
TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

Jan Shipps

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING



*Nothing can be so heart-rending as shared grief.
Or so heart-warming. I now understand the
concept of participation in rituals by proxy.*

BACK IN THE days when non-Mormons were called Gentiles, the editors of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* invited me to write an essay about what it was like to be a token "Gentile" in the heterogeneous gathering of scholars who engage in research and writing about Mormonism, as well as a frequent participant in discussions and institute programs with LDS students and faculty in Bloomington, Indiana. This invitation challenged me to reflect on what it meant to be located metaphorically in a place where I could stand with one foot in the Mormon community and the other in a com-

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plicated world where I was wife, daughter, mother, grandmother, Methodist, and member of a university faculty holding appointments in religious studies, history, and American studies. By the time I finished the resulting article, I had given a name to my marginal position: I am an "inside-outsider in Zion." By this I meant to indicate both my location and status and, additionally, to signify my understanding and acceptance of the task of continuing enough research in the historical sources and maintaining enough contact with Mormonism as both religion and culture to be able to speak responsibly when asked, as I so often am, about how it is with the Saints.

In the intervening years, some things have changed. Since my mother, father, mother-in-law, and father-in-law are now all dead (making us "the old folks," as my hus-

band, Tony, says), I am no longer called on to fill the daughter role. Also, I am no longer the director of the IUPUI Center for American Studies, so I don't have to deal with administrative tasks. Importantly, I helped to organize and am one of the two leaders—the other is a nuclear physicist—of an extraordinary adult forum at the First United Methodist Church in Bloomington. And the focus of my research shifted as I started to work in earnest on a book about Mormonism since World War II. But some things seem to stay the same. When something of consequence occurs in Mormondom, the telephones at my home and office begin to ring, and I am asked to provide context and commentary from outside the LDS community.

IN the course of conducting research on modern Mormonism and in talking at length with LDS friends about their faith (and mine) and their experience of being Mormon and my experience as Methodist, I have come to know that the temple and its rituals are critical elements in the symbolic construction of otherness that makes it possible for Saints to retain a sense of themselves as peculiar people. Moreover, in the process of learning as much as it is appropriate for me to learn about the temple ordinances and ceremonies, I have amassed a fair amount of information about temple rituals in which one person participates for another; this is to say that I have gained knowledge about proxy baptisms and other ceremonies in which one person stands in for another.

Frankly, although I was able to obtain knowledge in this arena of Mormon studies, with my Protestant background and hard-headed show me the data attitude, I had not gained understanding. I could appreciate the significance of the temple and even comprehend the importance of the endowment and marriage for time and eternity in the lives of Latter-day Saints. But this proxy business was beyond me; I just did not understand it.

THAT is until the first Sunday after my friend Lavina Fielding Anderson was excommunicated from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The 1993 semi-annual general conference of the Church was in session that day. Therefore, it is probable that not many Saints were aware that 3 October 1993 was world-wide communion Sunday, the day on which Christians all over the world—no matter how divided in other ways—all become one, ritually reconstituting the Body of Christ in space and time. Ordinarily this is not one of the more meaningful ceremonies of the

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church to me. But as it is about the only ritual occasion that brings Orthodox Christians, Catholics, and evangelical, conservative, fundamentalist, and liberal Protestants from throughout the world together as the church universal, on that day I generally try not to miss the worship service.

This year, however, I had another reason for being sure to attend. As spelled out in our *Book of Discipline*, the doctrine of the United Methodist Church provides for open communion. The opening words of the liturgy for this part of the worship service say that "Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, earnestly repent their sin and seek to live in peace with one another." Thus everyone is welcome regardless of religious affiliation (or lack of same). Moreover, since our doctrine is silent on the matter of who may be called to assist the ordained minister(s) to serve the ritual bread and wine (read that grape juice), in our congregation members of the laity are regularly asked to help serve the sacramental elements at the Lord's table. It so happened that for the first time ever, I was one of five lay members invited to serve in this capacity on this Sunday.

I was assigned the tasks of assisting with the removal of the linen cloth that covers the sacraments during other parts of the service and then charged with offering the elements to all who came to one portion of the altar to commune with the Lord and one another. I was directed to return to the table when all had been served to help with the ritual recovering of the elements, thus interring the symbols of Christ's body and blood to await their being brought again to the people of God in the next serving of the sacrament.

How simple, how routine, thought I, as those of us who were helping received our instructions. About this I was mistaken, truly mistaken. That this would be neither a simple nor routine worship hour for me was foreshadowed even before the service opened, for at the conclusion of our little instruction session, our senior minister placed his hand on my shoulder and said, "I was so sorry to hear about your friend."

Nothing, I think, is so heart-rending as shared grief. Or so heart-warming. All the previous week I had been trying to stand outside the circle of the accused in order to see the situation, as best I could, from both sides. Only then could I answer the questions of one journalist after another explaining what I regarded as the significance of the

Church's move to discipline six members of its own intellectual community. While I always alluded to the personal tragedy in separate cases, I also asserted that such actions shore up boundaries and clarify what being Mormon means. In a cool interpretive mode, I pointed to the membership hemorrhaging—the metaphor is Wade Clark Roof's—going on in various denominations in the Protestant mainstream (including my own), suggesting that the LDS church might be learning what happens when boundaries become fuzzy and so permeable in both directions that they no longer give members a sense of who they are and what being Christian truly means.

Yet the "fall housecleaning" had been tugging at my heart all week. I don't know Maxine Hanks, Paul Toscano, or Avraham Gileadi, but my friends Lynne and Mike and Lavina had been in my consciousness and in my prayers. Somehow most especially Lavina, for she is a sister whose life has touched mine at many different points since we first met in the mid-1970s. The evidence that my sorrow was reverberating in my own congregation made it doubly hard for me to be sanguine about the fact that on this Sunday, likely for the first time in more than four decades, Lavina would be unable to take the sacrament.

The congregation sang hymns, heard the reading of the scriptures and special choral music, and listened to what I have no doubt was a fine sermon. But I sat there unable to participate. All my attention was concentrated on those words about all who love the

Lord being invited to Christ's table.

Then the prolegomenon was over and the invitation to the Lord's table was extended to the congregation. I moved to the front and even though increasingly exercised, at first I performed my assigned duties without incident. Yet the lump in my throat made intoning the liturgical "This is Christ's body and blood, shed for you and all humanity" more difficult than I expected. Still I managed pretty well until everyone who came had been served. I even held the cup for the minister to partake of the bread and wine.

At that point, the two of us laywomen who were assigned to replace the white linen cover moved to do so, signifying the ritual's conclusion. But as I picked up the cloth, Lavina came so forcefully to my mind that I was unable to stem a torrent of tears. I almost dropped my end of the cloth and as I moved quickly to keep it from touching the floor, I missed a step and almost fell.

There I stood in front of the congregation, as spiritually distraught as I have been in a very long time. But then I remembered: I may be Methodist, but Lavina is Mormon through and through. We may have no conception of rituals "by proxy," but the Saints do. When death—or excommunication, which is a kind of death—makes it impossible for persons to participate in needed ritual acts, the Saints know that a brother or sister in Christ can perform that act for them.

Knowing that, I can now *understand* the concept of participation in rituals by proxy. It comforted me. And I am certain that Lavina was comforted, too. ☞



UNDER THE DOGWOOD TREE

Trees whisper, vines sighing; the winter is dying;
I touch, taste my growing—bloom poppies, blood-petal
stark against skies too blue. Tall grasses sigh, crying
songs that skim rivers past wind-water, hard metal
blue on grey. Vines crawl on purpled hills. Grapes settle,
deep in green, and juice shimmers droplets that fall, red crystal
beacons that burst on my prison-like cold—nettle,
moss above brown—in the soiling I lay deep within.
Tales easy-told have been; harder do the ends begin.

Spring is come; and yet, I lie—here, where I lay before,
set in soil, poppy red. Earth, I am buried in darkling sin,
settling in—a kind of crimson.

—VIRGINIA ELLEN BAKER