

Pillars of My Faith

A CHRISTIAN BY YEARNING

By Levi S. Peterson

I BELONG TO A LARGE AND AFFECTIONATE FAMILY. Through phone calls, letters, and reunions I keep in touch with brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, and innumerable cousins, most of whom are faithful Latter-day Saints. I converse amicably with my relatives on many subjects. However, when I take up the topic of religion, they often become wary and reserved. They know I am a doubter, and they wish to avoid an unseemly confrontation.

I acknowledge that it is my own provocative and ribald behavior that places a barrier between me and my relatives. That fact does not diminish my regret, for I love them very much. On occasion I suffer from the perception that I am dangerous to them. I am like Rappaccini's daughter in Hawthorne's famous story. The unearthly flowers which the scientist Rappaccini had created imbued his daughter with a lethal emanation. She could not associate with ordinary mortals because her very breath would kill them. As I say, I find in Hawthorne's story an apt figure for my relationship with those faithful Mormons who hold me in greatest affection. At times I feel my mere presence is a poison.

Four or five years ago my sister Mary surprised me by confiding to me a spiritual manifestation she had experienced in the Mesa temple. I see Mary only once or twice a year on my visits to Arizona. She always greets me with a warm embrace and chats affably about our mutual concerns. Yet I believe she feels vulnerable and cautiously avoids challenges to her faith. With many apologies she returned unread a book of my short stories which I had mailed her as a gift. I therefore recognized an extraordinary courage and generosity when she shared with me her remarkable experience with deity. I think she risked my rebuttal and scorn, which I am happy to say I neither felt nor expressed, because she hoped to help me. I think she hoped the unusual manifestation given her would help turn me toward a more complete obedience to the commandments.

When I was a child I both believed and doubted. When my brothers told me God's eyes could pierce concrete or could penetrate the dark recesses of a root cellar where I had taken refuge to pursue unhallowed impulses, I doubted that they could. On the other hand I often found myself directing silent sentences toward God, as if I truly believed that he had hid himself within the sound of my imagined voice. Now that I am an adult, I no longer hold conversations with God. I am too much a doubter, having no gift for intuiting spirit beyond the world of matter. Yet I am still a Christian and a Latter-day Saint. To many, my Christian aspirations will seem paltry. I have no thoughts about exaltation in the celestial kingdom, no ambitions to be a king, priest, and ruler over worlds without end. Instead I concentrate upon that most incredible miracle, the resurrection of the dead. I will thank my Lord with an utter fervor if he will again give form and fire to my cold ashes.

I became a confirmed doubter within a few days after my arrival in the French mission in November 1954. Late one afternoon my senior companion and I arrived in La Chaux de Fonds, a small watch-making city in the Jura Mountains of Switzerland. Without pause we deposited our trunks in our new quarters and conscientiously went out tracting. For a couple of hours we knocked on doors without gaining entrance. In that brief period I reassessed the nature of my mission. Its novelty and achievement had already faded and its tedium and frustration loomed. Clearly the vast majority of people in the world were apathetic toward the Latter-day Saint message. I was therefore doubly grateful when at last a man invited us in. Although his bristling grey hair and round wire-rimmed spectacles gave him a stern, ascetic appearance, he seated us with polite dignity and asked his wife to serve us mint tea and cookies. He informed us that he favored the Jehovah's Witnesses but would value any new light we might throw upon the Bible. He listened attentively and scrutinized each biblical passage to which we referred. He agreed that we could return on another day and again on another. At the end of our third meeting he politely said he had heard enough. He could not find sufficient evidence for the Joseph Smith story in his Bible to justify further lessons.

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This turn of events, minor though it was, precipitated a spiritual crisis for me. According to the faith in which I had been raised, this man stood condemned. He could make no excuse on Judgment Day. He could not claim that the missionaries had failed to reach him and that the glad tidings had never been preached to him. He had examined the truth closely yet had denied it. This was a crisis, I say, because I simply could not believe that a man of such evident kindness and sincerity could stand in any manner condemned before God. And by extension, I had suddenly lost my ability to believe that all the other good and sincere people in the world would stand condemned for failing to accept the particular interpretation of the gospel which the Mormon missionaries carried. It no longer seemed imperative to me that everyone in the world become a Latter-day Saint. And with the fall of this premise, a long line of other premises tumbled like dominoes in my mind.

I do not need to say that my mission proved a difficult experience. At one moment, after I had been made a senior companion and transferred to Charleroi, Belgium, I made arrangements to abandon my mission and only at the last moment decided to carry on, principally because I couldn't think of a single person who would welcome me home. I knocked on thousands of doors and delivered the missionary lessons hundreds of times in a strictly matter-of-fact, expository vein. I refused to bear a testimony, and I lived with a constant dread that someone might ask me point-blank whether I believed what I preached. Luckily no one ever did. I baptized three persons and was the initial contact for a family who later proved, as most converts in those days did not, permanent, sustaining members of their branch. In addition, I regularly saved a third to a half of my monthly stipend and gave it to the poor I met while tracting, and I used my beloved Louis Segond translation of the Bible to comfort and encourage the downhearted I met in any context, regardless of their attitude toward the Latter-day Saint message. A Mormon missionary could be, I learned, a kind of roving free-lance minister of the universal gospel. It now seems, thirty-one years following my return, that my mission was a rare and invaluable experience and that I am fortunate to have been persuaded to carry it to an honorable end.

Today I am a more or less active Mormon. I attend sacrament meeting regularly, I am a home teacher, I am a half-time instructor of my ward high priests' group. I am uninterested in what I will call secondary theological questions such as the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, the prophetic character of Joseph Smith, and the doctrine of the three degrees of glory. I do not quarrel with those doctrines. If my fellow Mormons consider them important, I too will stand by them, and I will certainly not fail to give them an orthodox cast when I lead discussions in my high priests' group. But in my private ruminations I dwell instead upon the more primary matters of the fatherhood of God, the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and the immortality of the human soul.

Predictably, I sense that my worship differs from that of many with whom I share a pew in sacrament meeting. This difference arises, I think, from a difference in the focus of our fundamental human anxiety. Christians have traditionally been anxious chiefly over the salvation of their soul. I speak here of salvation in the broad Christian usage signifying the entrance of the soul after death into the bliss of God's eternal presence. The late medieval English play *Everyman* expresses this traditional anxiety in a forthright manner. At the beginning of this simple allegory, God commands Death to summon Everyman before him for judgment. When Death informs Everyman that he must descend into the grave, this representative of universal humanity frantically begs time to arrange his affairs. Death allows him only to canvass his acquaintances to determine who will accompany him into the grave. Everyman is greatly disillusioned to discover that, despite their earlier promises, his hearty comrades Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods refuse to go with him. Even his old allies Strength, Discretion, Beauty, and Five Wits ultimately fail to accompany him. Only Good Deeds, much attenuated by Everyman's long neglect, is willing to go with him to judgment. As the play ends and Everyman and Good Deeds, newly fortified by Knowledge and Confession, descend into the grave, Everyman prays: "Into thy hands, Lord, my soul I commend. Receive it, Lord, that it be not lost. As thou me boughtest, so me defend. And save me from the fiend's boast, That I may appear with that blessed host, That shall be saved at the day of doom."

Although Latter-day Saints assert that their theology has abolished the doctrine of hell, they actually fear eternal punishment in much the same manner as other Christians. The outer darkness to which Mormons relegate those who deny the Holy Ghost is in its own way as frightening as the fiery hell in which their Puritan ancestors believed. Of course, Mormons commonly reassure one another that most sinners will be assigned to the lesser kingdoms of glory, the telestial and terrestrial kingdoms. These kingdoms are not thought of as places of active torment; their inhabitants will suffer chiefly because they will recognize the infinite opportunities of the celestial kingdom which they have failed to inherit. The blessed inhabitants of the celestial kingdom will enjoy the presence of God and will become the creators of worlds and the parents of spiritual children. As benign as this teaching seems, the prospect of failing to achieve the celestial kingdom fills many Latter-day Saints with dread. Even faithful, meticulous Mormons frequently express anxiety that they will not prove worthy of that blissful condition. In effect they suffer a traditional Christian anxiety over damnation.

If I differ from the typical Latter-day Saint, it is because my anxiety is focused not upon whether my immortal soul may suffer damnation but upon whether I have an immortal soul. I find my kind of anxiety well expressed in *The Seventh Seal*, a movie by the contemporary Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. I have viewed this movie numerous times during the past thirty years. Like *Everyman*, this movie is an allegory. It is about

a medieval knight who encounters Death while returning from a crusade. Whimsically Death agrees to a game of chess, to be played intermittently as the knight and his companions ride cross-country toward the knight's castle. As long as the knight can forestall the checkmating of his king, Death will allow him to live. Everywhere are grisly reminders of Death's dominion, for the plague is sweeping the land. An entire village has been decimated; an unburied corpse rots by the roadside; a villainous priest dies in agony before the horrified eyes of the knight and his retinue. Furthermore, the knight is a doubter consumed by the question of whether God exists and, contingently, whether the human soul will persist beyond the grave. At one point he asks a young witch who is being burned at the stake whether she has truly had commerce with Satan, since the existence of Satan would imply the existence of God. Her ambiguous reply gives him no satisfaction, and her cruel demise only exacerbates his anxiety. His question remains unanswered. As the movie closes, Death claims the knight and his companions, leading them in a *danse macabre* across a distant skyline.

Like the knight of *The Seventh Seal* I fear that the human soul evaporates with death. I live in anxiety of annihilation, and this anxiety conditions the nature of my worship. I will not argue that my kind of worship is better than, or even equal to, the worship of conventional Mormons. I will argue, however, that it merits consideration. It seems to me that I respond to Christian meanings which many others ignore. As paradoxical as it may seem, there are religious advantages to doubt.

One advantage of doubt is the perspective it offers upon the rite of the Lord's Last Supper, to which Mormons give the distinguishing title of the *sacrament*. The prayers of the sacrament enjoin participants to remember the mutilated body and spilled blood of the crucified Lord and to obey his commandments in order to have his spirit to be with them. The Latter-day Saints observe a reverent silence during the sacrament, making it a period of meditation and recollectedness. Although I can't know with certainty what my fellow worshipers meditate upon, I believe that most of them contemplate their successes and failures in living a Christian life. They do this because the Church has chosen to emphasize the sacrament as a renewal of one's vows to live righteously. The Latter-day Saints are, as my priesthood lesson manual informs me, a covenant-making people who perpetually refresh their commitment to obey God's commandments by partaking of the sacrament. I trust that for most Mormons the renewal of this commitment is a propitious and rejuvenating experience. Undoubtedly they yield themselves to God's designs and rejoice in the sheltering sweep of his providence. Perhaps they contemplate the agonies of the Lord on the cross and experience gratitude for the redemptive sacrifice which effaces the desperate consequences of their sins and opens before them the stairway to glory.

Often as I partake of the sacrament I vicariously borrow a like response from my fellow worshipers. As the deacons distribute the bread and water, I think about my baptism long ago in an icy creek and about the obligation of obedience that even at the age of eight I understood myself to be under.

Moreover, I imagine myself to be contrite over my infractions of the commandments and resolute about mastering my imperfections. Finally, however, I return to my private reality. This is not my own true response to the rite of the Lord's Last Supper.

For about ten years following my mission, on those infrequent occasions when I attended church, I partook of the sacrament from motives that seemed strictly social. I partook of it in order not to disturb the meditations of my neighbors by rousing their curiosity as to my reasons for not partaking of it. When our daughter turned three, my wife and I agreed that she should be raised a Mormon and we began to attend meetings with greater regularity. It did not take me long to recognize that I responded to the sacrament with an apprehensive grief. Often I had to halt my singing during the sacrament hymn and clench my teeth in order not to weep. In time a curious symbolism grew on me. During each service the sacrament table and its plates of bread and trays of water sat before the congregation covered by a white satin cloth. Irresistibly I identified the sacrament table with my father's coffin. When my father died when I was nine, a local craftsman constructed a coffin and Relief Society sisters covered it with white satin. During the funeral, the coffin sat immediately in front of the congregation.

Unquestionably the sacrament had become a tragic ceremony for me. Its tragic meanings, of course, ranged far beyond the connection I made between my father's coffin and the particular setting of the sacrament table in my ward. Its tragic meanings derived from nothing less than the premise that God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, suffered and died. Even the faithful are sobered by the contemplation that Christ endured an agony so vast that it could redeem the sins of an entire world and that he lapsed, if only momentarily, into the cold immobility of death. But, of course, the faithful are sheltered from utter grief by their belief in the resurrection. The Lord's Last Supper has always been taken as a symbol of hope. According to the account of its first occurrence, Jesus broke bread and poured wine for his apostles and expressly urged them to remember him. He had given them a tangible sign of his transcendent reality. It would remind them in the dark times of his absence that he had risen and would return. But for me, doubting alike Jesus's immortality and my own, the sacrament seemed an adumbration of despair, a weekly reminder that bright landscapes and beloved personalities from my past were irretrievably lost.

Time has elapsed and I have become even more consistent in attending meetings and performing my minor ecclesiastical duties. My response to the sacrament has evolved or at least has enlarged and become more complex. Often when I partake of the bread and water my mood is such that I ignore the numbing possibility that human destiny is eternal death. Instead I contemplate the egregious, absurd, astonishing, miraculous proposition that on a certain resplendent morning the graves of all history will open and the incarcerated dead, one and all, will emerge into a new and everlasting life. In such a mood I allow my imagination to construct a Christian future. I pay no heed to the conjecture of my associates regarding the

furnishings of the resurrected world. I reject out of hand an earth transfigured by glory like a sea of glass. Furthermore, I pay no heed to the belief of many that because of my perversity I will be denied the presence of God and my loved ones. If I have surrendered to a miracle, I insist that it be an entire miracle. On the morning of the resurrection I will greet my wife, my daughter, my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and a host of other dear relatives and friends, as I knew them in the finest moments of their mortality, clothed as I once knew them, speaking as I once heard them. Around them I will see the friendly surface of the earth as I once knew it, broad and fair with plains and mountains, forests and rivers, farms, villages, and cities. And soon I will see the architect of this miracle threading his way among the crowds of the resurrected, speaking kindly, giving reassurances, recognizing all as if indeed he has had with each a long and perfect familiarity. His countenance will be radiant with grace.

I am a Christian by yearning. Opposed to my doubt and perversity is a longing that the gospel be true. Christians are made, said the apostle Paul, of faith, hope, and charity. Though I have little charity and less faith, perhaps I have hope in some abundance. Often when I recognize how intensely I yearn for eternal life, I find myself elevated and encouraged. I find that my yearning has transformed itself into hope and I find myself responding to the sacrament as a ceremony of hope. On many Sundays while I participate in this solemn ritual, I ponder the possibility that Christ will one day resurrect me, and I am filled with gratitude that such a thing might come to pass.

When I attended a family reunion in Arizona a little more than a year ago, I found my brother Arley absent. His sons reported him to be very frail and ailing. When the reunion was over, I drove to Mesa and on an early evening dropped in on Arley. He made his way from the supper table to an easy chair with trembling legs, and he sat with his shoulders so slumped and his head so drooped that I wondered whether his chin would touch his knees. I asked him questions about our father and about our father's first wife, Arley's mother, and about the penurious homestead they had struggled to develop. Narrating anecdotes from the family's past, Arley seemed invigorated and greatly pleased. I too was greatly pleased. We each discerned in the other a vital trace of our father. For a couple of hours there in Arley's Mesa home we evoked our father's pulsing, blooming presence.

At leave taking I gripped Arley's hand and hugged his frail shoulders. It was an extraordinary goodbye. I feared, with good reason as it turned out, that he would die before I saw him again. A sense of the sacred accompanied me as I left his house and walked toward the home of my sister Mary, where I would spend the night. My way led past the Mesa temple. It was dark and the temple was illuminated. I remembered that the temple is a holy place, and I remembered that I had just come from a holy place, a living room made sacred by the fervent goodbye of two brothers. I spoke of this to Mary when I arrived at her

house. Mary had been at the reunion and had returned early to Mesa largely for my convenience. I stood with her at her kitchen sink while she tidied up a few dishes. I said a person could find the sacred in places other than a temple. I said holiness is as wild and free as the air. It circulates everywhere. I have felt it often in the presence of the newborn and the dead. I have felt it in a sunrise or along a mountain stream. In a soft voice Mary agreed. She said she too had met the sacred in unexpected places. Then we fell silent, each cherishing the proximity of the other.

People who have known each other for a lifetime can abruptly resume a topic of conversation after years of leaving it dormant. At her kitchen sink I renewed the discussion Mary had opened when she shared with me her sacred experience in the temple. My literal words concealed a larger meaning. Mary had loved me enough to share a sacred experience in hopes it would give me faith. I loved her enough now to share a sacred experience so that she would at least know that I am not irreligious. I think that was all I meant to say, and perhaps it was enough for the moment. Months or perhaps years from now I will renew my dialogue with Mary, and I will tell her how I feel about the resurrection when I partake of the sacrament. I do not know how I will persuade her not to worry over my poor prospects on Judgment Day. But perhaps she will be comforted to know that even a doubter can hope.

If Christ has indeed purchased eternal life for humanity, I for one will awaken to the reality of his gift with an immeasurable gratitude. In the meantime I will make it the center of my Christian worship to anticipate that gratitude when I partake of the sacrament. I do not belittle the communion of my fellow Mormons. It is not an unworthy way of celebrating the Lord's Last Supper to measure one's successes and failures in keeping the commandments and to renew one's covenants to live righteously. Yet in a sense it seems a pity to take one's immortality for granted, to expect it and count on it. It seems a pity to be so sheltered from the terror of death that one's gratitude for the resurrection is merely dutiful and perfunctory. Perhaps truly there are religious advantages to doubt. Perhaps only a doubter can appreciate the miracle of life without end.