two years ago this coming Wednesday, July 24, the first company of Mormon pioneers entered the Salt Lake Valley, which was to be their new home. Being mostly a desert, it didn't look very inviting to these refugees. But they had been driven out of their homes back east at gunpoint too many times, and after months of trudging over the plains and struggling through the Rocky Mountains, they were resigned to settling in a place practically nobody else wanted. They thought of themselves as the new Israel, the covenant people of the Lord, and their leader, Brigham Young, was seen as the American Moses, leading them through the wilderness to the promised land.

The Israelites under Moses were also refugees, although, unlike the Mormon pioneers, they left Egypt to escape slavery rather than because they had been driven out. In fact, Pharaoh was enraged that the Israelites were leaving and led his army to pursue them, either to bring them back or to slaughter them. It did not turn out well for the Egyptians. But it was no picnic for the escapees, either, who spent years of hardship in the desert before they could secure a place to settle.

Refugees are defined as people forced to flee their home country to escape war, persecution, violence, or other disasters. Long before the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was established, America was a place of refuge. Lehi and his family were fleeing the imminent destruction of Jerusalem when they came here. Centuries later, our own

This talk was originally delivered in the Solon Ward of the Kirtland Ohio Stake on July 21, 2019.

honored forefathers, the Pilgrims, were escaping religious persecution in England. Their descendants and fellow European immigrants soon began the process of turning Lehi's descendants into refugees, forcibly displacing those they had not already killed from their ancestral lands, then breaking treaty after treaty whenever they coveted the latest place of Native American resettlement. Eventually the Native Americans were confined to reservations, areas perhaps even less hospitable than the primitive Salt Lake Valley. We might well call them "refugee camps" rather than reservations.

Other examples of refugees immigrating to America abound. Beginning in 1845, just when the Saints were being driven out of their homes in Nauvoo, a devastating blight destroyed most of the potato crop in Europe, causing widespread famine. Hardest hit was Ireland, where over a million people starved to death, and another million emigrated, mostly to the United States. They faced resentment, discrimination, and economic hardship in their new home, but, for the most part, they survived and eventually prospered. My grandsons Cameron and Connor Shea are descended from Irish refugees. By contrast with the grudging welcome the Irish found here, the United States took in large numbers of dissidents from Cuba following the Communist takeover of the island in 1959. There are now over a million political refugees from Cuba living in Florida.

Today it seems that the entire planet is flooded with refugees. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, there are currently almost 71 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 26 million who have had to leave their home country, an all-time record. On average, 37,000 people are forced from their homes per day due to violence and persecution. In addition to losing their homes and their livelihood, in many cases they are separated from their families. Over half of all refugees are children under the age of eighteen. All too often they experience violence, discrimination, and deprivation during their journey and even after it ends in exile. The modern-day slave trade is mostly fueled by refugees.

The majority of refugees are from three countries: Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan. But large numbers come from elsewhere, including areas such as Venezuela, Somalia, Myanmar, and Central America. Today, Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees, 3.7 million, followed by Pakistan, Sudan, Uganda, and Germany. Historically, the United States, a nation of immigrants, has been the leader in resettling refugees. Several years ago, when I attended my oldest son's graduation from Cal State Fullerton, the program listed, in alphabetical order, around one thousand graduating students from the College of Business and Economics. I looked down the list to find the name of my pride and joy, but I noted that the single "Norman" on the list was preceded by no less than forty-five "Nguyen"s. I'm not sure how to pronounce it, but I recognized it as a Vietnamese name. The US has been reasonably good at bringing in people displaced by our own military ventures, including Vietnam and, more recently, Afghanistan and Iraq.

But recently, we have seen a change in our national policy toward refugees. The number of people we accept has dropped dramatically, despite the increasing numbers and desperate conditions of those in need. I am trying not to get political here, so let's consider what the scriptures say about refugees.

The Bible does not use the word "refugee" in our English translations but could often be understood as such when terms such as "foreigner," "stranger," or "sojourner" are used. In contrast to many of the ancient Middle Eastern tribal societies suspicious of or hostile to outsiders, Israel was held to a higher standard. Although we like to focus on the Ten Commandments, the Lord gave Israel additional requirements and instructions from Mount Sinai, including this: "Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). Elaborating on the theme, the Lord later told them: "But the stranger that dwells with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:34).

So already in the law of Moses we have the Golden Rule, and it is applied to foreigners living among us: treat them as equals. This should not surprise us, considering that the Lord God who gave the command is Jehovah, or Jesus. He reiterated it during his earthly ministry: do unto others as you would have others do to you. This, Jesus explained, was the meaning of the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12). The law of Moses further specifies that foreigners were to be included in religious festivals (Deuteronomy 16:14), that tithes collected by the priests were to help provide food for foreigners as well as widows and orphans (Deuteronomy 14:28–29), and that farmers were actually expected to be sloppy in their harvests so that the poor and the foreigners could glean the remains from the fields (Leviticus 23:22). The New Testament likewise counsels us to show hospitality to strangers (Hebrews 13:20) and tells us that when we are baptized into the kingdom of God, we “are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the Saints, and of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19).

When Jesus described the coming day of judgment to his followers, he specified the behavior that would separate the sheep from the goats: those who would inherit his kingdom had fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison, and been hospitable to foreigners: “I was a stranger, and ye took me in” (Matthew 25:35). Jesus himself had been a refugee: his family had to flee their home in Judea when warned that King Herod wanted to kill the infant before he could fulfill his prophetic destiny. Thus, Jesus really meant it when he said, “Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). I think it is safe to say that today’s refugees qualify as among the least, the most unfortunate, the most desperately in need, of the people of the world.

The Book of Mormon does not mention strangers or foreigners in the sense of refugees, but this does not let us off the hook. We in this favored land are blessed with peace, prosperity, and stability. It is easy for us to ignore the plight of those millions of God’s children not so fortunate. We may think, well, they need to work out their own

problems where they are, not come to us for a handout. King Benjamin, in his comprehensive address to his people on morality, after exhorting them to teach their children to love and serve one another, then tells us we must look beyond our families:

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

Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of any substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just—

But I say unto you, O man, whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God. (Mosiah 4:16–18)

Harsh words! Although they echo Christ’s pronouncement on separating the sheep from the goats: whoever failed to help those in need “shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (Matthew 25:46). King Benjamin goes on to say that we are all beggars before God, depending on him not just for our worldly wealth but for the remission of our sins (Mosiah 4:19–20). Thus, we have no excuse for hoarding our abundance when others are in want.

Last year, the Church issued the following statement: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has long expressed its position that immigration reform should strengthen families and keep them together. The forced separation of children from their parents now occurring at the U.S.-Mexico border is harmful to families, especially to young children. We are deeply troubled by the aggressive and insensitive treatment of these families.”¹ We have seen the pictures on

1. Church News, “Church Calls for Unity, Compassion in New Statement on Immigration,” June 18, 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/church-calls-for-unity-compassion-in-new-statement-on-immigration?lang=eng>.

the news of refugees who drowned trying to cross a river or an ocean, of decaying bodies in the desert, of children separated from their families, crowded together in cages with despair on their faces. But what can we as individuals do, so removed from these horrible scenes? Now that we live in a global society, I don't think we can just wait until someone in need comes knocking at our door.

A few years ago, as news of the desperate throngs trying to escape the carnage of the civil war in Syria bombarded us, I felt moved to get involved somehow. Perhaps we could sponsor a refugee family, help them get settled here. To my surprise, I could find not a single instance of Syrian refugees coming to Cleveland. You may recall that the United States decided not to accept any victims of that conflict on the assumption that a terrorist might slip through disguised as a refugee. But on further research, I did find a local organization called Refugee Response, which was helping refugees from other countries such as Afghanistan, Burma, Bhutan, and Ghana who did make it here. I learned that, in addition to helping them find housing and teaching needed life skills, they operate the largest urban farm in the country in Ohio City, which employs refugees to grow and harvest produce. I contacted them and ended up as a tutor for a ten-year-old boy whose family had spent fifteen years in a refugee camp in Nepal after being kicked out of neighboring Bhutan for not practicing the official religion. I worked with him on reading and homework for about a year and a half until his family moved to central Ohio. By that time, the refugees allowed into the US had been restricted even further, so Refugee Response never came up with another assignment for me. They are still in need of adult tutors for women, however.

My adult children pointed me to the International Rescue Committee, one of the most effective organizations assisting refugees worldwide. Although it doesn't give the same satisfaction as personal contact, they are always happy to accept donations. Another organization doing similar work, although not with refugees per se, is the Bountiful

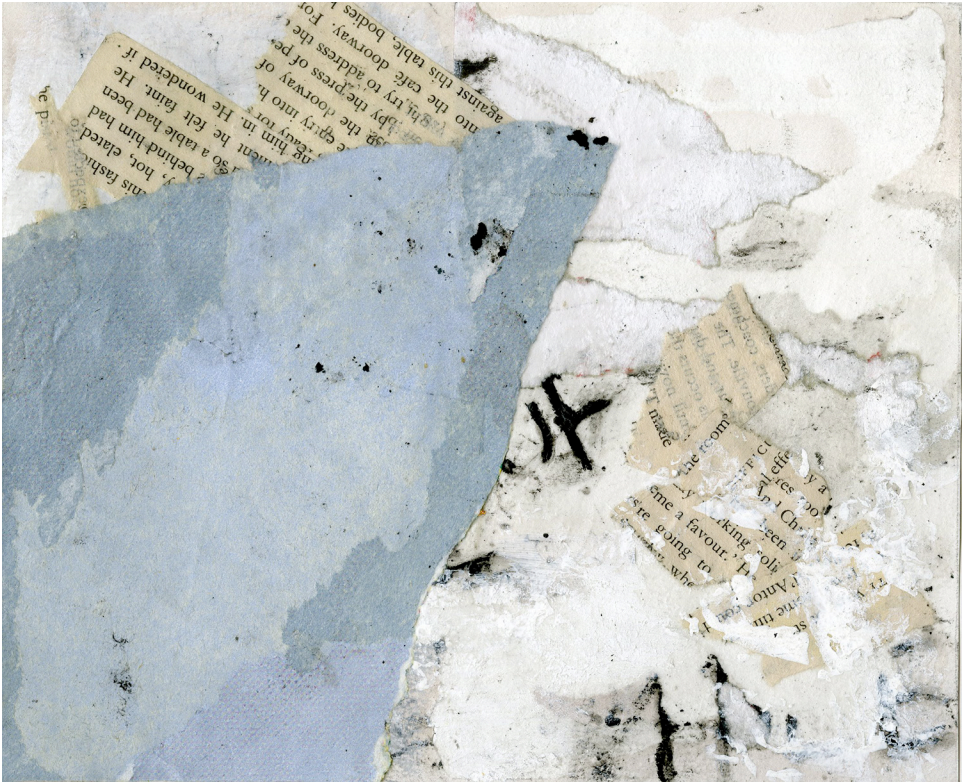
Children's Foundation, a.k.a. the Liahona Children's Foundation. An all-volunteer organization (no paid staff), it was established and is run by Church members, many of them missionaries who returned from developing countries wanting to help the people they had come to love. They focus their efforts on nutrition and immunizations, and they also depend on the generosity of people like us who, having read the passage in Doctrine and Covenants telling us we should not wait until we are commanded to do good, feel the need to help (D&C 58:26–29). The Bountiful Children's Foundation is not a Church-sponsored organization and does not engage in proselytizing. However, you may recall that several months ago a refugee from Bhutan via Nepal, Nischal Pradhan, was baptized in our ward. (I understand he now attends the young single adult branch.)

If you tithe and pay a generous fast offering, you deserve commendation. You needn't go beyond that to qualify for a temple recommend. However, in the temple, we express our willingness to consecrate *all* our time and means to doing God's work. Are we not a little bit relieved, though, that we don't actually have to get so extreme *now*? Maybe in the Millennium things will be different, and we can take that covenant more literally. Personally, I doubt I will live that long. But when I do get to the great day of reckoning, is the Lord going to say to me, *Well done, Brother Norman, you fed and clothed me, you took me in when I needed your help: enter into my kingdom?*

Or something else?

May there be no goats among us, I pray.

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“Land Of The,” acrylic collage,
by Marlena Marie Wilding.
2014

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