

# Give and Take

## GENEROUS ENOUGH TO INCLUDE US ALL

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I can tell it's Sunstone Symposium time again. Peggy has been on the phone for nearly a month now, and the office is filled virtually around the clock with working (sleeping) bodies, missing and/or meeting a myriad of deadlines. It was the same last year, and somehow most things got done. For me, at least, that symposium was worth the hassle. It was one of those unexpected experiences which make a difference.

We tried to build last year on one of our successes from the year before. We had invited, almost as an afterthought, several ministers to speak at our concluding banquet. "Tell us your frank opinions of Mormon culture and theology" was our only instruction or ground rule.

We began to doubt our sanity when the first minister, a Baptist, stepped to the microphone. "Let me tell you why Joseph Smith was not a prophet," he intoned. An uneasy silence descended. Then the Methodist and the Presbyterian spoke, and the Catholic monsignor concluded with a challenge that we learn to live together in love and understanding.

A worthy goal. "I've lived in this community for 20 years," said one minister Peggy had called, "and this is the first time I've been asked to talk to a Mormon audience. Usually conversion and not communication is the goal in a religious discussion." The Baptist admitted later that before the symposium, he didn't think he had anything in common with Mormons. "Meeting Mormons like those at the symposium and reading your magazine," he said, "has helped me realize that we do have similar concerns."

In that spirit we included many more non-Mormons on last year's program, some from such diverse points as

California and New York City. We weren't ready for the response from many of those we had considered our core supporters. They weren't interested in "ecumenism" (something of a dirty word it turned out). If these complainers were single minded enough, they could have scheduled their time at the symposium so they heard only papers by Mormons, for Mormons, about Mormons. I hope rather that they were open enough to discover the gracious Christianity of John C. Bennett, to laugh at the wit of Peter Berger, to respond to the poetic evocations of Kenneth Woodward's Catholic childhood.

I went and was amused and outraged and informed and stretched—and changed. I am one who learns in "fits and starts." I establish emotional and intellectual equilibrium, and for a while nothing much seems to effect me. Meanwhile the bothersome quirks and anomalies are collecting in my subconscious, making it a pretty crowded and quarrelsome place. Then some little thing—usually minute, even petty—sets off a revolution. All the pieces have to be put back together in a radically new way.

The idea which fomented my personal revolution at the symposium seems embarrassingly obvious: Mormons are not the only religious people in the world. Because I'm so thoroughly Mormon, in my genes and in my upbringing, I've habitually ascribed the good things in my life to my religion; the feelings and experiences inspired by this church without parallel, the Lord's one true, must also be unique. Such assumptions set up a false dichotomy of religious Mormons and nonreligious or secular non-Mormons.

Seeing these naive beliefs against a larger backdrop was initially disconcerting but eventually exciting. At Christmas time Peggy and I went to the meetings of the American Academy of Religion in San Francisco. Half of the bearded men in corduroy

jackets in America must have been in the lobby of the Hilton on check-in day. In the elevators people were arguing free will or the omniscience of God. We fell in with a group of Adventists. We exchanged horror stories about our authoritarian institutions and discussed our prophets, our nineteenth century history, missionary work, church-sponsored education, dietary and behavioral codes.

We had the same intense experience when Peter Steinfelds, editor of the Catholic periodical *Commonweal*, came to Salt Lake. We talked about the ties which bind us to our faiths. On both occasions there was a deeper sense of belonging to a community of searching believers (refugees from the secular world) than there was of being adherents to mutually exclusive claims to God's particular favor.

Not that I've ceased to celebrate the singular vision my church has to share with the world. But I am no longer threatened by the fact of being more ordinary than I had supposed. In fact, a healthy dose of feeling less peculiar, less chosen, would be a relief for many of us. We are often whiny and obsessed by narrow issues. Mormon life and letters suffer.

Michael Williams, the founder of *Commonweal*, described a less self-conscious, more graceful approach:

How can Catholic thought, the Catholic *outlook* in life and the Catholic philosophy of living, as distinct from what might be called the Catholic *inlook* and individual experience, be conveyed to the mind of the whole American people?

The Catholic novelist Flanner O'Connor said it more succinctly when asked to define "the Catholic novel." "[Some say] a novel that deals with problems of the faith; I'd rather say a Catholic mind looking at anything," she said, and added, "making the category generous enough to include myself."

Mormon "inlook" has its place. I'm glad that we can get together and examine our secret joys and secret pains. But such self-examination should never be at the expense of Mormon "outlook"—trying to communicate with those "out there." Open relationships with outsiders will necessarily expand the boundaries of our lives and sometimes cause personal revolutions. I still maintain it's worth the hassle.

So despite the complaints, the symposium this year still looks pretty "ecumenical." But for me that has become a richly-nuanced word.