

Pillars of My Faith

BEARING THE WEIGHT

By Kathleen Flake

I WAS NEVER PARTICULARLY AWARE OF HOW MANY PILLARS there were in Washington until being asked to give this speech. The anxiety at having to define my faith was such that it was infinitely easier to analyze pillars. So, as I drove past battery after battery of pillars, passing the Capitol, the National Archives, the National Gallery, even the new high-rise condominium on Pennsylvania Avenue, and especially the various memorials—I would ask why was that put there and what is it about me and my continuing commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ that serves this function.

I noticed that pillars serve a variety of purposes. Some, like those at the Jefferson Memorial, clearly support the weight of the entire structure. Others, like those of the Lincoln Memorial, support only the outer rim or porch. The last use worth mentioning is the pillar's decorative function. In both old and new buildings, pillars would be placed under small ledges or beside doors, not for purposes of bearing weight, but to add grace and line and, of course, prestige.

I began to realize my problem was not so much in identifying The Pillar of My Faith but distinguishing among the various props integrated into my personal house of faith—which were merely decorative, which were supporting porches or ledges; and which were bearing the weight of the entire structure?

From the beginning, the decorative pillars seemed the easiest to recognize. Foremost among them is, I think, my facility in the Mormon culture. I know how to dress like a Mormon. I know how to talk like a Mormon. I know what is a polite question, and I know the helpful responses to the impolite ones. I know the organizational structure of our community and the amount of respect appropriate to give to each layer. Though I have never admitted it, and most would never guess, I like being an insider in this community. I enjoy understanding the nuances of our relationships to each other. Sometimes I imagine it must be like living in a small town that knows no geographical

boundaries. The mayor is my cousin, and I went to school with the sheriff. I know how to avoid indigestion at the local restaurant and can pick the best conversations in front of the dry goods store. I have learned how to avoid the bullies and other doctrinal eccentrics. I know the stories in the town's cemetery, feeling the connectedness of past and present. I know about lost pages of manuscript, oxen who have been healed, potatoes baked for late-coming handcart companies, even wine from Dixie and massacres in meadows.

All of this is a pillar of sorts. It has the look of a pillar. It adds line and image to who I am. It gives me an identity, even credibility, regardless of any interior resources. To the uninitiated, five generations of Mormon progenitors and forty years of experience in the culture, including a two-year mission and BYU education, can even seem to be the cause rather than the effect of my Mormonism. In my experience, however, these cultural experiences and social graces cannot serve the function, though they may ape the form, of a pillar. None of these things are of real help to me when I have to decide the hard questions, such as, whether to support the Equal Rights Amendment or how to support the bishop who doesn't want me to support it. And, when a desirable man offers me his bed, it's not memories of the wonderful conversations in front of the dry goods store that informs my decision. These decorative pillars seem to crumble very easily under stress.

I HAVE a harder time admitting to the second type of pillar, namely, that which supports only a porch without bearing much of the building's weight. Going to what has always seemed the core of the most consistently positive experience for me, I have to admit that my understanding of our theology is merely an appendage to my house and confess that my love of the scriptures and love for the life of the spirit is not what keeps me going back again and again to the Church. Indeed, this secondary pillar includes many exciting experiences, even miracles. If I were to describe them here, you would, no doubt, recognize them from your own experience. Healings and mendings both great and small. Fires of testimony heard and given.

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Revelations of hearts and minds, as well as information. Tongues to speak the ineffable. Even wisdom and understanding. These gifts have spared me much confusion and given me moments of great joy. Yet, however much I love these things, I must confess that their usefulness is limited in the face of demands for sacrifice, obedience, virtue, and consecration. They are supportive. They give me signals of what's important. They even announce a doorway or two. But, I know they do not in themselves sustain me; they do not bear the load of the weight of this building that is my spiritual life.

Indeed, these experiences and my knowledge of what we commonly phrase as "the Church's truthfulness" has in the past seemed to be the very weight bearing down upon, rather than the pillar shoring up, my faith. I have only once said I didn't know whether the Church was true. I was eight or nine years old and each member of my Tucson Ward primary class was to participate in the monthly testimony meeting. Never wanting to do what was expected of me, I stood up and said, "I don't know whether the Church is true or not but hope that someday I will." I remember it so well, not because there were any repercussions, but because I knew I had lied. I did know "it was true" and I searched in vain to remember how or when it first came to me. As the years went on I gave up on trying to find out why. I simply tried to change my mind. It never worked. Finally, twenty years later, having failed to change my mind, I just changed my life.

I left for what turned out to be a surprisingly long time. In those years while I lived the life of a Gentile with as much zeal as I had the life of a Mormon, I never talked myself out of my testimony. I never rationalized my lifestyle as acceptable to God's intentions for me, or a superior choice to that of an active Mormon. I was happier and that was what mattered to me. I was tired of being right. I was ready to try being happy. While in Kobe, Japan, on a mission I would hear the local bishop frequently bear his testimony that in the Church was the way to happiness in this life, not just the life to come. I envied him. The truthfulness of the gospel did not work that way in my life. Instead, it inspired a sadness so profound that it could only be overcome by religious zealotry. Later, as the debate over the ERA led to an airing of our community's, if not our doctrine's, understanding of women, their spiritual nature and potential, their relative value in the Kingdom, and their relationship to God, I found words for some of my old sadness in the fact of the Church's truthfulness. Increasingly, that fact became less of a motivation to act, less of a reason to stay. So, I left. The fact went with me, but I left.

It was in process of consciously deciding to leave that I learned that these pillars of testimony of the institution and dramatic spiritual experience were merely supporting porches in this house of mine. Or, more simply stated, my knowing that the "Church was true" was simply information—a hollow fact—when it came time for me to decide the important stuff. The important stuff, the crisis for me, came and still lies in the ontological questions related to my relationship to God and the opportunity to realize my spiritual potential through the

Church.

IN 1979, I was a second-year law student clerking in San Francisco. The issues raised in the previous five years of acrimonious debate in Utah were not new to me. My first conscious consideration of such questions was at fourteen. I had abstractly wondered what God did with a female Moses. What did he do with women who had the spiritual attributes and potential of a prophet? What happens to the parable of the talents or the doctrines associated with the resurrection when applied to the present and future spiritual state of these women? Or, were there by definition never any women who had these attributes of faith and testimony? I immediately dropped the question, never asking it aloud. I was too intent upon denying the central fact of my life—that I was a woman and no amount of internalizing the male values of the Church would change my ecclesiastical destiny as dictated by my biology. Two years in the mission field finally forced this truth upon me, and I returned to Utah in 1973 intellectually confused about what I was supposed to be. Emotionally, however, I had a level of clarity that escaped me intellectually. For example, when a friend asked me if I had heard of this new magazine called "Ms" and described it to me, I said without hesitation, "I can't afford to feel those feelings." I was shamed by this manifest fear of an idea. In the six years that followed, I did feel "those feelings" and explored in depth the ideas raised by the feminist renaissance of the seventies. That exploration inevitably led to significant involvement in the donnybrook of the Utah State IWY meeting and the National Meeting in Houston. Numbled by the experience and fully terrorized by the raw power of the Church in political matters, I, like so many of my sisters, hit the deck. For me that meant withdrawing from both feminism and Mormonism. I just faded away into law school and benign inactivity in the Church.

But one decision leads to another, as we all know, and in the summer of 1979 I was facing a decision that would take me beyond inactivity and constitute a deliberate act in violation of Church law. I was having a terrible time making this decision but had promised to have it made by the time I picked Mark up at the airport. I took the round about way, all the while muddling through how I would respond to the demands of our relationship. Driving down the East Bay, I noticed the Oakland Temple on the skyline and instinctively drove up the hills to it. I suppose it was a superstitious hope that proximity to it might provide me with some intelligence or strength I could not muster internally.

Because of my attire and the fact of its being Sunday, the missionaries at the Visitor's Center assumed I was not a member of the Church and I did not correct them. I was searching for something and hoped that the uncomplicated dialogue would help—like the rehearsal of a catechism. Maybe there was something I had missed in my education or had forgotten that they could remind me of and restore my strength and desire. When they asked me if I knew much about the Mormon church, I

answered that I was a law student in Salt Lake City and had had many opportunities to discuss the Church. They asked if I could believe that God spoke through prophets today and started to tell me the story of the Restoration. I admitted that I had heard the missionary lessons several times. They turned then to the Book of Mormon story. Again, not wanting to waste their time or to toy with them, I quickly admitted that I had read it and was very moved by it. By this time, they, too, were wondering why I was there. At each juncture in the conversation, they had offered me the balm they had, and I admitted that I had received it but it was not enough to motivate me to affiliate with the Saints and live the law of the gospel. We all sat there for a moment in silence wondering what my problem was. They thinking, why isn't she baptized? Me thinking, why am I leaving this?

Finally, I started to speak in an effort to reassure them that they had done all they could for me. Not having thought it through myself, I heard the words only as I spoke them. "You know how in your church you value the wholeness of the family and emphasize the necessity of each parent's contribution to the emotional and spiritual development and well being of the child. That without the father the son, in particular, will have difficulty knowing himself and what he can become: his rights and duties, obligations and opportunities. And likewise, that without the mother, the daughter is going to suffer confusion?" I said, "I guess your church frightens me because I feel that, together with all these truths we've talked about, it offers me confusion as a daughter of God. While aggressively asserting spiritual distinctions between the sexes, it offers me no understanding of my rights and duties, my path of spiritual development. Or, worse, it entices me to set aside my womanliness and be, for lack of a better word, a spiritual 'tom boy.' "

I left feeling sadly relieved of a great burden—the burden of trying to fit. I felt as if the Lord had heard my soul's complaint and released me. It was as if I had been born in the midst of a Scout-O-Rama and someone had given me permission not to spend my days building campfires, raising tents, and tying knots. As if someone had said to me: "It's okay if this feels like something you don't want to do. You're not crazy." I even heard a hint of "You're right in thinking that things are a little confusing and it can be stunting to your growth in the camp." This was no epiphany revealing a true path. No justification for thinking the Scout-O-Rama was wrong. I simply felt relieved of what had been for me a life on the Procrustean bed of the Church's single-minded interpretation of the gospel through the male experience and values. I was relieved of the social pressure to sleep in the Great Outdoors, talk about cars, or learn what a nautical mile is. Not that there is anything per se wrong with these things. They just were not going to get me anywhere. I was not a boy scout and, for the first time in my life, I felt that was okay. I had asked and He had given me liberally, upbraiding me not.

However, I also lost all the sure measures provided by the Procrustean bed that had secured my life and informed so many of my choices. And, in the years that followed, I wandered far

afield trying to find alternatives. But, before I get to that, permit me to clarify something. There are two central weaknesses to the analogy of my youth in the Church to having been sequestered in a Scout-O-Rama. First, the analogy can seem to trivialize the work which men are doing in the Church today. That is not my meaning at all and takes the metaphor too literally. I believe that men are accomplishing many great and good things in the Church. Second, the analogy trivializes the spiritual effect of male domination of all aspects of the Church structure. This, too, couldn't be further from the truth of what I feel.

BUT back to the story. I left the temple grounds feeling that progress for me required letting go of the Church for a while. I concluded that if I wanted to comprehend and access my rights and obligations as a daughter, I needed a break from the program designed for the sons. Ironically, I needed to do this because I had so fully learned their ways and adopted their spiritual values. When I had heard the stories of Daniel, the Sons of Mosiah, Peter, and Brigham, I not only loved the stories, I wanted to do what they did: face the lions, speak with the tongue of an angel, redeem myself from denial, and demonstrate unfaltering knees. I wanted to put on the whole armor of God, fight the good fight, run the good race. I studied the scriptures, said my prayers, gave talks in increasingly larger forums, learned and practiced the spiritual gifts—only to find myself all dressed up with no place to go. The Church simply had no public use for those arts in women. All the time I had been listening to the stories, the message had been intended for someone else. And, worst of all, I had come out of the experience thinking that something was wrong with me for wanting these things. I was made to feel that I was unnatural, not fully formed, unclean in the finest of Greek and Hebrew traditions, all because I wanted to do what Daniel, Peter, and Brigham—or even my father and brother—did. Once after a lecture series on women and religion, a man said to me incredulously: "You don't want the priesthood do you?" Although it didn't do justice to my thoughts on the subject, I couldn't resist the simple reply: "Don't you?"

If it were not for a patriarchal blessing, I could simply conclude that my expertise at so many of the priestly arts is a result of my attempts to escape the stigma of being female in this church; the attempt to qualify by effort and talent where I couldn't qualify by birth. But the madness of my situation was that I had received the blessing. Does the pot complain why has Thou made me thus? Yes, though it usually doesn't do any good. But now the Potter had told me I didn't have to sit on the shelf. I felt as if God had released me from the gifts and the conflicts. I felt as if God were giving me permission to not try to fit myself, my hopes and gifts into the program of the Church. In the years that followed, though my love for the Church did not diminish, my need for it did. Though my conviction regarding its unique endowment of the keys to the Kingdom did not abate, my trust in its benevolent use of those keys

in my behalf did. I took more responsibility for the care of my own life.

As I have mentioned, for the next several years I lived the life of a "Gentile" as enthusiastically as I had that of a "Saint." I always expected that I would have to report on my stewardship someday—that God would invite me to be more responsive to the facts of spiritual life. Though I took great care not to volunteer to give that report, I would periodically drop in on a ward meeting. I thought of it as taking my pulse, trying to ascertain if it was time to do something about this unfinished business.

By 1982, I was living in Washington, D.C., and I dropped in on the Chevy Chase Ward to take my pulse and left almost in a coma. I knew a few people there, one of whom was the first counselor in the bishopric who took the occasion to ask if I would teach one of the Gospel Doctrine classes every other week. I was thunderstruck with a mixture of foreboding and chagrin. Chagrin because, notwithstanding my studied expectation that God would call for an accounting, I had never expected this. I was filled with foreboding because I had no confidence that I was ready to act within the structure of the Church. Yet I knew this calling could not be rejected. Not that I didn't try. What ensued was a dialogue as strange as the one in Oakland. I asked:

"Does the bishop know about this?"

"Yes, it was his idea."

"Does the bishop even know who I am?"

"Yes."

"No, what I mean is, does the bishop know how I live my life?"

"Well, it never came up."

I tried to reposition my argument:

"Will I have to change how I live my life?"

"He didn't say you did."

I could feel myself trapped, straining at the net. I thought, surely at some point he will set limits I can't abide that will make him withdraw the offer or justify my rejecting it. But, there it stood. I couldn't give up yet though.

"Do I have to attend any meetings besides Sunday School on the week I teach?"

"No."

"Do I have to be sustained?"

"Yes, but you don't have to be present."

"Do I have to be set apart?"

"Yes, but we can do it privately here."

I felt drawn and just short of being quartered. Because I knew this was the Lord's handiwork and because I could not give up the hope of "someday" fitting in the Church, I had to accept this call.

In the year that followed I continued to resist any other involvement with the institution and to respond as purely as possible to the promptings of the Spirit. What I eventually had to do, of course, was to change my life to conform to the law of the Church. I don't want to cause any confusion about that. I now understand that, paradoxically, this was accomplished

by giving me an opportunity to use my gifts without any demands from the Church's structure. Finally, one day having escaped to the Blue Ridge at a Yoga retreat, I sat meditating upon the conflicts which I tolerated, even fostered, in my life in my attempt to ward off the threat I felt from the institution of the Church. It came to me as surely as any revelation I have ever received that, if I truly wanted to know God the Mother and be called her daughter, I would have to conform myself to the law of the gospel and make peace with her Son's church. I bowed to this necessity and in doing so found the pillar to my faith.

In the few months from the time I submitted to his will and travelled the distance from the bar to the temple without so much as a touch of vertigo, Christ has cared for me with a sweet genius I cannot adequately describe. It was in those days of learning him that I found the thing upon which my life could be ordered in such a way as to bear all the old and some new stresses. It is, I think, this pillar that will remain standing into eternity, years after other parts of my temple have worn away. It is most simply and ambiguously stated as the love of God. I fear this answer will disappoint you. That you would have me say something that sounds less sentimental, more exotic. Or, maybe I'm the one who is embarrassed to be talking this way after all the years of intellectual pyrotechnics. Nevertheless, I must say unequivocally, with John, that God is defined by the love he offers us and that this love is enough, his grace is sufficient. To use the metaphor given to me tonight: Just as surely as pillars surrounding the memorial to Thomas Jefferson securely hold the marble canopy high over his head, creating a secure womb-like world, so also the love of God as manifest in his Son shelters the life that is submitted to him. The strength provided by this peace is sufficient to withstand the cruelest neglect and to bear the weight of the most obnoxious of public judgments.

In truth, many of the pressures remain. Generally speaking, women are not valued in our culture at large except as means to collective ends: as mothers and mates. Today, unlike in my youth, women can pray in sacrament meetings and other welcome changes have been made in the way in which women are treated within the structure. However, our roles are still largely perceived as temporal, and we are subject to ambiguous, if any, spiritual direction. Our exaltation is generally taught as derivative of our husbands. Sisters, I do not stand here revealing parts of my life to you in this way merely to encourage you to "bloom where you are planted" or only to say that God's love will make you able to endure.

I am trying to say something else. The power structure of the Church can be very distracting when one is trying to find her way to God. It is more than easy, it is sometimes thought to be required of us, to believe men stand in a relationship to God that we do not, that they have rights to access the powers of heaven that we do not. I am here to say that this is not my experience. Rather, what men have is expectations of and opportunities for empowerment that we do not have. By virtue of the fact that very little in the way of spiritual achievement is

expected or even desired of us, very little is sought by us. By virtue of the fact that we are circumscribed by the type of church callings available to us and by the ecclesiastical authority granted within those callings, we are seldom forced to go to God and to spiritually stretch to perform our duties. Like ladies of the eighteenth century, we have been educated to perform the arts of and to stay within the drawing rooms of our society. Consequently, our grasp exceeds our reach and for fear of having our hands slapped we are waiting for permission to expand into the world that exists outside.

What I have experienced is that, not only is it permissible, but it is incumbent upon us to do other and more than what we have been doing. If we will refocus our attention so that it lies upon Christ, the righteous desires of our hearts will be granted: we will be endowed to receive the rights of the fathers and mothers and be ordained to administer the same, namely, to be saviors upon Mount Zion, even to see the face of God and live. These rights are to be obtained in his House and fulfilled at his hand through the principles and ordinances of the gospel found in this church.

Sisters, the Lord loves you as well. If you love him and come to him with a desire to receive these endowments of earthly rights to heavenly powers, it is then within his power to bestow them upon you and give you the opportunity—yes, even within the Church—to exercise them. This is his work and glory and it can bring you happiness in this life, not just the one to come. That is why we worship him which is what I have tried to do here. ❧

VEGETABLES FROM MY GARDEN

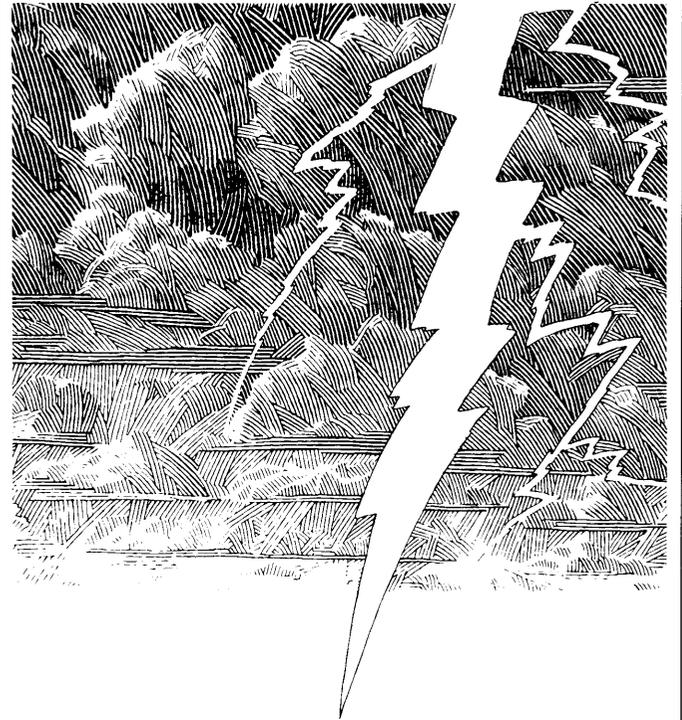
The owner of this land supplies the seed,
The water, and the plot for me to work.
I eat his meat and bread. Within his house
I light his lamp to push away the dark.

I borrow shovel, hoe and rake from him
To cultivate according to his plan.
In truth, how can I call this garden mine
If he gives everything including the sun?

Everything except the will to wake
To turn the furrows silver in the dawn;
The back that holds its bend beyond the row
Is mine; the aching in my arms I own.

And what about the blemished fruit I grow?
The tattered spinach, beetle-crooked beans,
Tomatoes mined by worms. Whose are the flaws?
If not the worm's, then may I claim *them* as mine?

PENNY ALLEN



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