

Pillars of My Faith

*I am, in fact, a believer whose principal talent and inclination is for doubt.
My faith does not rest on pillars, but flows in riptides of allegiance, deep
Mormon currents that sometimes draw and sometimes drag me back.*

A CHOREOGRAPHY OF THINGS HOPED FOR

By Neal Chandler

I HAVE BEEN READING SCOTT CAIRN'S *THE Theology of Doubt*.¹ The title poem proceeds at first with muted pessimism:

I have come to believe this fickleness
of belief is unavoidable. As, for these
backlot trees, the annual loss
of leaves and fruit is unavoidable.
I remember hearing that soft-soap
about faith being given
only to the faithful—mean trick,
if you believe it. This afternoon,
during my walk, which
I have come to believe is good
for me, I noticed one of those
ridiculous leaves hanging
midway up an otherwise naked oak.
The wind did what it could
to bring it down, but the slow
learner continued dancing. . . .

For me and my house, these lines are as easy to read as back-handed encouragement. We try to mind this same improbable step in the deciduous suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, where we practice what is known as "Utah Mormonism." In our neighborhood, not far from Kirtland, Mormons come commonly in two hybrid varieties: "Utah" and "Re-Organized." Of these two, the Utah variant is considered, by those few outsiders who take any trouble at all to investigate so

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obscure a sectarian distinction, to be by far the more bizarre and, hence, exotic and disreputable alternative. I mention this at the outset because, although it has been a source of irritation to other Utah Mormons and of frustration to those very serious persons charged with enhancing our public image, it has for me—for entirely parallel reasons—been a source of some comfort and affirmation. I am fond of the exotic and the disreputable and a believer especially in what are sometimes termed "the Mormon heresies."

I have also spent a great deal of my life in places where the mere fact of ordinary religious practice is itself a kind of heresy. I remember one day long ago, a graduate student's coming into my office and wondering nervously if she might ask me a personal question. She had just heard I was a Mormon. Was this really true? I allowed that, yes, it was, in fact, true. She then questioned me again and precisely to find out exactly what I meant by "yes" and what by "true." And when I had answered these questions, she stood across the desk in evident dismay and neither spoke nor made any move at all to leave, but like a parent, who has caught a child in some flagrant transgression of the rules, stood and waited for my explanation.

And I, like any caught child knowing there is never an adequate explanation, began instead with subtlety and diversion. Did she mind if I asked her a personal question? Why, I pressed, did she seem so concerned about this anyway? Her answer was straightforward. She'd never before known anyone she considered intelligent who was even remotely religious. And then Mormonism: a racist, reactionary, nineteenth-century cartoon of a religion. How could I? Why would I? This, of course, was in the early 1970s, well before the priesthood revelation when Mormon culture was distinguishing itself by and large through stolid resistance to, or, at best, militant non-involvement in the social and political battles changing the larger culture, which would only much later challenge or change the Church. She was so clearly disillusioned I felt myself shrinking

physically in her accusatory eyes. We talked some more. Mostly I talked, but our parting was only polite.

Somewhat earlier, I had undergone a period of intense scientific scrutiny when the anthropology department of my university has discovered that certain students were practicing Mormons. This was during the later Nixon years, when government grant monies for research trips to primitive societies on Bora Bora or deep in the African interior had dried up almost completely, and so the anthropologists were delighted and relieved to discover a primitive religious culture right there under their very noses. I spent many hours with eager researchers, who pored over long, gleaned lists of words, phrases, and acronyms and who struggled heroically to learn our arcane language.

What is an "R.M.," a "G.A.," a "P.P.I.?" What is one doing when one is "fellowshipping"? Is this an activity expressly or only implicitly forbidden to women? And how is it that among Mormons, even men are said to be "endowed"?

One anthropologist, a brilliant one (who actually did receive rare grant money to visit an elusive Central African witch cult never before successfully visited by a white man, and who, as a result, spent four months tied to a post, and then four more observing and recording the fantastic mores of a fantastic culture), cornered me one day. He had completed his studies and had just conducted an interview with the University of Utah's department of anthropology. When he returned, he pushed me into a corner and demanded:

"Let's get this straight, Chandler: You are a Mormon?"

"Yes!" I confessed.

"No, I mean, you're, like, a *real* Mormon? You believe that stuff? You do all that stuff?"

"I guess so," I equivocated.

Silently, this expert on exotic religion went back to his desk and the witch cult article on which he was working. "Man," he said, and he shook his head as he said it, "you are on a heavy trip!"

Another questioner once recounted to me a horror story in which a Mormon acquaintance, having been reported to



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a Church official by some far-right-minded, honor-coded friend and stranger in the faith for an infraction he had not actually committed, but would not have considered grievous even had he done so, was called up before the aroused authority. What interested my friend, beyond the role and use of informants in my religion, was the jaded pragmatism of the accused. He had not particularly stood his ground. Instead, he had put on the whole sackcloth of deference, demurring, destroying potential evidence, agreeing, cooperating, cynically doing whatever needed to be done in order to avoid suffering even the unjust displeasure of authority. There was something disturbing about that, she thought, something totalitarian. For all our Mormon niceness, which she conceded, and for all our studied earnestness and industry, our faith still had the chilling, medieval look of organized religion.

And what was I to say? I, who had once been informed on and subsequently interrogated because I drank Coca Cola on the airplane enroute to my mission field. What to say, except that for every horror

story she could tell, I could tell a dozen. I am, in fact, a sort of collector of stories, these and others. And, as Lavina Fielding Anderson has shown us lately and abundantly, when it comes to tales of this peculiar kind of horror, Mormon country is a land bountiful.²

We, to be sure, are not alone. A colleague once told me that when she read the Bible, though she liked the sense of so much and so distant history, she had no sense of God speaking to her through its pages. To her, a woman, it all sounded like the same old boys' club. The stories did not, by and large, make her proud to be a human being. There were some awful stories in that book. Its vaunted righteousness seemed partisan, inflammatory, hurtful, and self-righteous toward any but the chosen. What was the attraction? How did one, why should one, surrender one's will to the so-often dim and narrow and sometimes outright dangerous representatives of God on Earth?

At such times, I have felt not a little cornered. I do not relish being called upon to defend organized religion. The very

phrase sounds oppressively bureaucratic, a noun in obdurate passive voice. It's a little as if one had been asked to defend "corporate culture" or "institutional food" or "the military-industrial complex." It's a little as if one had been called to serve as spokesperson for the American Tobacco Institute. Demonstrably, the record of organized religion is not and has not always, or even mostly, been wonderful. And I have great sympathy for doubters. I am, in fact, a believer whose principal talent and inclination is for doubt. If I have a spiritual gift, it is the gift of cynicism. So why persist? Why not leave? Why?

Here I am going to exchange Scott Cairns's tenacious, dancing leaf for a metaphor of my own: still by no means "a pillar of faith," but instead a kind of riptide, the deep currents of allegiance that sometimes draw and sometimes drag me back.

TO begin with, let us be very honest about fundamentals. I am what Jan Shippo calls a "birthright" and Michael Quinn calls a "DNA" Mormon. I'll tell you my conversion story, but I will tell you first that my great-grandmother, my father's mother's mother, whom I was sent to visit every Christmas and summer vacation of my young life, was born in Winter Quarters, and crossed the plains with a family sent by Brigham Young to settle Davis County. My mother's mother's father joined the Church in England and left activity over a disagreement with Brigham Young and objections to polygamy, which his own brother was more than happy to practice. This great-grandfather stayed away from meetings, bided his time, and raised his family in the Church. My grandmother was the most faithful Mormon I have known, but she had her clear opinions about Brigham Young and about polygamy. Her Mormonism was earned and independent. Proprietary. It was not the cautious piety of deference. When I was to be married in the temple, she called her good friend, an apostle, to perform the ceremony. She did not call her other apostle friend, one she knew even better, who had lived down the street and who later became a beloved president of the Church. She didn't call him because she'd just never liked the way he treated his wife. She could tell you stories—though she mostly didn't. There are reasons that prophets and seers and high councilmen are often



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without honor in their own lands, and those reasons are not all bad ones.

IN a given neighborhood, we know that ward politicians will come and go, will be charming or inept, helpful or self-serving, generous or rigid in the fluctuating way in which human beings present themselves. But whoever the authorities and whatever the orthodoxies of the moment, the neighborhood itself will persist. It has already far too much history, has still too much vitality, is rooted far too deeply in the emotions and too expansively in the minds and imaginations of its citizens ever to be the property merely of the current administration. Mormonism is my neighborhood. I've lived here all my life.

It is perhaps true that I've been a cantankerous neighbor. Doubters are trouble makers, always seeing Saran Wrap in someone else's brand new Sunday clothing. I am not unclear about the disquieting propensities of cynicism. I aspire to be as dubious of my

doubts, for I know that doubt itself is easy, too easy, too soon exhausted. It may take the form of struggle, but most often lacks the substance. The real temptations, the battles, lie, in fact, in faith. And faith, I think, is very hard. How does one survive the incongruities, the compromise, the outright violence of faith? If you wonder what I can be talking about, let me tell you a small story, one of many that might be told.

In the 1970s, a sister I knew concluded from a talk given by an apostle that she had no choice but to throw her teenage son out of her home. He had been a good boy—more or less—a good student, certainly. He went to church, though a little too reluctantly, but he had grown his hair long—an ominous sign—and he had put a large, hand-made peace symbol up on the wall of his bedroom and refused to take it down. Meanwhile, an apostle of the Lord had warned all the Church in general conference that that same peace symbol was actually the broken cross of the anti-Christ, a taunt and an affront to the Savior, a visible, palpable blasphemy. Who could truly love the Lord and allow the anti-Christ into her home? What choice did she have? Her son would not believe the apostle, would not relent. And she was caught between her solemn, all-embracing temple commitment to sacrifice for the kingdom of

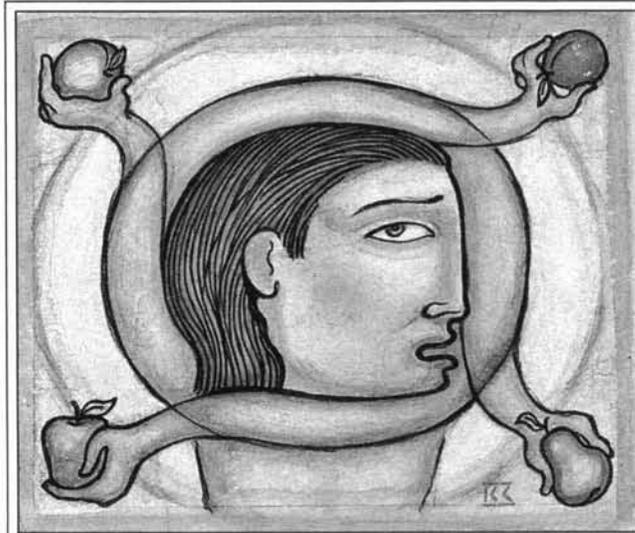
God and her mother's love for an errant son.

I am happy to tell you that in this case—as perhaps in most such cases—weakness won out. Her boy did not leave home, and he did not take down his peace symbol. But my happiness is not without guilt, for I can promise you as well that it was not the boy, but rather his mother who suffered greatly for her sin, which, as far as I can tell, was the sin of faith. And faith is hard.

Hard enough all by itself. So must we then put up with organized religion, too? The truth is that even outside of religion, religion is everywhere. It's inevitable. Every time human beings adopt and assert moral standards in regard to human behavior (and every such standard is finally metaphysical; spare me the rationalizations), they are forced to organize in order to implement them. It begins, of course, with family. If you have been a Mormon long, you may be surprised to learn that other people—gentiles, Presbyterians, Hindus, even secular-humanist atheists—have,

cultivate, and believe in families. It is useful in this respect to remember that most everybody's metaphors for deity are parental, and those for their church, familial. But beyond the family, there is also Little League baseball, which is going to be fair and equitable, dammit!, and wholesome and positive and character building—except, of course, that some parents and some coaches are unreasonable and overzealous and have to be dealt with carefully, politically, while for reasons of ambition and competitive pragmatism, not everything is always fair or equitable or wholesome or positive. There are also support groups, twelve-step and no-step, groups for the floundering, the recovering, the self-asserting, the overbearing. There are even workshops like the writing workshops I have taken part in where some people come, not just for personal or professional growth, but, as it turns out, for understanding, forgiveness, even redemption, and where success is threatened by gossip, by factionalism, by the exercise of unrighteous dominion and, in general, by organizational behavior.

For me, outside of Mormonism, it was the Cooperative Pre-School where the child was god, and the teacher a high priestess, whose rules of conduct in servitude to the child-god were administered far more rigorously than any regimen ever imposed by my religion. If my friend thought her Mormon ac-



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quaintance was craven in facing up to Mormon authority, she should have seen the hapless parents brought up on charges before the council of the Cooperative Pre-School.

Church is everywhere, organized and organizing. Organized religion is beyond prevention. The only real distinctions lie in size and expectation. Because formal churches do not, cannot, hide the absolute voice for which they claim to speak, they cannot escape the absolute expectations we have of them. And because when they succeed, they grow, become corporate and official in girth and manner, become bureaucracies, become organized religion, they are doomed to disappoint us. Hugh Nibley, for instance, warns us often that worldly success is a precise prescription for disappointment, but disappointment is not failure. It's only a sobering reflection of the human condition.³

Meanwhile, this corporate, bureaucratic, organized, terribly successful and sometimes

just terrible religion has been a home to me. I am using Robert Frost's definition here of home as "the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."⁴ A church extends the familial imperative to everyone who walks through the door. It's infuriating. I, at least, have infuriated many. Many have had, for the Church's sake, to forgive me. And I, in turn, sometimes forgive them. There is an older brother in my ward, whom I sometimes drive literally wild. During the years I was a teacher in the quorum of which he is a member (I am not, because nobody is about to make me a high priest), he sometimes stormed out of the meeting, trembling with rage over whatever outrageous heresy it seemed to him I was propagating. But I soon discovered that every Sunday he would greet me with a handshake, a determined smile, and new resolve to try yet one more time to endure my lesson. When he'd grown much older and was released from the high council, he was called to replace me as instructor. He had no gift for teaching. Moreover, his instincts led him to use every possible opportunity to combat my years of heresy with a long and predictable sermon on the blessings of obedience. But he sweat bullets over those lessons, and I resisted the impulse to get up and walk out, as I was sometimes encouraged to do, or to fall asleep as everyone else did. In fact, over those weeks, I think

he came to look for me as his one reliably attentive listener. In fact, I think—though I wouldn't swear to it—we came to develop a kind of perverse affection for (if still no semblance of agreement with) one another. And I came to this small miracle—I cannot boast of many—through the terrible disciplines of organized religion.

But if faith is the genuine challenge and organized religion inevitable, must it then be bizarre and outrageous Utah Mormonism? I have already made it clear that I am the product of an observant Mormon home in the center of avid Mormondom. I was recruited methodically from the moment of my birth. Still, as an adolescent I found myself embarrassed by my parochial church and culture. I decided I was an agnostic. The very word resounded with sophistication. But in the military, I discovered there was a base-line decency in my abandoned culture I was not finding in the world abroad. I conceded that I had not given my church a genuine chance. The chance I gave it was a mission. My peers in the mission home voted me the elder most likely to be sent home early. But I was not. That does not mean I avoided encounters with authority, but I stayed, learned things I hadn't known were knowable, and came home a Mormon.

I tell you this, not to confirm the extraordinary truth claims of Mormonism, but to document the rather ordinary trajectory of a very ordinary spiritual life. I've no doubt there are Baptists, Buddhists, Daoists, and even agnostics who can tell similar stories of indoctrination, rebellion, and reconciliation. But if you asked me if I could be as happy with any other religion, I would tell you no, though my reasons flow not so much from present-day Mormonism as from what I hope to be its promise as a religion beside and beyond its organization.

I BELIEVE in the transforming power of ideas, but I also believe that ideas take hold very slowly and always incompletely. I believe that the Old Testament brought home slowly and painfully the notion of a singular God insistent on justice, that the New Testament revealed a sacrificing God's forgiveness—a notion, by the way, which still strives with human understanding—and finally that Joseph Smith would have us know a God beyond the philosophical and theo-political necessity of absolutism, a God beyond hierarchy, who concedes room in his pantheon and grants to men and women, and to the environment of both, integrity, independence, wholeness. This is surely a rudimentary and, therefore, difficult and transforming idea, and, while I do not intend a treatise, let me mention a couple of things, the heresies of which Mormonism stands accused, and to which I referred at the outset with affection.

First, it seems to me that one of the chief glories of Mormon theology is to have returned materialism—that is, a husbanding concern for this world, this time, this flesh—to its place in the pale Pauline hierarchies of Christianity, an attempt to free us from paradigms that have little or nothing to do with life on Earth. If we truly need to work out our salvation in this physical environment, then it is useful to think that it has something—and not just something preliminary and mis-

leading—in common with the environment to come.

Second, if, as Joseph Smith says, men and women as well as God are self-existent beings, then God must love us not just as we love our children and other possessions because they are ours, but simply because we *are*. That seems to me an immense and transforming shift in the power politics of heaven. It presents an unparalleled generosity and, at the same time, a precariousness that grants astonishing dignity to human life and terrible poignancy to the life of God.

Finally, and more topically, our Mormon cultural tradition carries a marvelous crack, a sort of huge, straining Wasatch Fault, across the whole brass armor of patriarchy, or what I have come to think of as the sin of patriarchy. I realize that no religion, no church could have made more feeble or reluctant use of the gift of a literal Mother in Heaven, but the Church cannot, having acknowledged her (even in awkward and back-handed reluctance), safely disavow her. She looms darkly over Mormonism, over The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a kind of family embarrassment, and confirms the deconstructionist's insight that a great religion's deepest contradictions and insecurities, the inevitable cracks and fissures in its carefully polished surface, will finally reveal far more than its published revelations. God the Mother looms so darkly over Mormonism precisely because she is not yet a-dawning.

There is for me in the stayed, stuffy Mormonism of our recent inheritance still a powerful undertow of possibility and revelation. It pulls with the brash seductiveness of forbidden music. Imagine, if you are able, a really great foot-thumping, pulse-pumping, Afro-Armenian reggae salsa band rocking out gospel music just beyond the fiercely barricaded foyer doors of your fast and testimony meeting. Faces inside are frozen and prophylactic, full of righteous affront, while each succeeding witness from the pulpit sounds a warning more dour than the last against worldly music and alien perversions. The chorister rises bravely and directs the lady at the Allen electric to lead a counterattack. Fully-armored hymns, fully correlated, sally forth against the foreign sound. And you, of course, sing along. Reflexively. With determination. But you have noticed that the children and some of the teenagers, the brighter, livelier ones, are shifting and nodding and fidgeting to the wrong beat. Parents are already nervous, irritated, trying to make their charges sit still. And you, despite yourself, have also noticed something in you, something declining to sit resolutely, something rooted and unrepentant that pulses, just a little perhaps, but oh so sweetly to the spirited sedition through the door. You hold yourself very carefully, of course, very purposefully, performing the prescribed, antidotal hymn, but there is no vigor in it. Vitality lies across that ushered barricade in the thumping, bumping, get-on-down-see-what's-comin' foyer.

If this exercise offends you, you are in genteel company. Remember for a moment victorious David, leaping and dancing almost naked and with all his get-down "might" before the sacred Ark of the Lord, celebrating to harps and psalteries and timbrels, to cornets and cymbals and trumpets, blessing his people with prayer, but also with revel and with material gifts. He handed out bread and meat and wine to ab-

solutely anyone, rich or wretched, blue blood or trash, male or even female. From a palace window, his carefully bred, royal wife watched this scandalous public hoedown and was appalled. She never, thereafter, forgave him the humiliation, never again let him near her, never bore him a child, the scripture says, to the day of her death. But when she scolded him, he warned her that it was to this very celebration he had been chosen. Moreover, he would be more vile yet, more bizarre and exotic, more disreputable and base in the eyes of convention, and would be honored, finally, by the very people she most devoutly despised. (2 Sam. 6.)

I can't tell you whether David's queen viewed her outrageous husband too much with the eyes of a prideful world or with those of a puritanical church. I have, however, decided that the distinction is not important. If, like the world, the Church views its own most liberating gifts with offended decorum, then the elaborate institutional bed we have made will be as willfully barren, surely, as that of Saul's highborn daughter, and, like the slighted David of old, the dancing bridegroom will move on to more welcoming, more fruitful lovers.

I believe Mormonism stands before a crossroads, a choice already institutionally decided, but not thereby resolved. Is it going to be a world religion, empowering and liberating with new, unheard of possibilities for self-definition and for being genuinely in the world without being of it? Or is it going to be just one more angry, authority-driven, authority-obsessed, finger-pointing, elbow-flailing fundamentalist church with no abiding interest in a God who does not smite?

The momentum toward the latter is huge and driven by waves of popularity. In light of recent events, it sometimes seems overwhelming. The end of the poem with which I began is much darker than the not terribly hopeful lines I quoted. "Then again," the poet continues:

Once, hoping for the last
good apple, I reached among bare branches,
pulling into my hand
an apple too soft for anything
and warm to the touch, fly-blown.

On a bad day, and there have been many fly-blown days this past year, I think surely it must be easier to let it slide. Surely, it must. But I know that I am someone who, though he should have learned better by now, will, as Philip Larkin wrote, "forever be suppressing a hunger in himself,"⁵ a hunger which in my circumscribed life has been best and most tantalizingly fed by the bizarre and disreputable and heretical consolations of Mormon community and Mormon thought—not often at sacrament meeting, but at Sunstone gatherings of friends. Not through Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine*, nor easily the Book of Mormon, but DonLu Thayer's "Respite for a Heretic," Lavina Fielding Anderson's spiritual autobiography, Mike Quinn's clear-eyed arm wrestling with history, Levi Peterson's Cowboy Jesus, countless letters to the editor, and almost any outrageous old thing by Sterling McMurrin.⁶

On a good day, I genuinely believe the Apostle Paul's assurance to Timothy (whether, as the higher critics tell us, the account is fictional or not). Paul had his problems with the hierarchy, those starched bureaucrats up in Jerusalem, and with their racist fundamentalism. He had his own blinders as well and his troubles with women, with missionary companions, with the faithful, and, surely, with himself. His public relations were dismal. He ended badly, but he believed beyond his circumstances and with marvelous conviction that "God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love, and of a sound mind." (2 Tim. 1:7.) On a good day, I still believe he's right. ☐

NOTES

1. Scott Cairns, *The Theology of Doubt*, (Cleveland: Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 1985), 31.
2. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (spring 1993): 7–64.
3. Hugh Nibley, in "Leadership versus Management," *BYU Today* 38:1 (Feb. 1984), 46–47.
4. Robert Frost, "The Death of a Hired Man," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 34.
5. Philip Larkin, in "Church Going," *The Less Deceived* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1955), 29.
6. DonLu Thayer, "Respite for a Heretic: Jesus Christ and the Language of Desire," *SUNSTONE* 12:4 (July 1988): 14–23; Lavina Fielding Anderson, "In the Garden God Hath Planted: Explorations toward a Maturing Faith," *SUNSTONE* 16:2 (Aug. 1991): 34–38; D. Michael Quinn, "On Being a Mormon Historian (and Its Aftermath)," in *Faithful History*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992); Levi Peterson, *The Backslider* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).



IN THE PARK OF THE AWAKENING, WASHINGTON, D.C.

The giant of the earth has slept
Beneath three acres for his bed.
He stirs, so now they come in Sunday packs,
In prides, in pods, in gaggles, in bonded pairs,
Some sauntering by themselves,
Pouring through the corner of a Breughel painting
Into the park for the Awakening, the morning,
They move around the giant head emerging
With a yawn from warming earth,
They banter beatifically about the stretching hand,
Large enough to snatch them up,
About the foot, about the arm and the elbow reaching free
Toward the air where buds are burgeoning.

—KARL C. SANDBERG