

### Editors' Note

This article was given at the 1979 Sunstone Theological Symposium held in August.

When I was growing up in Morgan during the twenties and thirties, we seldom if ever heard such expressions as "Yield yourself to the Spirit" or "Let the Spirit guide you" or "You've got to lose yourself wholly before the Spirit can speak to you." We were, of course, exhorted to pray for the guidance of the Spirit, to listen to the still small voice, to seek the companionship of the Holy Ghost. But emphasis on the Spirit simply was not central to our Mormon experience. Our ward chapel was central. "Attend your meetings" was, "Magnify your callings" was, "Follow the Brethren" was, "Get your ward teaching done early" was, and late in the thirties "Go to the welfare farm" became central.

I think that my memories are more or less accurate and my experiences more or less typical of the Church at the time. Morgan was a small town of about 1,000 and somewhat isolated up in the Weber valley. But it was only a little over twenty miles from Ogden, forty-five from Salt Lake, and in those days nearly every quarterly conference was graced by a visit from one of the General Authorities. We usually had two two-hour sessions on Sunday, a Saturday night Priesthood session, and I vaguely remember some general sessions on Saturday. The visitor usually spoke for nearly an hour at each meeting. So we couldn't have strayed too far from the central teachings of the Church, or from its central emphases. Assuming my memories are accurate and my experiences typical, then the emphasis on the Spirit which a Mormon sees and feels all around him today is comparatively new and must surely represent one of the most significant theological and spiritual developments in the Church in our time.

My title almost commits me to demonstrate that it is both "new" and "mysticism." But I am going to shirk partially two serious responsibilities of the scholar: to define tightly his terms and to document thoroughly his ideas and impressions. I think most of mine are documentable. But even if what I am describing is neither new nor mysticism, I trust that my analysis would still be essentially valid. And today I am after implications. My paper therefore becomes more personal than scholarly.

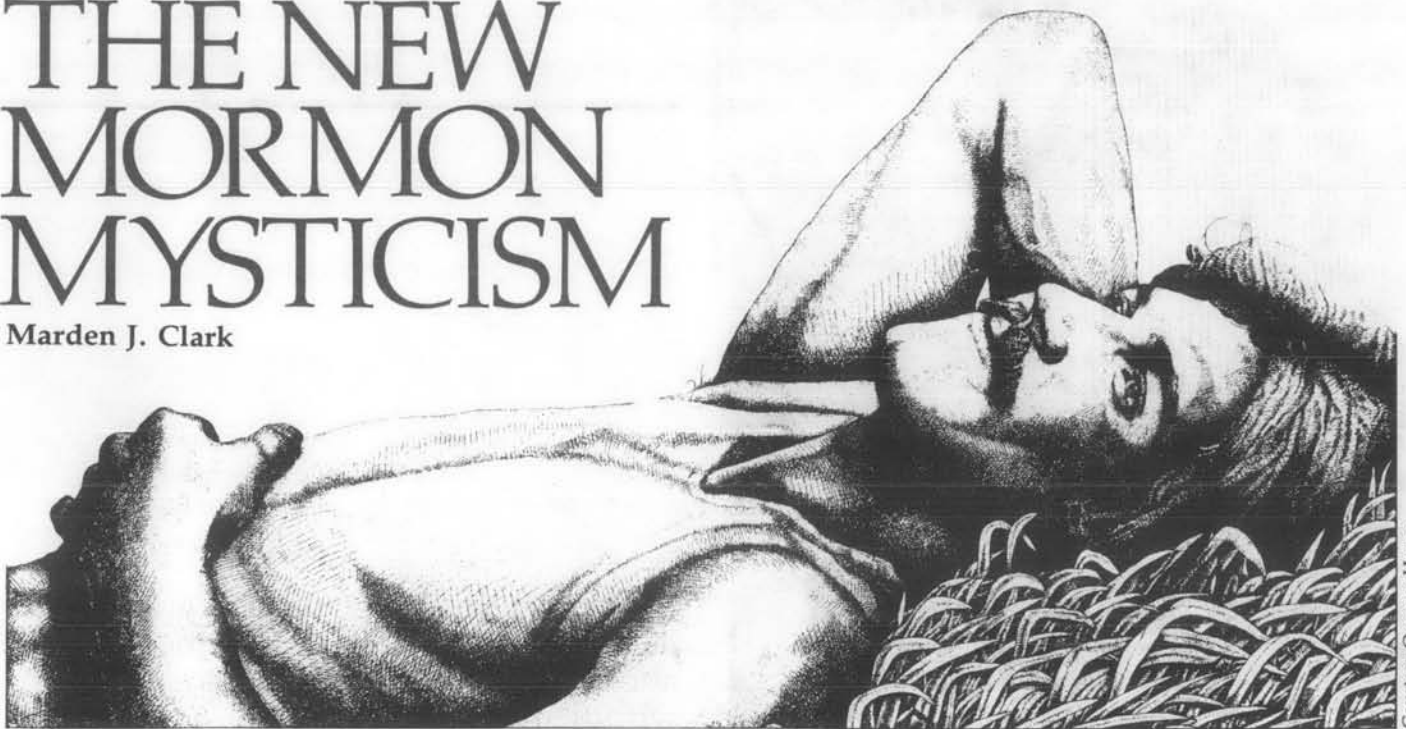
In calling it "mysticism" I risk something: neither the word nor the concept has a good feel for Mormons. We like to think we are practical people and the Gospel a way of life. We certainly do not think of ourselves as mystics. Besides, Fawn Brodie and others have tried to explain Joseph Smith—or explain him away—by defining him as mystic, largely in the tradition of the oriental or medieval mystic. For both of these, the mystic experience was private, interior, and finally ineffable—a total communion with the Brahma or with the Spirit. I use the word hoping it will carry only a little of that suggestion. All I really want it to suggest is a heavy reliance on the Spirit in our seeking of knowledge or religious experience. I would rather use the word "spirituality"; it comes close to what I wish I were describing and has almost no negative connotations. But my reservations about what I actually am describing make me willing to risk the word.

In calling it "new," I want simply to distinguish it from the rather passive emphasis of my growing up years, an emphasis which I take to be fairly typical—minus the passive—of Joseph Smith and the early Church (in spite of the Pentecostal experience in the Kirtland Temple, [recorded in DHC, II, 428, and other places] of the outpourings of the Spirit).

Neither "new" nor "mysticism" will help much to distinguish it, as I want to, from a nature mysticism,

# THE NEW MORMON MYSTICISM

Marden J. Clark



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close to pantheism, that we sometimes hear in the Church when we hear emphasized the universality of the Light of Christ or the sense of Spirit as light and life infusing all of creation or God as "in all things" and "through all things."

Again, the crucial point is not whether it is really new. Let me simply use as a kind of definition the expression "Give yourself wholly to the Spirit" and as a representative statement the thesis of Peter Anderson's Valedictory address at BYU's commencement last April: "One must open his life to the Holy Spirit." "Open his life" is not the same as "give himself wholly." Even so, I can hardly imagine it as the thesis of a valedictory address at the BYU that I first attended in 1935, though one might possibly imagine it as a valedictory thesis of the School of the Prophets.

A whole series of fascinating paradoxes develops out of this theological/spiritual emphasis on the Spirit. And the paradoxes give rise to both serious questions and significant strengths. I want to explore in the rest of this paper first the paradoxes, then the questions, then the strengths.

The first of the paradoxes is perhaps the most troublesome: Because it is *the* Spirit it would presumably always be the same and totally consistent, and yet we are all aware that it can speak differently and manifest itself differently to different people at different times. Any one who has sat much in Bishops' councils or other councils of the church has experienced the wide variances in how the Spirit is evidently moving in the members of the council. True, most such councils usually arrive at something close to unanimity after discussion and prayer. But it is sometimes a very painful process, in which one man's version of the Spirit may vary significantly from another's. Human beings, sometimes even those notably closest to the Source, are notoriously individual and sometimes weak and variable receivers of the Spirit.

The problem is complicated by a certain amount of confusion, or at least inconsistency, in our own identifying of the Spirit: Are we talking about an attribute of God and Christ ("Let thy Holy Spirit be with us") or about Deity itself (the Holy Ghost)? Some of us distinguish with real assurance among the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Light of Christ, and the Holy Ghost. Others of us don't even try to make such distinctions, feel little or no practical difference in any given experience of the Spirit. If or when the Spirit speaks or guides or heals, it is the fact of the Spirit and the fact of its closeness, its availability, and involvement in our lives, that is important, not the question of its precise identity.

A second and closely related paradox: We are exhorted to obey the commandments and follow the Brethren and at the same time to seek the guidance of the Spirit and follow it. Presumably there will be no conflict. And to a remarkable degree there is none. So far at least, Mormons are managing this potentially explosive paradox better than did our Puritan ancestors with their parallel paradoxical emphasis on strict moral and spiritual rule by the community and on the Inner Light,

which was the final guide in interpreting the final authority, the Bible. The reason for our comparative success may possibly be that we seek the Spirit more for confirmation of our spiritual decisions and directions than for initiating actions or decisions. The formula the Lord gave Joseph Smith for translating the Book of Mormon—that he should work it out in his own mind and then ask the Spirit for confirmation—has been a very widely accepted formula in Mormonism.

One need only look at the growing number of fundamentalist splinter groups and individuals, however, to realize how potentially troublesome this paradox can be. Nearly always the rationale of people who leave the Church to join such movements or simply to practice polygamy or other forms of individualism is that "the Holy Spirit moved me." I understand it was the original rationale that led to conferring the Priesthood on a Black member in Seattle, a move that set off one of the most widely publicized overt challenges to the authority of the Church in recent years. From what I know of the John Singer case, it was almost certainly part of the rationale behind the actions and attitudes of Singer that eventually led to excommunication. The Spirit can presumably move a man to order himself and his whole family to jump from a seventh-floor window. Or, a bit further from home, move a whole community to suicide. Some probably use the Spirit to justify or explain actions and beliefs already determined. But one can hardly talk to most of them without sensing a deep, even intense, sincerity in their feeling that the Spirit has been guiding them—even though they fail to see how deep can be the gulf between what the Brethren say and what people feel the Spirit is saying.

Third, and following from this second paradox: The new mysticism ought to result in the strongest possible sense of order and unity within the Church, yet it carries powerful seeds of individualism. The order and unity would result, of course, if all heard the voice the same or if it always spoke the same to all of us. Again strong forces are at work to increase the sense of order and unity through the Spirit. Perhaps the most important is the increasingly strong emphasis on hierarchy within the Church. Yes, we all hold the same Priesthood, yet we all know that we are usually ordained to offices within that Priesthood in orderly, sometimes almost mechanical progressions. An Apostle is an Apostle. Yet we all know or can know, the exact ranking of any member of that quorum, and we all know that it functions under the direction of the First Presidency, itself obviously a hierarchy, and that below it is the First Quorum of Seventy whose new organization is apparently following exactly the system of hierarchy of the Quorum of Apostles. Organization and hierarchy are constant reminders to the Church of both need and fact of order and unity and in this way are powerful counters to incipient individualism. In addition, one could hardly be an active Mormon without having heard repeatedly in the last few years that the Spirit works through and in total harmony with this hierarchy. The President of the Church is the only man who can receive revelation/

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inspiration for the Church as a whole, an Apostle can receive it as it pertains to his quorum work, a Seventy as it pertains to his, a Stake President can receive it for his stake, a Bishop for his ward, a quorum president for his quorum, a Relief Society president for her Relief Society, a father for his family, and any individual for himself. And when we do hear stories of people who claim to have received revelation for the Church, the answer is always, "Would the Lord—or Why would the Lord—send His revelations through you and not through His prophet?"

In spite of all this, the seeds of individualism find fertile soil in the new mysticism. If one hears that voice or feels that calm reassurance strong enough, even limited to confirming of decisions or actions, it increases his faith in the Spirit, as it should do. But the stronger the faith in the Spirit the greater the danger if one hears the wrong voice or feels the wrong sense of confirmation. Perhaps this is simply to repeat that one who has a testimony can be in graver danger, because more exposed, than one who has not. Regardless, we are stuck with the fact that one hears the voice as one hears it. And in that fact lies potential individualism.

Those seeds of individualism profoundly involve a fourth and crucial paradox: Mormons glory in their free agency and yet the new mysticism would ask them to give themselves wholly to the Spirit. We may not accept—or even be aware of—the awesome responsibility free agency implies. But we like to think that we are responsible for our decisions, even for what we are. But if one has really yielded himself wholly to the Spirit, presumably the Spirit will direct in all things. One has no need of free agency except to listen for and carry out what the Spirit tells him. To be sure, as I have heard it argued, that first decision to yield oneself may be the ultimate expression of will. But, in theory at least, it would be the last essential act of will. Even listening for the Spirit and carrying out its promptings would be mostly passive: presumably the Spirit would furnish both light and energy.

A fifth paradox: The new mysticism is at once a very easy and a most difficult approach to the spiritual life. It is easy because one can transfer one's burdens of choice and responsibility to the Spirit. If one gives oneself up wholly, then presumably the Spirit will guide one's decisions, give one strength to carry them out, and even take the responsibility if the decision should turn out wrong. Beyond this, most of us enjoy the satisfactions of certainty that the Spirit gives. Most Mormons would hardly admit this list of implications, at least not stated thus boldly. But one needs to listen to only one of the many weekly evangelical services on television to realize that these are the very points stressed in convincing a congregation that they should listen to the Spirit, transfer all their burdens to Jesus, and come forth to be born again. Mormons seldom get that kind of straight emphasis though it is often implied.

But if it were this easy, we would probably have a great rush, not just a gradual shift, to the new mysticism. It is at the same time a most difficult approach to

the spiritual life because it involves giving up so much of what we have considered ourselves. We Mormons have always gloried in our individuality (as distinguished from individualism). Yes, we are all sons and daughters of God. We sing in joy of the relationship. But we also glorify whatever it is that makes us different from one another, difference that we trace back through eternities and forward into eternities: we have always had our separate and unique personalities. And we will always have them. If we are to give ourselves wholly to the Spirit, then we would seem to be giving up a great deal of our identity.

Following from this, a sixth paradox: To give oneself up to the Spirit is attractive in theory but frightening in practice. Attractive for the reasons that make it easy but also for a higher reason: We immediately recognize a higher level of spirituality in living wholly with the Spirit than we usually sense in our ordinary approach to our religious lives. And we know well enough that we are supposed to lose ourselves if we are to find ourselves. But to really lose ourselves, to really give ourselves up! Aye, as Hamlet would say, there's the rub. The highly publicized identity crisis of our century would hardly prompt us to give up what little identity we feel some certainty about for some abstract life of the Spirit. We rather cling tenaciously to that individuality we do have than fly to that other one we know nought of, to what T. S. Eliot calls "A condition of complete simplicity/ (Costing not less than everything)."

And finally, such dependence on the Spirit is subject to the worst kind of cheapening, and yet it requires the greatest faith, the highest expression of our spirituality. It can become the means of cheap judging ("You haven't really let yourself be guided by the Spirit," or "Have you really prayed about this?"—positive in come contexts but sly and cutting when asked in the wrong tone.) Or it can be the source of a cheap arrogance ("I'm positive about this—as you cannot be—because the Spirit has testified it to me.") Or it can be the kind of cheap evasion of responsibility for both decision and action, the negative side of what I have already discussed.

Even without such dangers—and they may not be very great for the true seeker after the spiritual life—to really give oneself up wholly is an ultimate act of faith, an ultimate expression of spirituality. It must be, or those words of the Master would not ring so resonantly, so centrally to our religious sensibility: "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." The first and great commandment may subsume all the others, but to lose oneself for His sake must surely be a kind of final evidence that one loves God completely, that one has made the ultimate leap of faith.

Such a system of paradoxes could hardly help raising serious questions, most of them already suggested: When is it really the Spirit talking? How can I know? Just how does the Spirit talk? What do I do if or when the Spirit at different times seems to be giving me differing, even opposing, responses? What happens when the Spirit speaks differently to you than to me? What if I

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don't—or you don't—hear that Spirit at all or hear it only so still and small that it doesn't really tell me anything? Is whether I hear it or not primarily a matter of worthiness? Of surrendering myself wholly? How do I really go about giving myself up to the Spirit? Wouldn't such yielding simply make me something of a puppet of the Spirit? Or, at best, part of a homogeneous larger group? Such questions probably need little elaboration here. They are built into the paradoxes I have outlined. They tend to be the questions asked by individualistic members of the Church even without the new emphasis on the Spirit. All of the questions—and more that I have not raised—can be answered. They often are, with a sweeping and sometimes scornful answer (one that I have heard more than once): “But you're not really giving yourself up. You're not really exercising faith. You're not really paying the price of total loss of self. The very asking of the questions—perhaps even the writing of this essay—is the proof that you're not.” But such an answer is no answer, merely an indirect *argumentum ad hominem*. The questions remain, not alone for me but for many committed Latter-day Saints.

Fortunately, on the other side of such questions lie significant strengths. One is that the very attempt to recognize and know the Spirit, to give oneself up to the Spirit, moves—or should move—toward spirituality, toward a deeper religious life. Whatever reservations we may have about such a generalization (I have already indicated some), it *ought* to be true. One can, I suppose, seek the Spirit and not find it, or find it misleading, or find the wrong spirit. (In Mormon eyes, the obvious examples are again the fundamentalist groups.) And it is possible to not seek and have the Spirit find. The Spirit followed Jonah deep into the ocean when he was

anything but seeking. It turned Paul from a most vigorous persecutor to a most vigorous disciple. (As Saul he is an ultimate example of a man misled by the Spirit or led by the wrong Spirit.) Francis Thompson, in a marvelous poem, projects himself as running from the persistent affection of the Hound of Heaven. And nearly all of Flannery O'Connor's Christ-ridden characters are running from a Spirit that can resort to the most bizarre methods to bring them to him. But most of our scriptures, our religious history, and our own experiences tell us that we find only if we seek, that the more intensely we seek the deeper we experience. It may have been explicitly wisdom that led Joseph to the grove to pray. But wisdom in spiritual things and the Spirit itself are not easily distinguishable. That he should be rewarded by experiencing almost the total embodiment of the Spirit evidences the depth of his seeking. Moses scaled Mt. Sinai to experience the same kind of embodiment of the Spirit—the finger writing on that table must surely imply the totality of Jehovah's presence. Not many of us have to—or get a chance to—wrestle with God all night for the blessing of a new name that makes us Israel. The Lord has not asked most of us to go through quite the agonies of a dark night of the soul recorded by St. John of the Cross—a true mystic in the traditional sense—in order to experience the Spirit. But presumably we all can and should seek the Spirit with something of the same intensity. He does ask us to seek.

A second and closely related strength: The sense of dependence on the Spirit becomes an expression of the kind of humility that Christians are exhorted to by the Master, that we have always paid lip service to, that I have always had difficulty with myself, and that I see far too little of in most Mormons. We love to feel that we are



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humble, but even if we really seek humility and find it, we often find ourselves in the paradoxical trap that Benjamin Franklin defined for himself: we become proud of our humility. Or we forget how nearly synonymous are the right kind of humility and the right kind of pride, and we trap ourselves in the correspondingly synonymous wrong kind of pride and wrong kind of humility. But again, the very attempt to give oneself to something outside oneself is at once a recognition of and homage to something larger than the self and a denial of the self—or of the absolute primacy of the self. In other words, a move toward humility. Even the actual experiencing of the Spirit *can* be, I suppose, merely a boost for the ego. At least I have seen people for whom the experience seems to be merely that—an excuse to talk about how close one is to the Spirit. But fortunately most of the people I know who really have been able to give themselves to the Spirit have achieved a kind of humility, and a corresponding dignity and pride, that reassures me. I think of a woman with a remarkable gift for metaphor and hence for poetry, who often reports having found herself in deep communion with the Spirit through this process of giving herself up, of losing herself. She still finds herself a little in awe of herself: that *she* should have such experiences. That she has them I have no doubt; that they lead her to genuine humility I sense every time she tells me of them.

Which leads to a third significant strength: The struggle to lose oneself to the Spirit can mean a deeper communion with the Spirit. Here I can only be personal. The times when I have felt the Spirit working most intensely in my life have been times when I have been intensely seeking, intensely needing. But they have been experiences not of overt guidance, overt reprimand, overt messages of any kind, but of deep comfort, love, and communion. Such experiences ought to be available to us almost constantly. One would expect them especially during the Sacrament, during prayer, during the temple ceremony. But most of my experience with these, and the experience I observe or sense or hear about in others, is of a kind of formal, ritualistic participation rather than of deep communion. Ask any group of Mormon teenagers or even college students the reasons for prayer. Communion will be almost the last one mentioned. But the deep desire to give oneself to the Spirit can transform the ritual of sacrament or prayer into the experience of deep communion. I have had it do so.

The fourth strength may be largely practical, though with deep spiritual significance: The giving of ourselves to the Spirit can possibly transform the way we teach and learn. Most of us know that even at our best, at our highest pitch, we use only a fraction of the theoretical capacity of our minds. If that potential is there, if we really are what our theology tells us we are, potentially almost infinite in our capacities, then the most significant educational questions can have little to do with how to get more money for education or how to keep the federal government from gobbling up the system or even how to help students find their own identities.

They can have to do only with how to exploit that unused potential. I hope it won't seem merely simplistic to suggest that the answers might lie—perhaps have to lie—in our enlisting somehow the power of the Spirit. If the formula that I have been using for the new mysticism, giving ourselves up to the Spirit, is the way to enlist that Spirit, then the new mysticism would have almost infinite significance for education.

I have heard hints and suggestions of such significance many times in recent years. But the nearest I have come to seeing it in action is in the remarkable experiments by Clayne Robison, Reid Nibley, and others at BYU in the teaching of voice and music-listening. I have talked with Clayne at length about this. He refuses both *new* and *mysticism* to describe what they are doing. They don't talk at all about the Spirit, and certainly they don't tell the students that they are after any mystical experience. What they do is to get the students to teach each other to sing and to take the responsibility for their own learning. They insist that the students can recognize Quality in performances, in each other, and in their own voices, whether they can define Quality or not. (Any one familiar with *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* will recognize some echoes.) But the most basic instruction they give the students in voice is to forget themselves, to lose themselves in the music, to forget that they are "performing" and quit thinking of or feeling their ego as tied up in their singing, to leave behind their sense of limitations and *sing*. Similarly, in the music-listening classes, the students are told to listen for the genuine, to recognize and beware of the artist for whom the performance is primarily an ego trip, to recognize and love the artist who forgets himself wholly in his music. Clayne assures me that they now have sufficient objective evidence (before-and-after recordings and responses judged anonymously) to show that their approaches get significantly better results than private voice and listening lessons (surprisingly, all the group approaches did) but also significantly better results than any other group approach.

I have already admitted that all this is not direct application of the new mysticism. But the similarity of language—"lose themselves in their singing," "forgets himself wholly in his music"—suggests how close the approach can be. And even Clayne admits that behind their approach would lie the hope that the students would find the Spirit by losing themselves. Certainly in his directing of our ward choir, this is what Clayne is after.

All this applies with even more force to the final strength I wish to discuss: Giving ourselves up wholly to the Spirit could possibly transform the way we create. Here I may be working very much against myself. My writing has always been mostly "conscious and deliberate," in the words of T. S. Eliot. A lingering notion of the romantic "spontaneous overflow" approach to creativity may be what kept me from trying to write poetry or fiction until I was 45. And since then it has been primarily the sweat of the brow and the labor of the file that have been my basic creative tools. I can re-

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member only one line that I did no work for at all: "Where the Big Dipper touches the Sacramento in quiet communion." And this so astonished me when it "came full-blown in the dim-dawn morning" that I finally had to write a poem about it, a poem which ends "One line for me— / Why not an *Odyssey*?" Well, why not an *Odyssey*? I remember my exasperation when Keith Wilson came to BYU from Albuquerque and described for the faculty his creative process: He simply listened to his "Voice" and wrote what it told him. His major problem was writing fast enough to get it all down. I was exasperated. I had no reason to question the accuracy of his account. And I could find no comfort in any shoddiness in his poetry. I could only stand in awe and envy. It didn't help much when, after I had expressed my exasperation around the English Department, Clinton Larson came into my office a few days later and told me, in as stern and poetic-prophetic a voice as I have ever heard Clint use, "You've got to give yourself up to Poesy. You've got to listen to the Muse." Now anyone who knows Clinton Larson very well knows that for him Poesy and the Muse are but conventional names, even if he uses feminine pronouns to refer to them, for the Holy Ghost or the Holy Spirit. And he has described his own creative processes to me enough to tell me that his varies from Wilson's largely in his sense of the Source of the Voice that speaks to him and hence of the deeper authority and spiritual significance of that Voice.

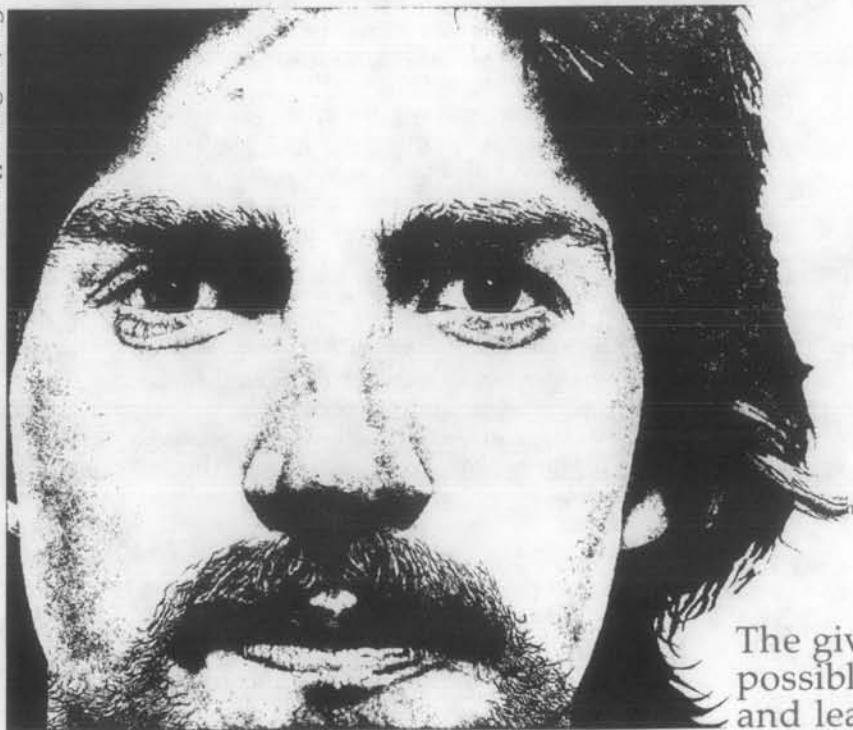
I have tried it. So far with only occasional flashes of success. But why not an *Odyssey*? As Clint and others have told me, if we really believe our own theology, if we really believe what we say about the workings of the Holy Spirit in our lives, then we have available the ultimate source of all creativity. I keep fighting a kind of temperamental resistance in myself, a sense that such seeking of the Spirit, such giving up of myself, would be a kind of cheating, a short-circuiting of the process. But

isn't this exactly what the new mysticism is about: our unwillingness to give ourselves up to the Spirit, and the necessity of doing so? Isn't my real problem that I'm afraid it won't be Clark writing that poem, that I might have to share the credit, if the poem should be worthy of credit? Or on the other hand, is there a sort of fear that the poem would not be worthy—after it had passed through my hands—of such a source? But such reservations are surely the voice of the ego speaking, not of the committed spiritual man willing to trust implicitly in his own theology or his own faith in the Spirit.

I don't know whether I will ever hear that Voice strong enough or long enough to make it a primary part of my creative process. What I do know is that the writing of this paper, the very writing of which may have begun, in the words of that accusatory voice I quoted earlier, as unconscious proof that I was not really giving myself up to the Spirit—what I do know is that the writing of this paper has become a kind of odyssey for me toward that Spirit. I may never learn to give myself up to the Spirit wholly. But what I have learned is that the strengths I have been talking about—the potential in the new mysticism—may help us finally to learn the absolute truth in that ultimate paradox: that we can find ourselves only by losing ourselves. We may learn a new definition of, and experience a higher kind of, free agency: not in the expression of our individuality but in the losing of that individuality in something higher. We may be able to transform the new mysticism, with all its paradoxes and problems, into the new spirituality. We may finally be able to give ourselves up wholly to the Spirit and have Him give us back ourselves transformed into new and higher wholes.

MARDEN CLARK received his PhD from the University of Washington. He is a professor of English at BYU and Bishop of the BYU 29th Ward. He recently published a book of poetry, *Mood: Of Late*, through BYU Press (1979).

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