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## TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

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Paul Douglas Mallamo

### SONIA JOHNSON AND MY JOURNEY WITH DISSENT



ON A THURSDAY evening early in September I drove to San Francisco to hear Sonia Johnson speak. This radical feminist/presidential candidate/mother/divorcee first gained notoriety during a well-publicized battle with Mormon leaders over the Equal Rights Amendment and free speech in the Church. Sonia's more or less public excommunication was an agony both for the largely defenseless defendant and for a church which meticulously preens its public image. Who won that battle I can't say. Sonia lost the church of her heritage and birth, and later the ERA as well. The Church lost a good deal of national respect, and worse, the mind and heart of that true rarity in Mormondom: a committed

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member who dares to speak strongly, intelligently, and, most unforgivably, openly, in opposition to an official position which she considers to be morally wrong.

In my own personal struggles in the Church, Sonia played an important role. Persons like myself who, for various reasons, begin to question a religion to which they have been committed for many years, a religion which claims sole possession of the essential core of divine truth and sanction, and which continually reinforces this teaching in the minds and hearts of its members, face difficult challenges.

The groping struggler often seeks the blazings of those who went before. Sonia was one of those blazers for me. She chronicled the story of her break from the Church in her first book, *From Housewife to Heretic*, a volume that will endure as a classic of emancipatory biog-

raphy. Much of what she said there gave me new insights into the destructive personal impact of patriarchy and its inevitable brother, authoritarianism, and the dangers inherent in literalism. In my own struggle it was an unexpected blessing, a rational voice telling me that I was not evil or crazy, that others had passed this way and seen these same things, that individual members could think creatively on their own, individually, truthfully, even heretically if that was necessary.

That Thursday night I drove to Old Wives' Tales bookstore on Twenty-first and Valencia to listen to Sonia discuss her new ideas and her new book, *Going Out of Our Minds—The Metaphysics of Liberation*. After she spoke, Sonia asked as many women as would to stand and talk about themselves. It was a room full of the pain of women. In that brief time, in those intense personal expressions, the gathering was very much like the gathering of a church, one in which a common bond or a common faith was pain and anger, where the only relief was to turn in upon themselves as women, and abandon the world of the enemy, the world of men.

That night I felt like a creature absolutely out of its element. I felt more out of place in that room, among those women, in my blue corduroys, permanent-press blue shirt, penny loafers, and shaved face than anywhere else I have ever been or anywhere else I can imagine. Sonia spoke of the otherness of the sexes, of the unbridgeable canyons of understanding separating females from males—new ideas indeed, a startling evolution, for me at any rate, from the more communitarian ideals expressed in *Housewife*. I felt that otherness among those women. And yet, near the end, when Sonia requested that we stand with our arms around each other to sing a feminist hymn, the woman next to me did not pull back as I expected her to, but embraced me as I embraced her while we sang. Had she known that I was a Mormon elder she might have been appalled, perhaps angry. I laughed out loud later to think what my Mormon brothers would have thought to have seen me standing there, arm in arm with 200 feminists, singing a song their wives must never sing. The word "appalled" would not do justice to their feelings.

I have a persistent mental image from that night. I see Sonia Johnson the radical feminist standing before a group of women in San Francisco, proclaiming the irreducible otherness of women, the depravity, stupidity, and arrogance of men, and freely admitting her sexual relations with other females. Then I see Sonia Johnson the wife and mother, active,

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faithful Mormon, attending to her prescribed ecclesiastical and family duties within the strictured otherness of Mormonism. That's the only "otherness" I can really understand, and I stress that in a vain attempt to express the incredible psychic distance Sonia has travelled in those years since her excommunication.

I believe I understand the basics of what she said that night, and for what it's worth I agree with most of it: that in the best struggle the means must be the ends, and that those means/ends do not involve struggle at all, especially using tactics the opponent is more adept with anyway, having used them himself for literally thousands of years; that the more one struggles in certain arenas, the stronger the opposition grows (witness the political defeat of the ERA); that the follies of patriarchy, of the moral squalor peculiar to authoritarianism and the abuse of strength, are responsible for a host of the world's most urgent problems, including almost all the horrors inflicted upon women since the species emerged; that the wide influence of women is indispensable if the world is to be saved from humankind; that to save the world you must first save yourself, change yourself, that simply *being* what you want to be (if that's possible) is infinitely superior to *becoming* what you want to be. Take *now* for yourselves the attitudes of the person you ideally envision. You are your own reality. *Be* it!

But then she said—Don't involve the men. They are not us. They are the other, and even if some of the kindlier members of that sex wanted to help, they couldn't.

It's what she had been saying, one way or another, all evening, but it sounded so sudden, so new. Upon reflection, it also sounded old and familiar. She stung me with that one because I was *there*, I cared enough to be there, if I may say that much for myself.

What distinguishes Mormonism from so many other religions are its claims to authority and exclusivity. Only Mormonism offers those saving truths and divinely sanctioned ordinances that will be efficacious in the hereafter. There is no compromise with other religious systems, other than to concede that they are probably better than nothing for most folks. They might contain a portion of the truth, but what they have serves at best as an introduction to the full program that only Mormonism offers. And since the true church is administered by men who alone on earth understand, interpret, and proclaim the full word of God, they had better be listened to.

What Sonia said that Thursday night was different in substance, but identical in spirit. Only the words had been changed. The

authority was there—herself and, I assume, a few of the other lights of feminism. If you were not a female you could not participate in what Sonia called "the greatest spiritual revolution in history." It was like a religion. It was a lot like Mormonism. But at least among the Latter-day Saints the outsider can be admitted into the embrace of its promises and protections through baptism. In Sonia's faith there is no baptism for the sex that shaves its face.

Sonia had much to say about the responsibilities of women in saving humankind from its own destruction, and she spoke well and truthfully; but she had absolutely nothing good to say about one half of humanity—a remarkable blind spot. The Mormon Church, likewise, says much about the dreadful condition of the modern world, and of its special responsibility to it as a divinely sanctioned body—in fact, as the *only* divinely sanctioned body—yet the Church's own blind spot consisting of apathy in the face of chronic human problems is legendary. (Mormons rarely mobilize to address a problem that doesn't involve substantial numbers of other Mormons, that is not likely to generate a good deal of positive publicity leading to more converts or political influence, or that is not seen as a threat to institutional integrity.)

The sincere questioner of the claims and activities of a religion to which he or she is heavily committed only needs the support of kindred souls until his or her questioning takes on a life of its own, which, if it is honest, deep, thorough, and persistent enough, it will most certainly do. Sonia helped see me through until my questioning was alive and well of its own accord, until the problems that had initiated the questioning seemed paltry by contrast. Eventually I was able to see clearly that the picture the Latter-day Saints paint of the Church, its origins, subsequent historical development, and its current goals, is sometimes at wide variance with scholarly evidence, contained in studies unknown and unread by the vast majority of Mormons.

It is worse than ironic that in questioning, in turn, what Sonia now advocates, I perceive an all too familiar pattern. She should have learned from her years of experience within the Church a basic human law: any person or organization that claims to have cornered the market on truth or moral authority most certainly has not. Sonia had much more to offer her listeners that night than what they heard. She said what her audience wanted to hear instead of enlarging their vision to include more than just themselves. The world is made of all of us. Mormons alone can't save or change it, and neither can feminists. We

all are needed in the endless struggle to improve the life we live together, like it or not.

It is sad and discouraging to add that Sonia could have done much for a church that today desperately needs reform and new directions. Sonia's excommunication was seen as her badge of honor among the Mormon intelligentsia. Her influence is missed in the battles now being waged to forge a more humane Mormonism, actively focusing its tremendous energies and organizational skills on the real problems of the world, less concerned with accumulating additional wealth, power, prestige, and converts; a more egalitarian Mormonism, valuing women as much as men, acknowledging their adulthood, their right to autonomy and to proportional representation in the halls of power; a more open and honest Mormonism, unafraid to finally unlock and examine all aspects of its controversial origins and development as it charts its future; a more tolerant Mormonism, less prone to stifle dissent and punish dissenters, more willing to listen and learn, to acknowledge and correct past mistakes; a Mormonism which functions less as a multinational corporation and more as a vital and humanitarian world faith.

Instead, her exclusionary brand of feminism alienates her Mormon supporters and those who need her support, and confirms Mormon leaders in their reactionary behavior, justifying to them in retrospect their unfortunate treatment of a woman who dared to speak her mind.

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#### MARY

Can even morning dew wet the dust  
Of Palestine? Cracked callous rimmed each  
heel

As she returned to cook the morning meal  
And clouds were golden grapes bunched just  
Above. Before her sight was full to trust  
His presence in the doorway to be real,  
The air between them swelled, and she  
could feel  
It split like bread baking through its crust.

Behind her eyes a flute intoned the choir,  
The sheep and shepherds clustered on the  
plains,  
The star along whose rays voiced fire  
Sang to a central blaze, and, by her heart,  
A field of lilies whose light perfumed her  
veins  
And did not dim beneath the "Touch me  
not."

—KATHRYN R ASHWORTH