

For many Latter-day Saints, dissent is equivalent to apostasy. We have to get over that semantic imprecision. There's a place within Mormonism for the loyal dissenter.

THE ART OF DISSENT AMONG THE MORMONS

By Levi S. Peterson

DISSENT, I ASSUME, DERIVES FROM NONCONFORMITY, nonconformity implying an inability to adhere to established standards and dissent implying an expression of that inability for purposes of protest or defiance. Both of these closely related terms will be important in the following essay though my emphasis will finally be upon dissent, which among the Mormons should be an ameliorative art, not merely a wild and aimless exfoliation of disillusioned members.

For many Latter-day Saints, dissent is equivalent to apostasy. We have to get over that semantic imprecision. Although apostates are dissenters, so are constructive inside critics, who informally constitute Mormonism's loyal opposition.

An unorganized loyal opposition has always existed within the Mormon church. However, the concept of authority as an all-sufficient source of truth is so strong among the Mormons that the contributions of constructive criticism are almost always ignored and often bluntly denied. Although many believe the gospel has been bestowed by heaven in a whole and perfect condition, the evidence of history is that the gospel isn't whole and perfect at any given time. The Church does in fact change for the better, and the dissent of loyal members is a rich source of improvement that ought to be managed with tolerance and finesse rather than rudely suppressed.

Sadly, enormous numbers of believers constantly fall away from Mormonism. As any missionary will testify, the attrition is greatest among the newly converted. However, even those who are thoroughly acculturated to Mormonism fall away in large numbers, presumably after discovering themselves to be out of harmony with some aspect of Mormonism deemed to be essential, and it is especially toward these that I direct my remarks. I am interested in how nonconformists adapt—whether, as they become aware of their nonconformity, they

suffer in timid silence or whether they abandon the religion altogether or whether they define a comfortable new relationship with Mormonism that involves at least a modicum of dissent. Needless to say, it is the latter accommodation that I favor.

THE SILENT, HIDDEN NONCONFORMIST
A nonconformist in mind and spirit but not in action.

FIRST, a word about the silent, hidden nonconformist who is a nonconformist in mind and spirit but not in action. Great numbers of practicing Latter-day Saints secretly condemn themselves for a nonconformity that strikes the objective observer as trivial—a failure to attend Sunday School regularly, an addiction to Sunday sports on TV, a taste for caffeinated soft drinks, and so on.

Once a woman came to my campus office seeking advice about a family history she was writing. In her manuscript she had recounted her grandfather's abuse of one of his plural wives and was now contemplating the probable censure of her mother and other members of her extended family, who prided themselves on the perfection of their ancestor's polygamous marriage. Although I encouraged the woman to stand by what she believed to be historical truth, the more she talked the clearer it became that her conscience sided with the probable censure of her family. In her own judgment, she was flirting with apostasy, and after two or three visits, she thanked me for my time and let me know she had decided to abandon the project.

There are many Mormons who quietly conceal a nonconformity of a more serious nature. Another visitor to my office was a woman who refused to reveal her name or even her city of residence. She was writing a novel about a Mormon wife and mother immersed in a church-oriented life style who happened to have a lesbian sexual preference. Admitting the character was modeled on herself, this woman claimed she had never engaged in lesbian activity, but was unmistakably drawn in her sexual desire to her own gender. She intended to publish under a pseudonym, but feared that the circumstances of

LEVI PETERSON, chairman of the English department at Weber State University, is the author of The Canyons of Grace, The Backslider, Juanita Brooks: Mormon Historian, and Night Soil. This essay was delivered at the Sunstone Theological Symposium in Salt Lake City on 14 August 1993.

the novel would betray her identity. She struck me as grim and desperate, and she never trusted me enough to put the manuscript in my hands. I referred her to a Mormon feminist in whom I knew she could confide. In time she stopped meeting with either this feminist or me, and I can only assume she had made a decision to stop work on the novel.

I certainly do not condemn the hidden nonconformists, whose numbers would astonish the world were they accurately known. The advantage of their chosen path is that they continue in the communion of the Saints, enjoying the comfort and support of a church-oriented life. The disadvantage is, of course, that they suffer a violated integrity. Integrity consists of holding to uncompromised values, and its possession is greatly to be desired. Unluckily, only a few in any population live out their lives without being forced to truckle in some manner to an imposed mode of behavior.

OPEN, KNOWN NONCONFORMIST

Violations of the commandments alienate them from the community of the Church.

I come now to open, known nonconformists, whose violations of the commandments alienate them from the community of the Church. Among such nonconformists must be counted the backslider or jack-Mormon, the Mormon who believes but doesn't practice in all the requisite ways. A close, dear relative of mine is married to a gentile, and most of his friends are gentiles or other backsliders. He smokes, drinks coffee, and goes on occasional drinking binges. He hasn't paid tithing since he was a boy, and he darkens the proverbial door of a church only for funerals. Yet, if someone impugns the Mormon church or its doctrines, he politely and accurately corrects that person. I would not be surprised to find him preaching Mormonism in a bar. A nonconformist but not a dissenter, he has no quarrel with the Mormon church, and it's entirely possible he expects someday to return to the fold.

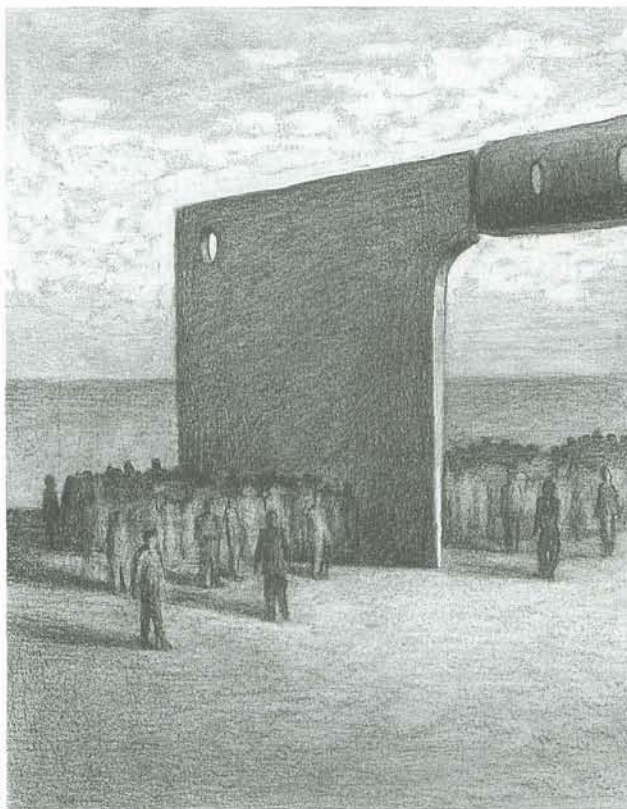
I respect the worship of faithful backsliders, many of whom, like my relative, are profoundly Christian, and I have tried to make a case for the authenticity of their religious experience in my story, "Night Soil." If these members of what may be called a nether church are comfortable in their nonconfor-

mity, I for one favor leaving them in peace. Latter-day Saints who attend meetings and otherwise obey the commandments should offer these backsliding brothers and sisters friendship without plotting ways of rehabilitating them. If they believe, they are as truly Mormon as any practicing Church member.

Obviously, many nonconformists eventually become so totally disengaged from Mormonism that they can no longer be called Mormons of any sort. When I was a boy, there was a wonderfully defiant chiropractor in my home town, who had lost an eye and a hand in a mining accident and who spoke in a deep, gravely voice. He was married to a Mormon who didn't attend church. Rumor had it that he himself had once been baptized. If so, the rite had not had its desired effect. Although his doctoring skills were valued by both the righteous and the unrighteous, he was a rallying point for the town wastrels and ruffians, who sought his company and valued his counsel. He smoked cigars, the fumes of which he accused the town's righteous of enjoying downwind from him. He told unsavory stories and made pious neighbors the butt of his jokes, breaking into hoarse guffaws when he had finished. Of a devout school teacher who continued to father child after child, he was said to have declared: "For Chrissake, the next kid that school teacher has goes for tithing." This man contributed enormously to the honesty of religion in our town by pointing out the foibles of the righteous. Any community of Mormons could profit from the presence of such a satirist.

Many disengaged Mormons simply disappear from the Mormon scene. They move away from Mormon population

centers, or, if they remain in Mormon country, they associate exclusively with non-Mormon friends and organizations. While I was a graduate student at the University of Utah, I became close friends with a young woman on her way out of Mormonism. She derived from a Mormon pioneer family in southern Utah and had been married in a temple. The immediate source of her disillusionment with Mormonism was the behavior of a high ranking authority of the Church from whom she and her husband rented a basement apartment. She observed this man in such an unethical conduct of business that his ecclesiastical office was discredited in her eyes and so, too, was the entire religion with which he was associated. In



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time, she divorced her Mormon husband, married a non-Mormon, and moved east, where she has raised her children in a secular environment.

It's worth noting that disillusioned idealism is at the root of a great deal of nonconformity among the Mormons. The Latter-day Saints prime themselves for disillusionment by attributing perfection to their own way of life and by allowing testimony to displace rather than complement reason in their search for truth. Moreover, the young are isolated from adverse ideas and forbidden practices rather than exposed to them from a forbearing perspective. Admittedly, many of the faithful pass a lifetime without being disabused of their facile optimism. Many others, however, come up against a bruising reality—they lose a loved one prematurely or they discover the scientific basis of the theory of evolution or they stumble upon the changes made in early editions of the Book of Mormon or they grasp how completely a male-dominated church has suppressed the initiative of women—and then it is anybody's guess as to whether they will stay with or depart from Mormonism.

One of my earliest English instructors at BYU eventually abandoned Mormonism because of intellectual disillusionment. While I was his student, he welcomed me in his office, and his independence of mind influenced my own budding nonconformity. Before I left for my mission in 1954, he had begun to attend the meetings of the Swearing Elders, and by the time I returned in 1957, he had left BYU and the Church. At a party some twenty years later, he told me the story of his disillusionment. As doctrine after doctrine failed to meet the test of scientific reason, his anger accumulated, and at last he wrote a letter requesting that his name be removed from the rolls of the Church. As he described an attempt by his brother-in-law, an apostle, to dissuade him from leaving the Church, his eyes flashed and he struck his palm and cried, "By God, I'll not abide a trammelled mind!" In contrast to his brother-in-law, his aged father accepted his decision calmly and without reproof. Yet as this truculent mentor of mine alluded to his father, his composure broke and his eyes filled with tears, confirming what everyone knows, that if you've been raised a Mormon, disengagement isn't easy.

There's no use fretting over the departure from the ranks of Mormonism of people like the two I've just described. You have to let them go with your blessing, and by all means do your best to stay in touch. The lapsed Mormons about whom I worry are those who seem never to find another emotional home, and when strangers show up in my office saying they've read some of my essays and they just want to have a talk, I know I'm in the presence of hearts in turmoil, and I hope I'll say something that will help them stay with the religion of their childhood.

I am somewhat taken aback by my own impulse to salvage nonconforming Mormons. I have little interest in proselytizing gentiles who are happy with their view of the world, whatever that view might be, and I have to say in all candor that my gentile friends are as dutiful, affectionate, and spiritually sound as my Mormon friends. But as for helping disillusioned

Mormons—that's another matter. My interest in helping them stay in the fold has something to do with the intensity of my own sense of belonging. For all my compulsive backsliding, I remain profoundly and ineradicably a Mormon. One evening as I turned north at the corner of Hotel Utah in Salt Lake City, I saw late sunlight on Moroni and the spires of the temple, and the strongest surge of belonging swept through me. I said to myself, This is my place and these are my people, now and for as long as I live.

I recall an attempt to salvage a nonconformist of a sort I have so far not mentioned, a Mormon fundamentalist. On a visit to my hometown I ran into a friend from school days who, on strength of having seen my name in the program of the latest Sunstone symposium, invited me to visit an acquaintance with him. The shelves of his acquaintance's office were lined with fundamentalist books, and after brief formalities, this man began to preach fundamentalism to me. He decried the Church's abandonment of the practice of plural marriage and of the ceremony of the second temple blessing and said the keys of authority within the Mormon church were lost, to be restored in the near future by one mighty and strong. This man was erudite, eloquent, and charismatic to a degree I have never encountered in any other person. I could easily understand how my friend from school days had fallen into an orbit about his magnetic personality.

The next evening, when these two called at my mother's house to further our discussion, I said that, though I was honored they would confide in me, the mere fact that I had appeared in the program of the Sunstone symposium did not mean that I was hospitable to their particular breed of dissent. I said I was a liberal Mormon and therefore on the opposite pole of disagreement with the official Church. I said I particularly did not favor nonconformity that would abolish the presently constituted government of the Church because I believe that a large, thriving church unified under the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve serves the interests of Mormonism far better than a host of small, warring churches.

I told them that I had made inquiries and found their promulgation of fundamentalism was a matter of common knowledge in town, and it would therefore be only a matter of time before one or both would be called before a Church court. The charismatic acquaintance asked whether I intended to inform against them. I said certainly not. I said my concern was chiefly for my friend from school days, who I judged would never be happy leading the clandestine, exiled life of a practicing fundamentalist. Turning to him, I asked whether he was prepared to accept the loss of fellowship with family and friends. He was visibly shaken by my candid question, as I hoped he would be. The next day I returned to Utah, and I can only assume that more lasting influences than my brief exposition were at work upon these two, for today, some eight years later, they continue in the communion of their respective wards.

I come now to the question of what nonconformists might do to honor their own integrity yet maintain their allegiance to Mormonism. I would like to suggest a deliberate, conscious

procedure, an amplification, if you please, of the art of dissent among the Mormons, for there is a way to vary from the norm with some degree of comfort.

TWO COMMUNITIES

Nonconformists need both an official church community and another smaller and less formal community of friends.

NONCONFORMING Mormons need two communities, the one provided by the official Church and another, much smaller and less formal, provided by friends and fellow nonconformists. I will discuss how nonconformists might comport themselves within these two communities in light of the differing opportunities and standards they offer.

Presumably most nonconformists begin as more or less accepted members of a functioning ward organized by the official Church. If at all possible, they should maintain that status, though, as I have indicated above, many a true Mormon does not attend church. The delicate question arises just how far they may go in expressing their nonconformity in the presence of the more obedient members of their ward. Accepting the fact that a certain degree of conformity is mandatory, they must judge the tolerance point of their particular ward and not exceed it. But the average ward will tolerate far more nonconformity than is generally recognized, and the confirmed nonconformist is well advised to experiment with the limits. A good deal of the success of nonconformity within a ward depends upon the good humored, affectionate spirit with which it is practiced.

If I may, I will cite the church-attending members of my own ward, whom I conceive to be average active Mormons—committed to the standards of the Church, a little doubtful of their own salvation, eager to convert the nonmember and reactivate the backslider, and very concerned with the sick and unfortunate within the boundaries of the ward. I feel an immense love for these people and admire and respect their valiant struggle with life's vicissitudes. They always greet me warmly, and they accept me as a home teacher and as an instructor in the high priests group on one Sunday each month. As I have

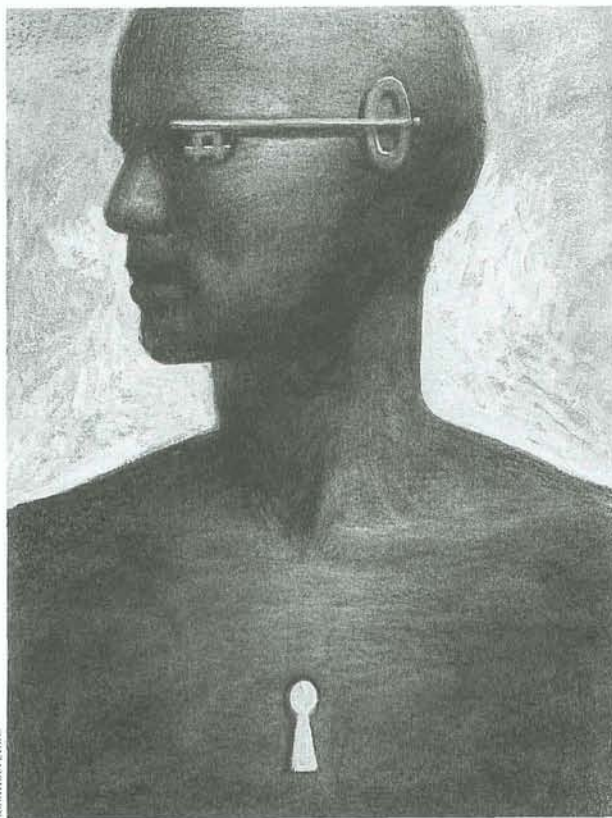
said elsewhere, I worship vicariously through their prayers, hymns, and ceremonies. Yet many of them, if not all, know I am a backslider. They know I drink coffee, don't pay tithing, mow my lawn on the Sabbath, write salacious books, and sleep in church without apology.

Declining church calls politely yet firmly is one kind of nonconformity that I believe church attenders could practice much more widely than they presently do. Some years ago I was summoned to meet with the bishopric of my ward. The bishop turned the proceedings over to his first counselor, who informed me that they believed themselves admonished of the Lord to call me to be Sunday School president. I thanked them

kindly for the call and said I was highly honored but felt obliged to decline because I was so involved in helping take care of my aged mother-in-law. As far as I could tell, their friendly attitude toward me was not altered by this refusal.

It is of course necessary to think of a morally acceptable excuse when turning down a call. I remember many years ago that the president of my elder's quorum asked for volunteers to go to a local hospital to administer to the sick. Elder after elder said he would be out of town that afternoon or had to visit an aged aunt or was committed to sing in another ward's sacrament meeting. When it came my turn, I said simply that I didn't want to go. The president, a somewhat older man with unruly Scottish hair, stared at me in disbelief. "Not wanting to go isn't a good reason!" he exclaimed and gave me a thorough scolding. I learned a lesson from the incident, and ever since I have always provided the mandatory moral excuse.

Another matter has to do with the unconventional views on doctrine which teachers and class members might express during lessons. Because I accept the duty of not antagonizing the members of the high priests group whom I instruct on one Sunday each month, I am often led to support and affirm doctrines for which I personally have little taste. Furthermore, my primary objective as a teacher is simply to overcome the stultifying boredom inherent in a lesson manual wrung dry of any novelty or conflict by the vigilant hands of correlation. However, I am happy to exercise a liberalizing influence if I can. Whatever attempt I make to exercise such an influence comes entirely through questions,



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never through assertions, and I'm often surprised at just how liberal the high priests group of my ward proves to be in answering leading questions on certain points of doctrine.

During the month just past, I led a discussion on the necessity of teaching our children and grandchildren to marry in the temple, a topic I approached with a sense of deficiency since my own daughter had just married outside the temple less than a month earlier. As is my custom, I first paid my respects to the official doctrine on this matter by summarizing it and reading several supporting passages of scripture. With that duty done, I went on to some of the interesting implications of the doctrine.

I said that so far as I knew, most other Christians believe in the asexuality of the immortal soul. Is it true, I asked, that Mormons believe that immortal spouses will engage in sexual intercourse? All agreed on the procreation of spirit children by celestial couples. Whether that would involve sexual union as known on earth was debated inconclusively. I asked whether it is just to require marriage for the highest exaltation. Someone said that the unmarried righteous could at least inherit the Celestial Kingdom. Another pointed out that an unmarried woman might be given a husband during the Millennium. No one seemed to think an unmarried man deserved such consideration. What about the fact that, until recently, when a couple married in the temple divorced civilly, the man can marry again in the temple whereas his divorce wife can't? Several agreed that this was wrong. One man defended the practice, saying it was the nature of polygamy to allow this. A younger man said it was still wrong, and he cited an injustice of just this sort done to a close female relative of his.

The members of the class often thank me for making them think. It is a sorry fact that the official Church has become so fearful of controversy that simple, elemental thinking has all but disappeared from its classes and pulpits. It can be argued that all that is required to liberalize the Mormons is to help them think. As a spiritual act, thinking is far more important than believing, and ultimately those who think about the problems and perplexities of their religion will gravitate to a liberal position.

I turn now to the second community to which the nonconforming Mormon might belong, the much smaller and less formal community provided by friends and fellow nonconformists. In its simplest, least visible form, such a community is created through ordinary social relationships of a self-selected sort. Like-minded persons seek each other out and become social familiars. Trusting in one another's discretion, they can criticize the Church and make jokes about doctrines and practices with which they disagree, thereby feeling less isolated and less compromised in their integrity.

I'm aware of many such small social circles. I'm thinking, for example, of a group of about a dozen women in Salt Lake. Some of these women are married, and others are divorced. Some attend church, and others don't. They go out to lunch with one another and meet regularly to discuss books they have read. Disillusioned with the status of women in the Church, they are brash and ribald and especially prone to

ridicule the affectations of male authority. It is possible some of them will drift out of Mormonism. For the moment, their small, self-created society helps keep them in.

Other nonconformists choose to ally themselves with a visible community of dissent, thereby running a much greater risk of conflict with the official Church. The visible community of dissent expresses itself through newsletters, magazines, journals, books, publishing firms, scholarly societies, action committees, lecture series, and symposiums. Many individuals stand behind these manifestations: lecturers, authors, publishers, editors, officers, board members, and professors, to say nothing of the courageous persons who subscribe to the publications and attend the lectures and symposiums. Many of these individuals are militantly hostile to the official Church. Fundamentalists and anti-Mormons must be classed among this sort. However, many other members of the community of visible dissent are not hostile to the official Church. Far from being its enemies, they conceive of themselves as a loyal opposition, providing an inside, corrective criticism without which an organization becomes spiritually inert.

THE MORMON LIBERAL

Liberalism suggests an attitude of promoting change within the Church—change of a progressive sort, change in the direction of the civilized values evolving in the world at large.

THIS kind of friendly dissenter is the Mormon liberal, whose name I use without apology. The very opprobrium attached to the word *liberal* in the minds of religious and political conservatives makes it attractive to me. I prefer it to frequently used synonyms like *intellectual* and *Liahona* because it especially suggests an attitude of promoting change within the Church—change of a progressive sort, change in the direction of the civilized values evolving in the world at large. Conservative Mormons, like other conservative Christians, evade the unsettling task of keeping up with civilizing change by dismissing the civilization around them as secular and fraught with human error. In doing this, they fail to distinguish the good from the bad and in effect cement themselves into uncivilized attitudes and practices from their own cultural past.

As everyone knows, there are many visible centers of liberal Mormonism. *Dialogue*, *SUNSTONE*, *Mormon Women's Forum*, and *Exponent II* are flourishing liberal periodicals. Signature Books has become a large and significant publisher of liberal Mormon books. The Sunstone Foundation fields a large annual symposium in Salt Lake City and several lesser symposiums in other urban centers, where Mormon values, doctrines, and rituals are given a reflective consideration. The Mormon History Association, counting many hundreds of members, stands for an objective study of the Mormon past. The Association for Mormon Letters fosters a rational study of the artistic and intellectual values of Mormon literature.

The net effect of these centers of liberal Mormonism is the creation of an informal, widely available forum where both the pro and the con of any Mormon issue are given equal time.

Among the many sins laid at the door of liberal Mormons by conservative members of the Church, none is greater than their tolerance for both sides of an issue. Admittedly, a large liberal gathering like the annual Sunstone symposium in Salt Lake City seems a veritable Babel of discordant ideas. Fundamentalist publishing firms will be found to have set up book displays. Avowed anti-Mormons circulate freely, and there are presentations by ministers of other faiths and by scholars from the RLDS church. However, for all the colorful diversity to be found at a Sunstone symposium, the prevailing spirit has always been orthodox, faith promoting, and committed to Mormonism. Liberal Mormons listen to diverse opinions not because they fail to revere truth, but because they believe truth is most readily arrived at by an informed, rather than a censored, mind.

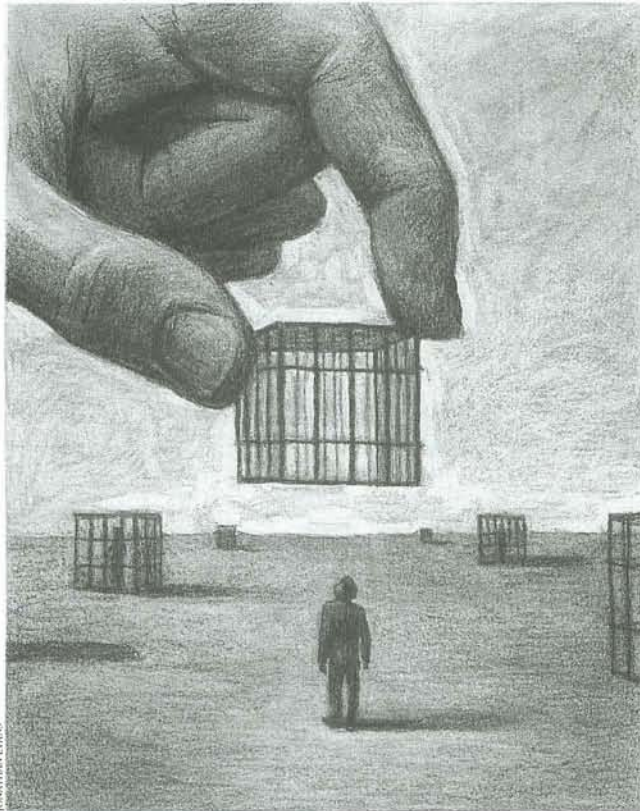
I most recently experienced the loyal Mormon spirit of a Sunstone symposium at Washington, D.C., during March of 1993. A couple from the D.C. area met my wife and me at the airport just as a crippling blizzard struck the eastern third of the nation. With great pride, our friends showed us the Washington temple, beautifully illuminated in the snowy night, and they talked with easy familiarity of innumerable activities in their ward. Obviously, they were fervent, faithful Mormons. The next day we made our way along deserted, snow-swept streets to the campus of the American University, where the symposium went forward with a larger attendance than had been expected. There was a pleasing balance between liberal and conservative presentations, for these fortunate escapees from Wasatch Front culture believed sincerely that the liberal view can be reconciled with the view of the Church at large, as indeed it ought to be.

At lunch I listened to a discussion between two bishops of inner-city wards composed chiefly of racial minorities. These bishops spoke of ministering to the spiritual needs of Latter-day Saints who were third- and fourth-generation welfare recipients with neither prospects nor plans for changing their cultural status. I was moved by the immense empathy of these two men—and of their wives, too, who joined fully in the discussion—for the economically disadvantaged and racially diverse Saints whom they served.

By evening the blizzard had intensified, and many in attendance learned by radio and TV that the expressways and airports by which they planned to return home were closed. Yet as we assembled in a plenary session and fervently sang “The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning,” our collective anxiety lifted. And when in closing we sang “God Be with You till We Meet Again,” it was as if indeed God’s peace had descended on us, and we went away into the storm strengthened in our commitment to Mormonism.

As I prepare to read this essay at yet another Sunstone symposium, I am aware that the official Church has turned against its liberal membership with an extraordinary zeal. The causes against which the membership are specially warned in a recent speech by a member of the Quorum of the Twelve are feminism, the dignity of homosexuality, and the open forum of dissent. The weapons deployed by a bellicose church are simple but effective. General authorities need only denounce a certain doctrine or movement to immunize a large majority of members, who accept the judgment of their leaders as definitive. As for would-be dissenters, sometimes a simple inquiry from a stake president suffices to ensure silence. Sometimes it takes the rescinding of a temple recommend to remind a devout liberal of the limits of expression. For cases of extreme intractability, the Church maintains the ultimate moral expedient of excommunication. Another potent weapon is dismissal from their jobs of employees of the Church who express liberal ideas. At BYU, where the expectations of academic freedom as practiced elsewhere had fostered a certain liberality of speech, a rewritten code now allows instructors to be dismissed solely for statements deemed disloyal to the Church.

In a season of heightened anxiety, when the general authorities, who in a legal sense own the corporate Church, seem bent upon a full deployment of their weapons, what advice might I offer to my dissenting brothers and sisters who love Mormonism and are intensely loyal to it and whose chief sin is that they have urged civilizing change at a faster pace than the authorities will allow? In the present climate of active repression of liberal voices, what amplification do I make on the art of dissent among the Mormons?



JONATHAN EVANS

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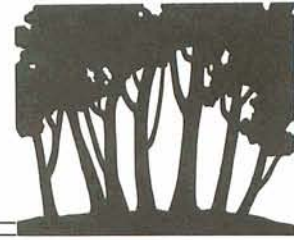
By all means, liberal Mormons should maintain their connection with a home ward if at all possible. They should strengthen themselves by singing the old familiar hymns and engaging in the comforting rituals. They should influence the others in their ward with liberal ideas, if only in oblique and subtle ways. And if this engenders a certain deviousness, arising from keeping one's involvement in liberal things hidden from one's brothers and sisters in a ward, so be it. There are worse things than a little hypocrisy. No one is without it, however perfect he or she may pretend to be.

To those whose livelihood depends upon the Church I would say most emphatically: Never lose your job for a liberal cause. The contribution of any single person to vocal dissent is limited in importance. You are making a contribution simply by making sure that a payroll position is held down by a person of liberal sentiments. So consider withdrawing from the ranks of open dissent if it seems your job is in jeopardy. If you teach at BYU and your dean rumbles about the dangers of attending the Sunstone symposium, don't attend. Catch up on what happened there while socializing with your liberal friends who are employed in more benign climates. Count on living to fight another day. It's much better to be a living dog than a dead lion. There'll be other times and occasions for spreading liberal ideas. That's very, very important to remember. *The battle for the liberalization of Mormonism is perpetual. It'll not be over soon. You need to hunker down for the long haul.*

Finally, if your particular identity and indignation demand a course of action that seems fated to lead to excommunication, well, God bless you and give you courage. Even here, I have some advice, which is that excommunication is no reason for withdrawing from Mormonism.

I fancy that if I were excommunicated by a Church court on a weekday, I'd be back sleeping in sacrament meeting on the following Sunday. Presumably I'd be relieved of my duties as home teacher and occasional instructor of the high priests group. Presumably I'd not be called on to pray or preach. But those are petty losses. I'd continue to partake of the sacrament unless I were expressly forbidden to do so. In that case, I'd attend meetings from time to time in a ward where I wasn't known and would partake of the sacrament there. Certainly I'd join lustily in singing hymns, and I'd attend church socials and chat as always with my friends after meeting. And of course, out on the battlefield of liberal Mormonism, I'd go on doing whatever it was that had got me excommunicated in the first place.

Though as a corporation the Church may be owned by its legally constituted officers, as a moral community Mormonism is beyond ownership. You and I belong if we choose to belong. I for one do choose to belong. I'll not let another human being, however highly placed, drive me from Mormonism. I'll not let an archaic doctrine or practice drive me out. I choose to stay where my heart is and to vent my disapproval of uncivilized beliefs and practices through a quiet but unrelenting resistance. There's a place within Mormonism for the loyal dissenter, and I for one intend to occupy it. ☞



WHY NOTHING BEAUTIFUL KNOWS EXACTLY WHY

When we plead guilt we do so
assuming our lives or feelings
will be spared—God will nod—
secret hearts revealed for all
the verisimilitude of sinners:
the choppers fall,
flames whistle,
bolts snap forward.

Truth defined by the faithless
makes you foolish.
From cities people rout dominant
religions, wagon loads of legal
error burns: people sing
ancient songs of ancient judges—

“It is better that ten guilty persons should escape
than that one innocent should suffer.”

Duty fastens you to scaffolds—
eyes white through black holes—
underfoot trembling wood,
Duty
severs the tongues of rope-seized necks.
Would you not malign duty for dignity?
Still you stand, seized and throttled.

I go on teaching
slums, college collages of limbs and 20/20 illusions,
the money-making schemes of outside worlds.
This mush, this tasteless gruel of business,
eats its maker. The great God maker we try to reduce
to Boolean algebra, wine
and polite hors d'oeuvre conversation.

This reality to the faithless:
War, Politics, Art—unfelt symbols,
semiotic hazards graded and passed:
Love, the breakdown of devoted statistics.
Children, weak and grinning spawn.
Nations, dreams of sovereignty shattered.

—SEAN BRENDAN BROWN