

*A Mormon man's strivings to be faithful to his
testimony of the restored gospel in the face of in his
homosexual identity.*

“MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?”

MEDITATIONS OF A GAY MORMON ON THE 22ND PSALM

By Oliver Alden

*I was cast upon thee from the womb:
thou art my God from my mother's belly.*
—PSALM 22:10

I GREW UP BELIEVING FIRMLY IN GOD AND SEEKING, as best I could, to do what I had been taught was right and moral. From the time I was small, I was what most people thought of as a “good” boy, though naturally not a perfect one. I could count easily on one hand the number of lies I told while growing up. I never stole. I never cheated. I never tried drugs. I never smoked. I worked hard in school. I got good grades. I was well-liked and openly admired by teachers, by friends, and by their parents. I graduated from my high school with an unusually large portion of the honors and awards it offered and, I realize upon reflection, an unusually small portion of the animus that peers so often direct at the kind of students who receive them. I remember few who did not like me and none who did not think well of my character and integrity.

At seventeen, at college, I went through my rebellious period. This turned out to be quite mild, consisting—in its entirety—of getting drunk several times (alcohol was not considered immoral in the faith in which I had been raised). At an institution whose student body was then characterized by fairly widespread drug use and even more widespread sexual license, my actions were thought far from the stuff of spectacular wickedness. I remained honest, decent, and chaste. I was one of very few who still attended church regularly. Not saintly,

OLIVER ALDEN is a pseudonym. The name is that of the central character in George Santayana's novel The Last Puritan.

perhaps, but still good by the standards with which I had been raised, and certainly by those that constituted the norm around me.

My rebellious period also turned out to be quite brief. Several months into term, I learned of the restored gospel, developed through prayer a firm conviction of its truthfulness, and joined the Church in the teeth of vehement opposition from my family and to the nearly universal horror of my friends. These I ignored. What could they possibly say that would override a revelation from God?

I took to the gospel wholeheartedly. Since my baptism, I have sought to serve God to the best of my abilities and to remain close to the Spirit. I have never turned down a calling (although my home teaching record is dismal). I served an honorable if unspectacular mission. I jettisoned my first love as a career in favor of one that would better allow me to provide for the family I was taught should one day form the focus of my life. Before embarking on my career, I went to the temple to pray for inspiration as to where to pursue it. I even chose names for the children I expected to have.

I teach Sunday School now and try, at least, to seek the promptings of the Spirit in the lessons I prepare. I have been told that people sometimes feel the Spirit when I teach or when I bear my testimony. I treasure the card I received from one student, thanking me, in her words, for internalizing the teachings of the Savior and for helping the students to internalize these as well. I have devoted great energy and resources to getting the temple work performed for my ancestors. I spend a week of my vacation time each year in archives in Europe, tracing my forebears back beyond where the micro-

filmed records begin. Performing the temple work for them has been a source of tremendous joy and satisfaction to me. I strive to keep the law of chastity, and have, to this day, never had sex with anyone, man or woman.

I love the temple. I have nourished few ambitions in the Church, though I once flattered myself that my testimony and facility with foreign languages would stand me in good stead as a mission president some day, and I looked forward with hope to the time when I would have the chance to serve as one. A Sister I admire greatly once told me (to my genuine surprise) that I, more than anyone she knew in our ward save one, seemed to have built my life around the Church.

The only thing that clouds the picture, of course, is that I am gay.

*But I am a worm, and no man;
a reproach of men, and despised of the people.*
—PSALM 22:6

I T took me three decades to bring myself to the point where I could admit that I am gay, even though the inclinations—both emotional and, as I matured, sexual—go back as far as I can recollect, to age six maybe, or eight. Even then, I recall sensing that something was terribly wrong, and I realized, with waxing horror at each stage of my growth, that my responses differed profoundly from what I was told they should be. The centerfolds my compatriots smuggled with them on junior high Boy Scout campouts (our troop's sponsor, an American Legion post, was untroubled by such things) merely repelled me. Even in high school, female anatomy never held for me any of the fascination that grew to be so all-consuming in the lives and conversations of my friends.

I could never understand why it did not. On dates, I had to force myself to do the little that could, in view of my moral stance, be expected of me.

Even more difficult was realizing what it was that I felt instead; realizing that I was becoming something my society and my religion proclaimed to be wrong; realizing that my deepest emotions and inclinations were "defective"; realizing that I was turning into the sort of monster that I had been taught should horrify even me. As a young man, it is hard to comprehend these things and even harder to come to terms with them, with no guidance, with no answers, with no role models except laughingstocks, with no one who understands.

The mockery and derision cause great pain to those who grow up gay. Still, people give vent to their scorn, even in the Church. In recent years, I have sat in priesthood meeting and heard gays—and by extension myself—described as an "abomination in the sight of the Lord" (by a class member, not by the instructor) and have sat in stake conference and heard

gays described as "vile" and "disgusting" (by the stranger next to me who volunteered that he hadn't darkened the Church's door in thirty years, not by the apostle conducting the meeting). Of course, neither man guessed that he spoke of me. Nor did my former boss, who, unsuspecting, made it clear that he did not want a gay man working for him and would go to great lengths to ensure that this did not occur. For better or worse, I am one of the very great number of gays who do not fit society's stereotypes. I have stood, bemused, as people who assumed me to be straight explained to me, with great earnestness, how "you can always tell who they are."

Until I stopped trying to pass as straight, I succeeded. After all, most people see me as masculine and moderately athletic. I attend hockey games and heavy metal rock concerts, dislike Broadway show tunes, and can't cook to save my life. People long thought it acceptable to say demeaning things about gays in front of me. But I did change departments to get away from that boss, suffering a loss of seniority in the process. I now earn a fifth less than I would if I were straight. Fortunately, since I picked my career to enable me to support a family that I am now evidently not going to have anyway, I didn't really need the money.

Not surprisingly, I have given a lot of thought to the possible causes of my homosexuality. I do not claim to understand them. After all, the experts themselves remain unable to agree. One national figure I consulted pointed me to studies suggesting that homosexual orientation could result from the type of hormonal injections my mother had been given to avoid miscarriage; had I been born a decade earlier, it could have been thalidomide instead, and I might have no arms. A second expert thought this

explanation completely wrong. Recent studies emanating from respected institutions (and widely reported in the media) suggest that there may even be a strong genetic component to homosexuality, if genes are not actually the sole determinant.

One thing I do know is that, at least in the overwhelming majority of cases I have encountered, homosexuality is not elected. Perhaps the most vicious lie current is that people choose to be gay. Why would any sane person ever do so, in the face of extremely fierce, and often deeply internalized, societal disapproval? In the teeth of the scorn and derision known to result? At the risk—if you are Mormon—of expulsion from your community in this life and condemnation to a lesser place in the next? Availability of choice—except perhaps in the case of someone who is genuinely bisexual—rings untrue in the realm of human sexual orientation, as one readily sees from the somewhat perplexed look returned by a straight person who is asked when exactly it was that he or she chose to be straight. Certainly, being gay was not something I could

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*Why art thou so far from helping me,
and from the words of my roaring?
O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not;
and in the night season, and am not silent.*

—PSALM 22:1–2

I NEVER doubted God's ability to perform miracles, and the very manner of my conversion reaffirmed to me their reality and their availability in individual human lives. It is not surprising, then, that I had faith that God could perform a miracle here, too—a faith that was strengthened when I received my patriarchal blessing and heard, to my intense relief, its promise that I would marry and have children. I need not worry, I thought. The lepers in the New Testament were cured. God will cure this problem, too. Certainly, it was a righteous request. In fact, I wondered many times—and even asked priesthood leaders—why they couldn't just give me a blessing and make everything all right. After all, I certainly felt that I had experienced many other miracles.

My faith gave me strength enough to go for long periods believing that I really was (or at least soon would be) straight, and I identified myself as such to myself and others. True, every year and a half or so, something (usually something I could not restrain with mere effort or discipline, like a dream) would remind me of where my mind went if I did not keep it under absolute control. At such times, my faith that God would cure me would often waver. Once, when wondering why God had let me suffer this for so long, I received a peaceful spiritual assurance that I had voluntarily agreed in the pre-existence to take this on. I was not told why. Nonetheless, with great relief (and even greater hubris), I not only took this revelation to mean that I would be cured, but assumed that I could then go on to serve as an exemplar of how this was done, living proof of the rewards of faith. There would have been purpose to the suffering, I thought; it would benefit others as well. So I held on, and strove mightily to obey every commandment and to do all that was expected of me, to clutch the iron rod so tightly that even priesthood leaders suggested I was too hard on myself, and prayed fervently many times each day. And waited. For fourteen years.

*Be not far from me; for trouble is near;
for there is none to help.*

—PSALM 22:11

I HAVE always been the sort who believes in wrestling any problem to the ground, so I actually did a lot more than just wait for those fourteen years. God, they say, helps those who help themselves. So I spent years consulting half a dozen different counselors and psychologists, and one nationally known researcher on psychosexual development, paying out many thousands of dollars in the process. Nothing happened. (Actually, that is not true. A lot happened. The better psycholo-

gists worked wonders on virtually everything that troubled me except the homosexuality.) I also read anything suggested as helpful on the subject of homosexuality. Nothing offered me any real insights into anything but possible etiologies. Nothing provided a method for overcoming homosexuality itself.

One exception was a sort of guidebook written by a born-again Christian who said he had become straight. This book disappointed me particularly, as its thesis seemed to be that men became homosexual out of a failure to bond with their more truly masculine compatriots, and out of a resultant sense of exclusion from the true male fold. By developing such bonds—and emotionally close but non-sexual relationships—with the truly masculine, homosexuality could be overcome. I had two problems with this thesis. The first was that, at least by the time I finished my education, I had deeply bonded, and developed very fulfilling emotional, non-sexual relationships with quite a number of men, including some who must have been among the most stereotypical representatives of this masculine fold. Many of my closest friends at school were what everyone—unjustly, I think, in view of my friends' innate intelligence and capacities—called "jocks." Four of us (the other three were football players; I was rowing crew) hung out together, partied together, went out drinking together (three beers and a ginger ale each round; they knew my standards), and helped each other out on our homework. Frankly, had there been such a thing as a truly masculine fold, I had kind of thought I was in it. Curiously, I seem also to remember many men who were manifestly not in it, but who were nonetheless straight. Worse still, the book never explained how you became straight once you had so bonded. It just happened, apparently. But it hadn't happened to me. It reminded me of a cartoon I once saw showing two scientists in front of a blackboard on which one had scrawled a long and complex series of mathematical formulae and obscure symbols, evidently delineating the steps of some complicated scientific process. Smack in the middle, however, was a step which read "then a miracle occurs." It seemed we were back to miracles.

Throughout this period, I also sought the help and advice of nearly all the men who served as my bishops. To their credit and to that of the Church, none ever reacted with unkindness or prejudice (the fact that I hadn't actually done anything may have played a part here), and each responded with care and concern and with his most sincere attempt to help. Unfortunately, the help was almost universally limited to offering comfort and encouragement and then referring me to more psychologists. True, one bishop did propose castration as an option, but I was not sure that he meant it entirely seriously, and I was sure (I knew him) that he was young, frightened, desperate to be able to offer any sort of solution, and generally in over his head on this one. Besides, his other idea—to bury myself in my career in the hopes of successfully suppressing all sexual impulses—was one I more or less adopted for the next decade. The result, naturally, is that I did not end up being straight, but did end up being fairly prosperous. This is not what I had in mind, of course, but it beats being gay and poor.

I also stumbled, at the end of the fourteen years, onto an in-

formal group of Church members who met together to seek to overcome their homosexuality. The group was diverse in every respect: age, occupation (construction workers, oddly, seem to have been disproportionately represented), degree of masculinity, degree of activity in the Church, marital status. Several even had children, which certainly suggested that they were able to be more physically responsive to women than I could imagine being. A few (all married) claimed that they had successfully overcome homosexuality. Of course, six months later, one of these was on the phone telling me that he felt torn between staying with his wife, his children, and the Church and chucking it all to go find the man of his dreams. Gradually, I began to figure out that what at least some of these men had meant when they said that they had overcome homosexuality was that they had managed to stop resorting to anonymous sexual encounters with other men. By that standard, certainly, I had never been gay at all. The problem was that I was still attracted exclusively to men. Worse yet, it was still men with whom I would find myself falling in love.

Still, I tried as best I could to change. I dated. I had girlfriends. It was a chore, although on the surface, at least, it must have looked like it worked. I still recall how flabbergasted I was one day when an acquaintance from my singles' ward sat me down and demanded to know how it was I managed to go out, at the same time, with the "two most beautiful women in the ward." (His description; I had honestly not noticed.) Granted, an inordinate number of my girlfriends tended to live in distant cities (amazingly, it took me years to figure out why). The physical demands made upon me were difficult to fulfill, and terribly frightening. (Imagine, if you are straight, how it would feel to have to kiss romantically someone of the same sex, and to know that, if you were what you were supposed to be, you would want to.) I once even went so far as to have myself tested for mononucleosis to escape an impending evening of French kissing with a particularly aggressive girlfriend. (I had previously tried to plead uneasiness about whether this behavior was morally permissible, but she claimed she had checked with her bishop, and he had told her it was fine.) Toward the end, desperate, I even discussed marriage with one girlfriend whom I truly loved—though unfortunately only platonically. Then I decided that I cared for her too much to do that to her life and broke it off. A great woman, she understood. She remains one of my closest friends.

I feel regret now for my behavior towards some of the women I dated, for the hurt and confusion they often felt and

that I couldn't explain to them. But I always nourished the hope that some day just one of them might work, that one day I would feel some desire for any of them. I couldn't, back then, admit even to myself that the pretending never got any easier.

*All they that see me laugh me to scorn:
they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying,
He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him:
let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.*

—PSALM 22:7–8

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THINGS only got worse with time, as it became harder and harder to deny with any conviction that all those years of counseling, all those years of vigilance, all those years of prayer seemed to have availed me nothing. The homosexual drives, far from diminishing, took on ever more alarming strength from year to year, and then even from month to month, until they loomed nearly overwhelming. I had still not given in to them, but there began for the first time to be some close calls, and then others that slid closer still.

More terrified than I had ever been in my life, I discussed each of these with my bishop, who responded with an outpouring of patience and love and concern, but with no solutions, which manifestly pained him deeply. He strove to offer what encouragement he was able, and what balm he could for the self-loathing I so clearly evidenced, pointing out that I hadn't yet actually done anything serious, that temptation itself was no vice, that I ought, in view of the way I was actually still living my life, feel morally triumphant. "How could I?" I asked. He, if tempted by the sight of a woman, could curb his thoughts and walk away triumphant in his victory over acknowledged natural drives. For me, such victories were only another form of defeat, one more triumph in a battle no normal person should need to fight, one more shattering reminder that what lay at my very core was not something "righteous if kept within proper bounds," but something evil. "Even when I win," I recall telling him, "I lose."

The suffering was horrible, in the way it only can be when the enemy against whom you wage war is yourself. To make it through, I drew solace and strength from the stories of people who had suffered far more horribly, but who had nonetheless endured. Interestingly, the two finest examples I found of this dogged nobility amid suffering were women: the Russian author Irina Ratushinskaya, shipped off by the Soviets to years of

indescribable privations in the gulag, in part for her beautiful poems about God;¹ and Nien Cheng, with her depiction of the ghastly physical and mental cruelties she endured at the hand of China's Cultural Revolutionaries.² I see now that, in my copy of the latter's book, I turned down the corner of the page on which she had written, upon finally leaving China, "God knows how hard I tried to remain true to my country."

It came as a devastating blow, then, when I heard a Church leader say in a talk that patriarchal blessings promising marriage and children might find fulfillment only in the next life. As nothing else had worked, that had remained my last shred of hope. The great miracle on which I had pinned everything might be denied me in this life, it seemed. I could not understand why. I had struggled with everything I had. I had kept myself chaste for thirty-one years. Why, I begged my bishop, won't God just take this away? In sorrow and real anguish of soul, he told me he did not know. Despairing, I asked God directly. True to his promises, he had never seemed far, even in the worst of those times. The response was clear: "That is why I gave you everything else."

It took me months and years even to begin to comprehend that statement's significance. At the time, desperate, overwrought, I must admit it meant little to me. "Everything else" with which I had been blessed looked trivial when I was afraid I was going to lose my soul, and I was becoming desperately afraid. The decades of battling to a standstill my most basic drives had left me worn and exhausted. I felt like someone who had fallen over a cliff but caught onto a branch that he was grasping onto for dear life, wondering, as he felt his strength ebb and despairing of rescue, how much longer he could hold on. Still, I did not want to fall, did not want to become what I had been taught to despise. More than anything, I wanted to be able to face God with a clean record. If I lived, however, it seemed only a matter of time before this record would become tarnished. I decided that I would rather be dead. Unfortunately suicide, too, was said to be a serious sin. I regretted that there were no wars for which I could volunteer and in which I might be killed. So for countless evenings, as I said my prayers, I begged the Lord to take my life during the night.

*My strength is dried up like a potsherd;
and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws;
and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.*
—PSALM 22:15

THE Lord did not take my life, so I made plans to take my own. I concluded that a pistol in the mouth would be the best method. It would be quick and would allow no second thoughts. It could not conceivably be any more painful than remaining alive. Home would be a poor site for the act, since I lived alone and my corpse might not be found for some time. I considered my office, where my secretary would presumably find my body in the morning. I ultimately settled, with a bit of dark humor, on my boss' office. I disliked him and figured that, if I was going to spray blood and

brains all over someone's walls, they might as well be his.

The main barrier to suicide, oddly, proved to be one of the Church's teachings. Not its teaching that suicide was a sin. I was already convinced that the choice lay between that and homosexuality, which was also a sin but somehow seemed much worse in the eyes of the Church. After all, I had never sat in meetings and heard someone call suicides an "abomination in the sight of the Lord." What I couldn't get around was the teaching that you took your mind intact into the next life. "What if I blow my brains out," I thought, "and then I wake up in the next world and I'm still gay?" What if suicide didn't actually work?

The other barrier was my bishop. He had watched me and listened to each stage of my struggles throughout the long and agonizing process. He may have lacked for grand solutions, my bishop, as my feelings jerked back and forth for weeks and months with the ebb and flow of my strength, as I struggled to endure one day only to plunge into utter despair the next, but he was always there, with love and compassion and caring greater than most human beings seem able to muster. He hurt for me. I doubt that as a straight man he will ever understand completely what it feels like to be gay, but he came closer in those days to understanding the pain that gay members of the Church endure than anyone I have ever seen, before or since. And for months he kept me alive, until one day, desperate, at wit's end, he finally blurted out that he would much rather that I went off to be gay than that I killed myself, thereby finally triggering in me the realization that the hatred of homosexuals that lay at the root of my suicidal drive did not ultimately come from my religion. It came from me.

*But thou art holy,
O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel.
Our fathers trusted in thee:
they trusted, and thou didst deliver them.
They cried unto thee and were delivered:
they trusted in thee, and were not confounded.*
—PSALM 22:3-5

MY desperation did not lessen, and my sexual impulses seemed only to wax ever stronger. I felt I had no strength left, more drained than ever in my life. Then one day, a young and deeply spiritual woman in my ward in whom I had confided my problem—and who had loyally supported and encouraged me throughout my struggles—repeated to me something she had heard at a fireside. The scriptural promise that God would give no commandment to his children unless he prepared a way for its accomplishment (1 Ne. 3:7), the speaker had suggested, cut both ways. Once you really had done everything humanly possible on your own, you could pray to God and tell him that you had reached the end of your resources, and he would then supply the rest.

I have always been wary of doctrine that rests on no more solid authority than a statement at a fireside, but this particular statement certainly seemed reasonable. Throughout the scrip-

tures, when God wanted a humanly insurmountable obstacle overcome, he intervened when his children reached the limits of their powers. Besides, at that stage of my spiritual crisis, I would have grasped at anything that could afford hope. I returned to my knees and told God that I had reached the end of my rope, and that he would have to do something.

It had never crossed my mind, of course, in all those years of struggle, to ask God if he had any plan in regard to all this. I knew that I wanted my orientation changed, and I trusted in God to do it. After all, he would have to change it if I were to become what the Church taught (and what I believed) I was supposed to be. I was unprepared, therefore, for the response I received.

*He hath not despised nor abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted;
neither hath he hid his face from him;
but when he cried unto him, he heard.*
—PSALM 22:24

THE response I received was that if I kept with a man the same moral standards the Lord expects of his heterosexual children—chastity prior to a lifetime commitment and fidelity within it—my salvation and exaltation would not be lost. I was warned, however, that it would not be an easy life.

“Well,” I thought after I finished praying, “that can’t be right.” I knew what the scriptures said. I knew what the Church said. This was ridiculous. It also certainly wasn’t the solution I would have chosen had my preference been asked. I wondered if I had finally cracked under the pressure and taken leave of my senses completely. Had I manufactured this? The only problem was that the revelation had been unmistakably clear. It had been strong. And it had been delivered by the same experience—by what I term the same voice, for lack of a better metaphor—that had first spoken in the past to confirm to me the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, that had guided me on my mission, that had borne witness to me of so many other things in experiences in the temple, and that had throughout the years provided guidance which, even if seemingly unreasonable when given, had always proved right in the end. That same voice. I felt I knew that voice. I knew that it had never guided me wrong in the past.

Still, I was reluctant to trust this experience. I found my bishop at church the next Sunday and told him what had happened. His initial response surprised me. “I know you to be very sincere and spiritual,” he said. “If that’s what you were told, then I guess that’s what you were told.” Later, of course, once the implications of what I had said had sunk in, he was careful—as he has been in each discussion of the issue since—

to stress the rules of the Church on homosexual relations and to let me know that he had had occasion to sit on Church tribunals judging men who had made similar statements but who had been excommunicated anyway. (What, I wondered, if they were telling the truth?) Later still, deeply troubled by his inability to make the prescribed moral judgment of homosexuals comport with the characteristics of the man he actually knew, he even cornered a general authority to ask him if he thought there might be a revelation on the issue soon.

Meanwhile, I retested my personal revelation. Same answer.

I waited until calmer times, and asked again and again over the coming weeks and months. Same answer. I went to the temple. (I had asked my bishop whether I should continue to go; he responded that I should go until I actually did something that would prevent me from being there.) Same answer. Eight months after the original revelation, having made certain I had resolved anything I could think of with my bishop, I went to the temple to ask one more time. Same answer.

In my own way, I thought that I might be able to put the Lord’s logic to the test (that hubris again). I loved the temple and attended frequently, having had at the time probably among the better temple attendance records of anyone in our ward under the age of seventy. (In addition to its inherent spiritual power, the temple offered brief respite from the pressures of the sexual orientation issue, as neither gender looks terribly alluring in temple clothing.) Would it, I wondered, still be appropriate for me to attend the temple once I had “married” a man? Naively, I figured I had the Lord boxed in on this one. He would have to say either yes, from which I could infer that one of the Church’s limits was simply wrong, or no, from which I could conclude that the Lord

had no business giving me permission to go off and do this in the first place. Of course, when I prayed, the Lord said neither. Instead, as happens from time to time, the answer came as a recollection of a scripture, its implication obvious: Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians that they abstain from eating meat sacrificed to idols, whatever their own beliefs about it might be, lest they weaken the faith of their brethren. (See 1 Cor. 8:9–12). I understood from that prayer that if I married a man I would no longer attend the temple because, whatever the right or wrong might be, there would be too many people who would not understand and whose faith it might injure.

In retrospect, I realize that this answer also served to stress to me another important truth about the earlier revelation: that it was personal to me, and could not of itself be understood to be of broader application. Each of us, I believe, can receive from the Lord guidance about how we are to conduct our own

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lives. The revelations that establish broader rules, that contain doctrine, that are of wider or universal application, are, I believe, vouchsafed to those with proper authority. The Lord, it seems, may sometimes suspend his own rules for his own reasons—Nephi, seeing the unconscious Laban, was ordered to violate two of the ten commandments given to Moses. Like Nephi, however, we each bear the responsibility of ensuring that any revelations we receive have truly come from the proper source. In my case, the familiarity of the voice and consistency of the responses at widely varying times and in widely varying circumstances convinced me that it had.

I try to emphasize the same individual responsibility to the gay brethren whom I home teach. (Good pragmatists that they are, my priesthood leaders have, since learning of my situation, assigned me to heavily gay home teaching routes. In at least one case, I have been the only member of the ward with whom the brother in question—a returned missionary—would agree to talk.) The bottom line, I tell those I home teach, is that no one should ever do anything for which he or she had not received the Lord's approval. I urge these men to pray sincerely about how they should live their lives. I do not presume to know the answer for any individual but me. But these men know that I am gay, and they see that I have sought to remain true to God and, to the best of my abilities, to his church.

*My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation:
I will pay my vows before them that fear him.*
—PSALM 22:25

IT was not an easy thing at the beginning (and it has never been an easy thing since) to remain true to the Church. The Church seems often to send an unmistakable message that it does not want men like me in its community. Many leave, as a result, often taking with them a legacy of profound bitterness. It is a source of great pain to me to realize that the official position, at least, of the organization around which I have built much of my life appears to be that I do not belong in its midst. Granted, I am more fortunate than others I know in the same situation, for in my case this pain is palliated by the unstinting love and heartfelt efforts to include me in their families shown by ward members of virtually every political stripe and religious opinion—including some whose support is frankly quite amazing. Still, there are times when the sense of being something of a pariah becomes very discouraging, and I have to keep reminding myself why it is that I keep coming week after week.

The reason is an experience that ironically was triggered in large part by my own pride. In the October 1990 general conference, at which time admitting I was gay was all still very new to me, one of the general authorities delivered a talk highly critical of homosexuals. Angered, I walked out, but then went to the temple grounds to think about what to do. I felt firmly convinced that there was no place for me in the Church. I recall telling God that I was sorry, but that I just could not keep attending. I didn't belong with those people, I

told him; they didn't want me there. I am not sure that I expected any response, but I got one anyway. "Whatever they do to you," I was asked, "just continue to go." So I do.

This resolve has also sometimes cast me in the unexpected role of defending the leadership of the Church to gay members (and former members) bitter about the perceived brutality of the Church's position on homosexuality. In their defense, it is hard not to understand the depth of their feeling, when some have had friends or acquaintances in the Church who felt compelled to take their own lives over the issue, and when many have come close to suicide themselves because they had been taught that the alternative was even more horrible. But I ask them, nonetheless, whether if they themselves had not been through the experience of being gay they would understand it, whether they would have any notion at all of what it was like. They all admit that they would not. How then could they expect the general authorities, who presumably have not been through it, to understand? I do allow myself, however, to ask whether it is appropriate for the Church to respond to homosexuality with such severity when its own representatives concede that they do not understand the problem, and that they have no solutions at all to offer.

*I will declare thy name unto my brethren:
in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.*
—PSALM 22:22

IHAVE also had some fairly heated discussions with more activist gays about my continued affiliation with the Church. They argue that the Church viciously persecutes its gay and lesbian children. How, they demand, can I continue to attend this church—and to teach a class there, no less? How, for heaven's sake, can I continue tithing to them? Don't I see what that church is doing? Don't I know about the suicides?

Of course I do; I was almost one of them. Their real argument is that my primary loyalty should be to the gay community—to my people, in their minds—and they are angry that it is not. My response (often preceded, if the attack has been a bitter one, by the statement that this is my life and they have no right to tell me how to live it) is that while gays and lesbians are indeed my people—at the very least we have endured a common lot of discrimination and persecution—the Mormons are no less my people. I wasn't raised with the Mormons, and I chose them, true, but I couldn't reverse that choice now even if I wished to because the fundamental beliefs that guide my life have become too deeply rooted in my soul. Although it would certainly make my life vastly easier, I can no more walk away from my faith and pretend I do not believe it than I can pretend that I am not gay. Both rest at my core. One accuser, upon hearing this, conceded quite frankly that he simply did not understand religious conviction. Admittedly it is more difficult—because, to an extent, they are right—if they then sneer and say, "But don't you see? They don't want you." Still, the answer is simple. "It's not for them that I go."

*The meek shall eat and be satisfied:
they shall praise the Lord that seek him:
your heart shall live forever.*
—PSALM 22:26

I BEGAN slowly, gradually, to enter the gay community. It did not at first prove an easy process—partly, at least, because I had only one gay friend (I knew him from Church; at the time I met him he had been dating women), and he now lived in a distant city in California. The greater problem, however, was the preconceived notions I had absorbed from the media (my primary source of information, really) about what gay people were like. After all, didn't we all learn from television that all gays are obsessively promiscuous, dissipated, shallow, and devoid of genuine emotional ties and spiritual yearnings? Not to mention any innate sense of decency. I was frightened by this picture. It certainly was nothing like what I desired out of life. I also felt lucky that my history up until that time had run the course it had. Even though there had been so many long years of struggle, I had, by the time I finally came out, at least reached a place in my personal development where I had the confidence to decide for myself how I would conduct my life as a gay man. I had most certainly not been provided—by the media or by anyone else—with a positive role model showing how to live a gay lifestyle that was decent and moral. I wondered if, had I confronted my orientation a decade earlier, I would not simply have assumed that I had no choice but to become what society and the media had told me a gay man was supposed to be.

Reality proved much different from the depressing picture the media had painted for me. I would never deny that the stereotype of sexual promiscuity holds true for significant segments of the gay community. I have several gay acquaintances now who undeniably fit the description. Some have even tried to tell me that such sexual activity is simply part of being gay. (Often they have said this in the patronizingly avuncular tone people usually reserve for conveying obvious truths to slow learners, as if they expected me to respond, "My gosh, you mean I'm supposed to have been sleeping around all this time? And no one told me?") In contrast, I also have both gay friends whose sexual experience would be considered by the standards of straight society to be extraordinarily limited, and gay friends who, in their late thirties, are still with the same men they got together with in college two decades ago. One acquaintance has never been sexu-

ally active with any man other than the one with whom he exchanged rings a few years back. Not a single one of my non-member heterosexual friends can make the equivalent statement regarding his or her spouse. Some of my member friends cannot either.

My experiences in dating over the last few years also contradict the stereotypes about gay men and their sexual activity. Lack of assertiveness never having been one of my shortcomings, I tend to make my moral code and the religious convictions that underlie it clear on the first date and to suggest that

if my date will be unable to accept them we probably should not go out. Of all the men I have dated in this period, only two indicated that my moral code would pose a problem for them. (One of these two then proceeded to go out with me for the next six months anyway.) Another, who was himself from a conservative, though different, religious background, actually became angry at himself for not having adopted similar standards. Obviously, of course, these men are not a representative sample, as my own biases are involved and I am disinclined to date men known to be very promiscuous. What has frankly surprised me is that there are so many gay men who are not promiscuous at all, and that there have been so many who were willing to deal with a code of morality that even in the heterosexual world is considered rather extreme. (The next dating hurdle that sometimes arises is trying to explain that I don't go to movies or sports events on Sundays because it's the Sabbath. That usually leaves them speechless.) In any case, I have concluded that, like the straight world, the gay world encompasses a tremendous variety of lifestyles and moral codes. Unfortunately, it seems to be largely the promiscuous ones that receive wide publicity.

One of my best friends, a staunch member of the Church, once asked me bluntly if I didn't resent promiscuous gays for giving gay men like me a bad name. I responded that our society and most of our churches send unmistakably clear messages that if you are gay you are already morally defective, depraved, and evil just for being

what, through no real choice of your own, you are. (Even if you are celibate, the popular message in the Mormon community is largely the same, whatever official distinction the Church may draw between orientation and conduct.) If you are already doomed, I asked—if you are already beyond the pale with no hope for salvation or acceptance just for being what you are—what use is it to draw lines in the sand about personal morality? It's all over anyway. What makes it possible

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for me to draw my moral lines is my personal belief, derived from my religious experiences, that if I comport myself in a certain fashion that (like the moral rule for heterosexuals) circumscribes but does not deny my nature, I can still believe that I stand steadfastly on the side of good and right. It is often those deprived of this sense of moral integrity and self-respect by the internalized judgments of society who ultimately plunge into promiscuity. In a real sense, such men are merely doing what society has told them it expects of them.

I see this particularly strongly among the gay men I know who are or were LDS. There's an astonishing number of such men, I have found. In fact, the first reaction of most gay men in my city when I tell them that I am Mormon is to laugh—not at me, and with no malice, but simply because they have heard the same statement so many times before. I do not mean to suggest that we are statistically overrepresented in the gay community. At least part of the phenomenon must be attributable to the fact that the depth of their connection to the Church while growing up or while on their missions has led many gay Mormons to continue to assert a religious affiliation long after most others have simply abandoned theirs. Of course, we are certainly not underrepresented in the gay community either.

What has been instructive to me, however, is to see the different patterns into which gay Saints and former members often fall. One category seems to be made up of those who blandly assert that they were once LDS, perhaps that they even served missions, but that they had gotten over it, as if the Church were some sort of stage to be got through in a maturational process. I find their abandonment of the Church troubling (and they often find my continued loyalty to it incomprehensible), but what is most noteworthy is that these are often the men with the most well-adjusted, happy, and stable lives. In contrast, it is often the men who believe most strongly and love the Church most deeply who live the most miserable lives, seeking forgetfulness in the slow suicide of sexual promiscuity and excessive drug use because they still believe deep down that they are damned. I once met one such man because a gay friend—himself not someone who could plausibly be accused of fanatical inflexibility in matters of sexual morality—became so concerned about his friend's activities that he asked whether I, being LDS also, couldn't try to exert a positive influence. When I reluctantly got to know my friend's friend—once a missionary for the Church, now sexually promiscuous and a drug dealer—I was stunned to find that he not only loves the Church deeply and has a strong testimony of the gospel, but that he goes around trying to get people to read the Book of Mormon. (I have seen him do this.) Confused, I asked him once about the evident contradiction between his life and his beliefs. "I know I can never make it to the celestial kingdom because of what I am," he told me, "but I want to make sure that as many other people as possible can get there." At home, later, I cried. And I was glad that it would be left for God rather than for me to judge this man. I wouldn't know how.

My own path down the admittedly bizarre trail I seem to be on has been a much more happy one because of my belief in

myself and in the fundamental morality of my conduct. I have also been fortunate to receive acceptance and support for how I seek to live my life from an unusually wide variety of members of the Church. The only factor I can find that seems to unify my defenders in the Church is that most are people of marked sincerity and spirituality. Their support has considerably eased my process of combining the aspects of my life that it had seemed—and that everyone had told me—it would be impossible to reconcile.

In some cases, support within the Church has come from very surprising sources, including members with reputations for extreme doctrinal conservatism. In the case of at least one of my priesthood leaders, his support clearly came against his will. After sustaining minor injuries in an automobile accident, I had requested a priesthood blessing from this man—a humble man of profound charity, but one who had gently but firmly made clear from the outset his fundamental opposition to the course I had adopted. When this leader laid his hands on my head, however, he blessed me not only that my injuries would heal properly (they did), but that I would one day meet the man who was to be my "companion in this life." It was the only time in my many years in the Church that I have stood after a blessing to see its giver manifestly shocked and horrified. That leader remained shocked and horrified for a very long time, but eventually—a year after the blessing, perhaps—walked up to me after sacrament meeting one Sunday and quietly told me that he hoped I would find my companion.

*Deliver my soul from the sword;
my darling from the power of the dog.
Save me from the lion's mouth:*

for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns.

—PSALM 22:20–21

OTHER Church members, not surprisingly, are less supportive and find my experiences troubling. These brothers and sisters generally make one of three arguments against what I am doing.

The weakest argument seems to be that I could not view "marriage" to a man as moral because such marriages are not legally recognized. This is certainly a curious argument for Mormons to make in view of the fact that little over a century ago, the Church accepted polygamous marriages that were then not only not legally recognized, but were in fact criminal acts, and that today in South American countries where divorce is not permitted, the Church allows temple sealings of couples who legally are adulterous. Clearly, legality and morality must be separate issues. If not, would it mean that same-sex unions would be moral so long as legally recognized? If that is the case, it is probably only a matter of time. Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland already allow the equivalent of marriages for same-sex couples.

Another argument I often hear is that gay Mormons should simply remain completely celibate and endure to the end, like the single sisters of the Church (no one ever seems to mention single brothers) whose situation is said to be identical to ours.

Perhaps significantly, this argument is not one that has ever been made to me by a single sister. Very much more virtue is being asked of those single sisters (and of their single brethren) than most Church members will ever have to exhibit themselves. One of the most forthright members of my stake's leadership once volunteered, when discussing this issue with me, that he had been able to marry in his early twenties, and that he frankly wasn't entirely sure that he would have been able to maintain his moral standards had he not been able to do so. None of this, of course, alters the fact that at least some straight singles do endure chaste to the end. What I question is the assumption that our situations are truly equivalent. My experience is that they are not.

Singles who are straight and who wish to marry can always maintain hope. Life alone may be lonely and difficult, but the right companion may always be around the next bend in the road. It's never really over. More important, these singles have outlets. Many date, attend Church social functions designed to introduce them to single brothers or sisters in their age group, pursue romantic relationships, and otherwise channel their energies into morally appropriate activities with the opposite sex that still provide a measure of release for some of the pressures that build up.

Gay members are in a different situation. For us, there is officially no hope. We are told that we should expect to be alone until we die. Rather than channeling our instincts and energies into behavior that is morally appropriate but that nevertheless allows some release, we are told that there are no acceptable releases, so that instead the pressures build up and ultimately burst through at whatever point proves weakest. Our energies, rather than being directed at finding a mate, must be directed inward, seeking with all our might to hold in check some of our most fundamental impulses. Such a task requires a vast strength few seem to possess.

I am told that there are gay members of the Church who strive to endure chaste to the end, though their numbers appear very small relative to the proportion of the Mormon (or ex-Mormon) population that is gay. I wish such men and women well. In my own case, in considering whether to rely upon the personal revelation described earlier (which, after all, was not mandatory), I vividly remember weighing the moral possibilities carefully, including that of lifetime celibacy. I recognized that many of the gay Mormons I'd met who had sought to remain celibate had instead ended up in a sort of cycle of celibacy, then a big mistake (often of a fairly sordid kind), and then repentance—a miserable cycle that frequently just seemed to keep repeating itself over and over. For myself, I knew how difficult it was becoming to hold out, and I knew

how close the close calls were getting. It appeared that I stood in danger of entering the same miserable cycle. I concluded that, whatever its absolute morality, the idea of committing to one man and spending my life being loyal to him would be much more moral (and much less sleazy) than what it looked like the alternative would probably turn out to be.

I do not believe that the smallness of the number of gay members of the Church who endure chaste to the end is an outgrowth of a homosexual orientation so much as of the nature of the task we are asked to undertake. I have often wondered what would happen if, for some reason, the Church leadership announced one day to the entire sophomore class at BYU that they were never to seek mates, that they were never in their lives to be allowed any sexual outlet whatsoever, and that they were never to pursue (or even to long for) that particular kind of love that everyone says is of such great worth, but that instead they were to spend their entire lives alone. How many of those students would remain true to the Church and its standards for five years? For ten years? For twenty-five? Those who make the celibacy argument are asking me for another forty. I wonder how many of them could do this themselves.

The irony is that, the way I now live my life, I probably could do it myself. I may have to. I have dated, but I haven't yet found a man with whom I want to spend the rest of my life, and frankly I sometimes wonder whether I will. At such times, I have to contemplate seriously spending the remainder of my life single (which to me means celibate). Actually, the way I live my life now, my situation really is analogous to that of the straight single sisters and brothers. But it is analogous to theirs because (at least on my less cynical days) I have hope for the future and because (even on my more cynical days) I have some outlets. These make a tremendous difference, I have found. Since I've started dating men, my moral standards have actually become easier rather than harder to maintain. The close calls have largely disappeared. I no longer have to worry about the pressure bursting through at the weakest spot because I control when and where that pressure is released.

I am also familiar with the arguments against homosexuality based on biblical passages, as well as with a variety of counter-arguments: that most of the biblical passages in question (except the one in Romans) may actually refer in the original language to the male prostitutes which were a feature of contemporary idol-worship;³ that it is odd for us to take these particular passages literally when so many other statements in the Bible—Christ's absolute prohibition on divorce except for adultery is a good example—are now reinterpreted to lessen

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their impact or ignored completely; that the Book of Mormon is strangely silent on the entire question. The issues raised are extremely complex. I do not claim to know the answers.

I do know, however, that arguing about the meaning of scriptures is probably fruitless. My own response, therefore, to those who assert on the basis of scriptural passages that gays are sinful is to point to the story of the woman sinner who washed the feet of Jesus at the house of Simon the Pharisee. (See Luke 7:36–50.) We do not know much about this woman except that her sins were evidently notorious. Uncharacteristically, though, in neither the King James Version nor the Joseph Smith Translation does the Savior tell her to sin no more. Perhaps the statement was simply not recorded; perhaps he knew it to be superfluous. I have often wondered, however, if the Savior might not simply have understood some difficult aspect of the woman's situation. She manifestly had an extraordinarily profound and good soul for someone involved in notorious sins. Might she have been a widow who prostituted herself to keep her children from starving? There certainly were such women at the time. What is most interesting, though, is Christ's response to the carping of the self-righteous Simon. "And Jesus answering said . . . There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?"

*For the kingdom is the Lord's:
and he is the governor among the nations.*

—PSALM 22:28

CLEARLY, a major question for me is what might happen to my Church membership in the event that I find a man with whom I wish to spend the rest of my life. Granted, the long hours I often spend at the office, coupled with my moral code, seem sometimes to have given my homosexuality a rather theoretical quality, but clearly the ultimate object of my dating is to find a companion whom I can love and who can love me in return. In that case, some priesthood leaders have warned me, I may be excommunicated.

Excommunication is something to which I have given much thought, and which I also made the subject of prayer before embarking on the path I now follow. Obviously, what I was hoping for was some sort of promise that nothing would happen, but that was not what I got. Instead, I received the same assurance that if I followed the guidelines from the other revelation, I would not lose my salvation or exaltation; the same assurance that the Lord understood; and the same assurance that everything would be all right in the end; but nothing about the future of my Church membership. Instead, I was told that the actions of others in this regard lay within their stewardship, not mine, and were not an appropriate subject of my prayers. In the most important respect, I guess, I already had the only answer I should need.

That answer, however much comfort it may provide in the religious sphere, nonetheless does little to assuage my concern

that I may be expelled from the organization around which I have built much of my life and which represents to me my primary loyalty. This prospect causes me great concern and great pain. It also tempts me to try to marshal in advance arguments against the taking of such an action—the message it would send that sticking to a moral code like the one I strove to follow had not been worth trying; the irony that it was only because I had remained active that any action was being considered (our stake, at least, does not pursue and excommunicate inactive gay members); that I had done the best I could when nobody had been able to provide me with any better solution that actually worked.

I recognize, however, that these arguments, in the final analysis, are misconceived. Whatever the arguments, pro and con, the decision ultimately rests with God. It is, after all, his church, not mine or even that of its leaders, and both I and they are expected to abide by his decisions. I know (and do not envy) many of the stake leaders who would have to make this decision were I to marry a man and become sexually active with him now. Several are very close friends. I know these men to be devout and sincere. They do not seem like the sort to let either friendship for me on the one hand or prejudices about homosexuality on the other cloud their ability to perceive and act upon God's will, whatever it may be. I only hope that, if and when the time comes, I will stand before men whom I can trust as much as I do the ones set above me now.

And if they do take away my membership, I'll see if they won't let me join our ward choir. They take anyone.

*All they that go down to the dust shall bow before him:
and none can keep alive his own soul.*

—PSALM 22:29

I NEVER resolved in my own mind whether the permission slip revelation, as I now tend to call it, meant that acting within its limits would not constitute sin, or simply that the Lord would forgive certain things, perhaps even in advance. Nor do I try any longer to disentangle the issue. In many respects, the distinction is largely semantic. To the extent that it is not, the issue is rife with theological implications I do not believe it to be my place to resolve.

Nevertheless, I have learned some priceless lessons from my experiences. One was the degree to which they brought home to me a truth many members of the Church (including me) seemed more to mouth than to believe: that in spite of our necessary best efforts, we will still fall short of perfection, and that our salvation and exaltation ultimately depend, in the final analysis, on God's grace. (See 2 Ne. 25:23.) It also caused me to begin to develop compassion for those who fall short—for the first time in my life, really, because I had never myself failed at anything before. Then I sought diligently to overcome homosexuality and failed completely, but God seemed to be saying that he understood. Perhaps, I thought, I should learn to do the same. It was probably ultimately to the good that I underwent these trials, for had it otherwise been possible for me, by some sheer dint of effort or obedience, to obtain a place

ruling some world in the hereafter, I am certain that I would have been a terrible tyrant, exacting of my charges and merciless to those whose efforts proved inadequate. Now I understand better.

My experiences also gave me a much deeper appreciation for the Atonement. A singularly beautiful article by Bruce Hafen, who I hope will not be too appalled to find it quoted here, helped me put my experiences into perspective.⁴ Christ's atonement, Elder Hafen wrote, brought healing not only for sin, but for all suffering and bitterness and inadequacy—the "beauty for ashes" the Messiah would bestow on those who mourn in Zion, as foreseen by the prophet Isaiah. If we love the Lord with all our hearts, Brother Hafen seemed to promise, not only would he be "aware of our limitations, but . . . he will also in due course compensate for them, 'after all we can do.'" The Atonement, he wrote, is "a success that can compensate when we cannot, after we conscientiously do all we can." This has come to be the framework in which I view my own trials and the Lord's response. It has also turned my own abstract appreciation of the Atonement into something I feel with deep emotion. I used to have trouble concentrating during the sacrament prayers. Now, when I hear them and contemplate the Savior's sacrifice, I have trouble holding back the tears because I feel that, in small part, he did what he did in order to give me the opportunity for a full and decent life.

They shall come, and shall declare his righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done this.

—PSALM 22:31

I HAD often wondered in years past why it was that Christ on the cross would have despaired and accused God of having forsaken him. It was not until I read the biography of Christ by the Japanese Roman Catholic writer Shusaku Endo that I learned that Christ's apparently despairing cry was actually the opening line of the twenty-second psalm, and that this psalm, far from being despairing, is in reality a moving reaffirmation of faith amidst suffering. For this reason I chose it as the framework for this piece.

My experiences have served to deepen my faith in God and my love of him. I know that he stood by me at every stage of my trials. I know now as never before that he can provide peace in troubled lives and hope and redemption in lives that seemed hopeless and doomed. I know from experience that if we love and trust him he can ameliorate problems and catastrophes to which there appear to be no solutions. And I still believe in miracles. ☞

NOTES

1. Irina Ratushinskaya, *Grey Is the Color of Hope* (New York: Vintage International, 1989).

2. Nien Cheng, *Life and Death in Shanghai* (New York: Grove Press, 1986).

3. See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

4. Bruce C. Hafen, "Beauty for Ashes. The Atonement of Jesus Christ," *Ensign*, April 1990. The quotations appear on pages 8 and 13, respectively.



SPACE EXPLORER

go down a long dark hallway
with a lamp
held out in front of you
and revel in the way
darkness and its shadow angels
fall away from you
like ignorance
as each door,
every stretch of floorboard
or wall or ceiling
opens up its brilliant confession,
all that it is
snapping clean and true
in the flame
of your curiosity
and gather up these facts,
these impressions
like scattered fruit
in the deep barrels
of your understanding,
onward and onward
without fear,
even as the oil
shrinks to nothing
in the bottom of your lamp
and the light flickers
and eventually dies
and the darkness returns,
arrogant as ever

—JOHN GREY