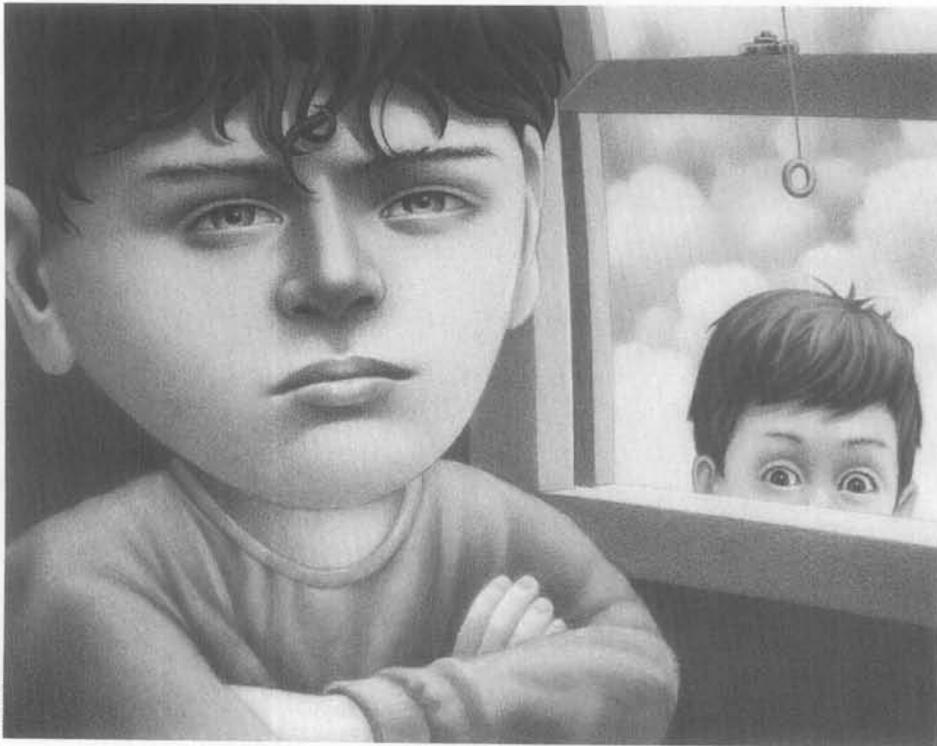

THIS SIDE OF THE TRACTS

Carol Lynn Pearson

“I DON’T WANT TO BE A MORMON ANYMORE!”



How do I keep my children involved long enough to see the good in the Church for themselves? Or at least long enough to make a rational choice?

IT WAS SUNDAY morning and I had just finished getting ready for church. Strains from *My Turn on Earth*, a musical I had written, wafted through the house. “. . . It ends with death, it begins with birth, and it’s my turn, my turn, my turn on earth.” I walked down the hall and opened Aaron’s door to urge him on.

“Aaron? We’ve got fifteen minutes to

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be. . . .” I froze. “Well, what is this?”

John, halfway out the window in torn jeans and an old grey sweatshirt, looked at me sheepishly. Behind him I could see Aaron’s legs on the roof.

“Where are you going?” I demanded.

“Up in the hills.” John’s voice was soft but clear.

“Why?”

“So we won’t have to go to church.” He lifted his other leg through the open window and hunched down to look at me. Aaron’s face moved into the frame and spoke.

“We hate going to church. We’re not going to go anymore. We hate being Mormons.”

“Yeah,” added John. “Church is lame.”

Speechless, I stared for a moment at my two boys framed in the window, the morning

sun on their hair and a sure defiance in their eyes. I was stunned. They had grumbled from time to time about how boring church was and how most of their friends got to go swimming on Sunday. But running away to the hills so they wouldn’t have to go? We always went to church, like we always ate dinner. It was not up for question.

Rage and frustration rocked me as I finally found my voice. “I cannot believe . . . how dare you . . . ?” I sputtered, unable even to complete a sentence. “Get . . . back . . . in . . . this . . . room . . . right . . . now!”

John’s legs made their way back through the window. Then Aaron’s.

“Sit down!”

They sat on the floor and I stood over them, wanting all the height I could get. “So this is it? You’re dropping out of the Church? You’re never going back?”

John shook his head. “Never,” said Aaron.

Had I been watching this scene in someone else’s family, I would have had to stifle a smile. But this was my family, and I found myself seized with terror. “Falling away” is not what I had in mind for my children. Certainly not at this age. John was only twelve and Aaron was eleven. They were too young to fall away.

“Are you going to make us go?” asked John sadly.

I heaved a huge sigh and leaned up against the door. I could make them go. I could threaten them or bribe them or cry in front of them until they felt so guilty that they’d get into their white shirts and dark pants and Sunday shoes and go.

“No,” I said after a long pause. “I’m not going to make you go. But you’re not going up into the hills either. If you don’t want to go to church this morning, you can just sit right where you are while we’re gone. No going outside. No television. We’ll talk about this later.”

“Okay,” they mumbled.

AS the deacons, twelve to fourteen years old, walked up and down the aisles in their white shirts and ties, passing the sacrament, I felt a war within me. John should be with them. John should want to be with them. I could make him be there next week. Should I? The War in Heaven was fought over the right to free agency. I could sort of remember voting for it for me, but I certainly didn’t remember voting for it for my children. They got it anyway, though, and they were exercising it. A joke title someone had thought up for a book was “Free Agency and How to Enforce It.” I liked that.

The Rice boy held the silver sacrament

tray in front of me, and I took the small piece of bread. He would never sneak out the window and run up in the hills to avoid having to go to church. Every Sunday the Rice family filled the front row, and I would watch them and other stalwart, happy, two-parent, seemingly-perfect families in the ward and envy them. With two parents united it's almost possible to block all the doors and the windows so that no child sneaks onto a deviant path. *Almost.*

Early on, we were the perfect Mormon family, too, holding family home evening and singing "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam" and "We Thank Thee, Oh, God, For a Prophet," and paying our tithing before any other financial obligation, and teaching the children that coffee and tea and alcohol would never be found in our cupboards, and going to the temple regularly, and fulfilling all the assignments given us by the bishop.

But then the children's father climbed out the window, and that changed everything. Even after the divorce, the window stayed open and looked inviting and winds blew in and things that had been fastened down suddenly were up in the air. The children knew that their father drank wine with his dinner sometimes and that he didn't go to church anymore or believe everything the Church taught. They were just digesting the information that this man they adored was a homosexual, someone on the Church's list of most

serious sinners. There was a *lot* blowing around that used to be fastened down, and I was left alone to grab and hold and nail down or throw away. I knew intuitively that it was not just a bright summer day that was tempting the boys to skip church. It was a crumbling of the family identity. Their father wasn't a Mormon anymore. Why should they be?

I wasn't listening to the sacrament meeting talk by the visiting high councilman, a tribute to the pioneers in commemoration of Pioneer Day. I was writing my own talk. What was I going to say to the boys when I got home? I couldn't speak with unwavering confidence like some Mormon parents could. What my boys didn't know—what most people didn't know—was that I had eyed the window and thought about climbing out myself.

Sister Keddington arose and smiled and lifted her baton for the beginning of "Come, Come, Ye Saints." Before we had finished the first verse, I felt tears on my cheeks and wondered if the bishop or Sister Keddington or the high councilman would notice. If they did, they wouldn't think too much about it. A divorced woman has the right to cry, is expected to cry. They would never guess the tears came from a different well.

"Gird up your loins; fresh courage take. Our God will never us forsake." Emily noticed that my voice broke and looked over at

me, then took my hand. I had stood beside my mother Emeline as she sang "Come, Come, Ye Saints" with great resolve and gratitude. She had been a missionary for the Church on two separate occasions and had always prayed, as the family knelt together beside our chairs at supper, that her family and their families would heed the counsel of the prophet and give their all to building the kingdom. The last Christmas she was with us before she died of cancer when I was fifteen, she put in our stockings a letter she had written, telling us she was proud of us and urging us to continue in our devotion to the truth, to the family, to the Church. I had memorized most of the letter.

Her mother, Sarah, who had walked across the plains beside a covered wagon when she was eight, had sung that same hymn again and again. I knew that as a girl in Idaho she had sent her Christmas money with that of everyone else in the family to be used in building the Salt Lake Temple. She had wanted new mittens, but had willingly sent the money and mended the holes in the old ones. "Though hard to you this journey may appear, Grace shall be as your day."

And Sarah's mother, Mary, had maybe even been one of the first singers of the hymn. The song had been written by William Clayton in the late 1840s as he lay alone in a leaky tent after receiving word of the death of his infant son back in Nauvoo, Illinois. It was passed from wagon train to wagon train, bringing the pioneers comfort and hope. "Why should we mourn or think our lot is hard? 'Tis not so; all is right." Just a phrase, just a line of the melody could link me instantly with my people, with Sarah and Mary and all those other ancestors who had seen and followed some bright new light: George, who had given up a prestigious position as a lacemaker in Nottingham; Thomas, who had marched in the Mormon Battalion to San Diego, boiling his rawhide shirt to survive; Warren, who had sailed around Cape Horn to San Francisco with Samuel Brannan and then had accepted Brigham Young's call to found a city that became Mesa, Arizona.

All these people, my people, had sung "Come, Come, Ye Saints" and had meant it. "Oh, how we'll make this chorus swell—All is well! All is well!" I heard them singing it along with me now from the back of the chapel. I saw them watching me, their posterity, their hope, their seed for whom they had sacrificed so much. They knew I would continue the family heritage, continue to build the kingdom, to be a good Latter-day Saint, to teach my children the restored gospel, to



"Why should I pay \$9.95 for a temple cross-stitch pattern when I can photocopy it for 25 cents?"

send them out as missionaries. They were happy to see me there, where I belonged.

But where were my boys? I could see Thomas Morris staring at me darkly from under the great eyebrows in the family photo album. "Carol Lynn," he said sternly, "where are your boys?"

Well, they were home sitting on the floor of Aaron's room because they didn't want to be Mormons anymore.

But I was there. I had not climbed out the window. That was something. So many of my good friends had left the Church for one reason or another, the women usually over the same issue that troubled me so deeply: the "woman" question. Oh, how many hours I had spent in tears over that! I loved the Church and that love was braided with pain. Being a woman of feminist consciousness in a thoroughly patriarchal institution brought the most wrenching conflict. Did I want that for my girls, who were sitting here beside me, dutifully holding the hymnal? Did I want my boys to be complicitors in a system that seemed to prize maleness over femaleness? And what of the other issues that waved their hands for my attention? What of the large number of homosexual people and their families who sat in our chapels or used to and were hugely misunderstood? What of the black people who only recently were being invited into full fellowship? What of the egocentric provincialism that drew such a heavy line dividing "them" and "us" and its temptation toward arrogance? What of the exasperating bureaucracy that sometimes seemed insensitive to the needs of the individual? What of all the other issues that swirled around in my head and sometimes made me stand in the foyer greeting the good people of my ward that I loved so much and feeling that my heart would break because maybe, after all, I wasn't really, really one of them? Maybe I should just let John and Aaron climb out the window. Maybe I should go with them and tell Thomas Morris I had found new frontiers.

SACRAMENT meeting dismissed and everyone moved toward the various classes that composed Sunday School. I grabbed my friend Annie in the foyer and whispered, "I have to talk to you. Come out to my car. Now." Annie looked at my intense face and followed me out to the parking lot.

Annie had been my confidant and friend ever since we had been visiting teaching companions together and understood all my questions and struggles about the Church, and even shared some of them.

I was near to tears. I explained my di-

lemma with John and Aaron. Then I asked Annie, who wasn't born into the Church, why she stayed. And why did she want her kids to stay?

Annie looked out the car window at the recognizably Mormon chapel with its plain spires and practical design. We had on other occasions lamented the cookie-cutter architecture that made all Mormon buildings look alike and joked that we ourselves were running from the same cookie cutter.

She shared her conversion story and concluded, "After I got baptized I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Everything was wonderful. Everyone was wonderful. I was with God's best people, industrious, honest, happy. They were . . . different. There was a different spirit there, and I loved it.

"And gradually . . . I saw that it was not perfect, that *they* were not perfect, and the scales fell from my eyes and I saw the warts, and sometimes I have said to myself, 'What am I *doing* here?'"

"And what do you answer?"

"I answer," Annie said thoughtfully, "that I'm here because, warts and all, it's still an excellent system, that the leaders have our happiness as their goal, because you don't find better people, because life on your own can be too scary, and because I know that this is where God wants me to be."

I hit the steering wheel in frustration. "Of course! The pluses far outweigh the minuses! But how do I keep my children involved long enough to see that for themselves? Or at least long enough to make a rational choice? How do I keep them from climbing out the window?"

Annie smiled and put a hand on my arm. "When you find out, Sister Pearson, let me know." The Mormon mode of formal address

had become our standard term of endearment.

"Thanks, Sister Mauss."

I GRABBED the girls when Sunday School was over and hurried through the foyer to the big wooden doors before anybody could ask me where John and Aaron were. But Brother Jones stopped me on the steps.

"We missed your boys today."

I turned and tried for a smile. "Yes. They . . . couldn't make it." I could not lie and say they were sick. But I couldn't tell the truth and say they had fallen away. If I said that, we would be on the agenda of the next bishop's meeting, with all the leaders in the ward charged to assist in the reactivation of the Pearson boys. There would be friendly calls from the youth leaders and "kidnappings" for ice cream. Other boys would be mobilized to tempt the erring ones back. I would be viewed as a failure if I allowed my boys to leave the fold and we'd never hear the end of it. Why couldn't they just leave us alone?

But I knew why. It was more than just statistics, more than just doing their duty. They *cared*. They all cared about my boys. And not just about their eternal souls. They cared about them here and now, and they wanted to help keep their feet on good and growing paths and avoid some of the pitfalls that can be so dangerous. Growing up is tough and the world is a mess. We'd be a lot better off, I had to admit, if every boy had Brother Jones to watch out for him.

And so I wasn't angry as I hurried down the steps before he could ask any more questions. Just embarrassed. And confused. And exhausted.

"Tell them we hope they can make it next



"Are we ready if Jesus comes tonight?"

week," he called after me.

WHEN I opened the door of Aaron's room, the boys were sitting on the floor playing "Monopoly." My talk wasn't quite ready yet, so I didn't give it.

"Brother Jones said to tell you they missed you," was all I said.

Aaron glanced up. "Good. They can miss me again next Sunday."

IF ever I wanted a pure religious experience, which I did that night, I put on the orchestral arrangement of Mormon hymns I'd had for years. One side, having a scratch, reminded me too much of mortality, but the other side was heaven. And I curled up in the reclining chair in my bedroom under the red wool blanket we got in Scotland.

Why was I feeling so frightened? All parents run the risk that their children will leave the family religion. Each of my ancestors who were converts had left a religion, maybe had broken a parent's heart. I believed strongly that one should grow where one was planted. But if the ground was not good for growing, then one had to transplant oneself. Sarah and Warren and Thomas had transplanted themselves and had been happy with the new ground. Lots of people I knew had found a new life on Mormon ground that was unquestionably better than their lives on the old ground. I had been born on this ground. Had it been good for me?

My own history as a Mormon moved before my closed eyes. Memories covered me, warm as the red wool blanket. It had been lovely to grow up knowing I was one of God's chosen people, knowing I was unique and well loved and well taken care of, protected from the world by a living prophet whose guidance was as firm as the mountains around us, knowing that the heavens were again open, that angels had visited the earth just like they had in the Bible, and that God had spoken to Joseph Smith and would speak to me whenever I truly asked, though probably not so dramatically. Even when, years later, I decided God chose various peoples for various things, that no leader on earth was infallible, and that God had spoken to lots of people besides Joseph Smith, it was nice to feel special.

It was nice as a very small girl listening to Aunt Cree tell how she knew the spirit world was as close as walking through the door to the next room and that she knew her own mother was there, strong and happy, because she herself had been allowed a glimpse the last time she went to the temple and it was

wonderful . . .

It was nice at age seven playing Raggedy Andy in the church play and knowing it was important because all of us had talents that were given by God and it was our obligation to develop them and share them . . .

At eight putting on a little white dress and being immersed in a font of water by the strong hands of one who had God's authority to baptize me exactly like John the Baptist had baptized Jesus . . .

At ten giving my first talk in sacrament meeting, telling the story of Grandmother Sarah leaving her dolls in Nottingham, England, to come to America and cross the plains to Utah and how all of us must be prepared to sacrifice for a greater good, and having Bishop Bodily hold out his calloused farmer's hand to me and tell me I was a real fine speaker . . .

At thirteen sitting quietly under the warm hands of Brother Eldredge for my "patriarchal blessing" as his warm voice inspired me to be prayerful and to guard my virtue carefully and to speak words of encouragement to uplift those who are discouraged and to be a ministering angel here upon the earth, and to trust in God even in times when darkness appears and to know that through faith I would see the light and find the encouragement to go on . . .

Knowing at fifteen that my mother was just as real as she had ever been, but now she was in the spirit world and on her way to the celestial kingdom because she had been such a good woman, and I had to do my best to live a good life so someday I would be there, too, because families can be forever . . .

Standing in the Smith fieldhouse at BYU as one of thousands of incoming freshmen to sing "The Spirit of God Like a Fire is Burning" and knowing that in spite of all the challenges of combining intellect and faith, and despite too much attention to hair length and skirt length, I would sit in classes for five years with students and professors who wanted to make the world ready for Christ's return . . .

Arriving as a young woman in Athens with all my luggage stolen, alone and with no friend in the world but a young Greek man who had tried to seduce me for three days on the train, knowing that I could go to the U.S. Air Force base and find the Mormon "branch" there and have instant family, instant friends . . .

Kneeling across the altar from Gerald in the Salt Lake Temple and exchanging vows of love and fidelity for time and all eternity, and then when part of the vow went awry, knowing that much of it remained and that

the strong, strong promises of eternal progression for all of us were still intact . . .

Seeing my children standing with all the other children at the front of the chapel and singing brightly, "I Am a Child of God" . . . collecting their pennies for the sick children in the Primary Medical Center . . . memorizing their parts on the Christmas program and finding bathrobes to be the three wise men . . . dreading the monthly "fast Sunday" when they'd have to skip two meals and give the money to the poor . . . seeing Emily get off the bus from a week at Girl's Camp still shining from standing around the campfire with a hundred girls and leaders, arms around each other, singing "The Lord's Prayer" and then putting crackers in sleeping bags . . . Aaron remembering a challenge in a talk given at church for everyone to live twenty-four hours as if Jesus were right there beside you and suggesting that we try it. . . . How could we not be Mormons? That's who we were, like it or not, and if we didn't like the kind of Mormons we were we needed to become the kind of Mormons we would like. We've gone through such a lot to get here, *such a lot!* The Church had been good for me. Even the conflicts had been good for me, making me think and feel and become stronger and opening up plenty of work that needed to be done.

I DIDN'T really give my talk until the following Saturday, when the children's father came out, and Gerald gave most of it for me. Strange where one's best help comes from sometimes.

"I hear you've been giving Carol Lynn some problems about going to church," he said to the boys after all of us were gathered in the family room.

"We don't want to go anymore," said Aaron, staring up at his father grimly. "It's lame. I don't want to be a Mormon."

"Lots of people don't go to church," added John, "and they're still nice people. I don't want to go. It's boring."

"Boring?" asked Gerald. "That's not a good enough reason."

"And I don't believe half the stuff I hear."

"That's not a good enough reason either."

"Well, you don't go. Why do we have to?"

"I did when I was your age. When you're out and on your own you'll make your own decisions on going to church and thinking whatever you want to about religion. But you need a place to start, and this is a good place for you to be right now. Learn all you can. And the bottom line is that your mother needs you to go. That's what the family does and that's the end of it. Carol Lynn needs

more support right now than she's getting from all of us."

I knew this little speech required some sacrifice from Gerald, and I was grateful. He was torn with his own pain, the terrible pain of being a Mormon at heart and at root, but one that did not fit.

AND so after one week of having fallen away, the boys were reclaimed. They went to church the next Sunday, and the next, and most Sundays after that when they weren't sick.

TODAY three-quarters of my children are active in the Church, and I love them all the same.

John is serving a mission in Argentina. When he left home to go to college at the ultra-liberal California Institute for the Arts, he stopped going to church, as expected he would. A year later he amazed me in a telephone conversation by saying, "Mom, I've decided I want to get back into the Church."

"John! What does this mean?"

"I had to see if I could be John without being a Mormon. And I see that I can do that."

"And what makes you feel you want to be John and be a Mormon?"

"That's who I am. That was my upbringing. I feel more comfortable there. And I feel that the Church is an instrument of great power."

"So this decision feels right in your heart?"

"Yep. I dropped out because it didn't feel right in my head, but I've decided there's something about religion that ought to be a thing of the heart with the head just standing by giving a little advice now and then."

John's letters from the missionfield are warming. He loves the work and tells me the gospel is true and the Church is the closest thing we're ever going to find to Narnia. Still, he is aware of the dangers of a system that has the missionaries screaming "baptize" in the mornings, and has decided, "my goal is to love the people, to get them to feel the Spirit, to raise them to a higher place, and seal them there with baptism."

Emily is experiencing some profound growth and joy in her life, in which the Church is playing a central part. She has been instrumental in the recent conversion of a high school friend. The Church with its splendid support system has been hugely important in helping Emily heal from some emotional distress centering around our unusual family circumstance. And two years in the pits of L.A. has made a move back to

Zion feel very much like a return to the "pure in heart." After first attending her new single's ward, she called me in ecstasy with a report on finding two dozen brand new beautiful friends. But she can laugh at our cultural absurdities and is in no danger, I think, of becoming an empty-headed follower.

Katy at sixteen is perfectly comfortable with being a Mormon and has been known to haul out an inactive friend up the street and get him to church. But she is a thinker and points out to me ongoing inequities, such as at our last ward conference raising our hands to sustain the Young Men's presidencies, but not raising our hands to sustain the Young Women's presidencies.

Aaron at present is not attending church and does not consider himself a Mormon. He tells me he is not comfortable with organized religion and wants to develop an independent spirituality. He has long, blond hair and is a rock guitarist and has his own sound studio and takes good care of his mother and

younger sister. The values he grew up with are be intact, and several people have told me Aaron has said that when he has children they're going to be raised in the Church.

Whatever becomes of any of my four children, I am not going to disown them like Tevye did. I will respect their decisions. But if I could write the scenario for each of them, I would keep them in the Church.

EMILY and John and Aaron and Katy are fifth generation in a remarkable spiritual movement. I want them to continue it, to appreciate the rich, rich heritage they hold, to honor the teachings that point them toward godhood, to remember Sarah and Mary and Emeline and George and Warren and Thomas, to stay with the family, the small family and the larger family, to grow where they were planted.

And if the ground needs attention, to dig in, and if the overgrowth cuts out the sun, to trim it back. And never, never to put pioneering in the past tense. ☞



LOOKING AT HER, I COULD

These frail, sacred, and profane people
shield the piano-chewed soprano;
looking at her, I could
scream, swoon, redefine my entire life
as insipid series, unexplained temptations,
a mishmash mosaic like speed
typing drunk, tired, fingers
locked like frozen twigs.

(looking at my wife again) I think:
I am not Agamemnon,
no need to murder me, dear—
raise an axe, stop the rhythmic pulsing
of my weak-willed half value heart,
a purple bit of flesh
engineered from primitive molecules.

Looking at her, I could
be played all the way through once,
looking at her, I could
reform my commercial acculturation,
smash the thrones of despotism,
read an underground newspaper,
decry the charitable virtues
of my gender, class—
throw my nameplate to the vast populace,
long for the consummation
of voice and action, peace and feeling,
love and instinct.
Looking at her
I could.

—SEAN BRENDAN BROWN