

## FROM THE EDITOR

## BRASS-FUL THINKING



By Elbert Eugene Peck

## SUN BEAMS

WE'D LIKE TO welcome you to SUNSTONE this morning. First, a few items by way of announcement (and pleading):

1. SUNSTONE is now on CD-ROM. The text of all issues of SUNSTONE and the late *Sunstone Review* are now at one's ready reference for either IBM or Mac computers on Signature Books' *New Mormon Studies CD-ROM: A Comprehensive Resource Library*. The CD also includes *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, the *Journal of Mormon History*, all non-fiction publications of Signature Books (including the nine-volume diaries of Wilford Woodruff), the Mormon titles of the University of Illinois Press, plus other important early LDS works, such as the *Journal of Discourses*. Retail price is two hundred dollars; you may purchase it through the Sunstone Mercantile at a 10 percent discount (see the inside back cover). If Sunstone sells just one hundred copies, we'll make enough to cover the printing cost of one magazine issue!

2. Give us a piece of your mind. Is it a Mormon thing, typically American, or just human, but why don't people tell authors what they think of their article? You'd be amazed at how many even big-name SUNSTONE authors receive zero feedback on their published pieces. It's scary just to put one's ideas out in public for scrutiny, but it's equally frightening when there's no response: "Does everyone but me know what a fool I am? Is this silent void merely polite embarrassment?" Okay, Mormons don't like to share negative information, but, flip, we don't even share the kind of positive, "good job!" comments that Sunday School teachers regularly get! Private letters are a kind and

surprisingly rare act of service, and SUNSTONE forwards, unopened, all mail addressed to our authors (but we don't give out addresses or telephone numbers). To make author correspondence easier, we're starting to put e-mail addresses in our author bios, but SUNSTONE needs letters for publication, too. Before we got an e-mail address (SunstoneUt@aol.com), internet advocates promised we'd be flooded with letters to the editor and to authors. Hardly. "What was the response to such-and-such article?" I'm often asked. "We didn't get many comments," I reply. "Really? Well, everyone I know was talking about it." It's a mistake to assume the author already has heard the comments; make the time to share your thoughts; you'd be surprised at how one letter engages an author (or editor) in an on-going mental dialogue. The Mormon intellectual community will never flourish without a critical community, and, by golly, dialogue with our idea shapers is essential.

3. Fax us the facts. Similarly, I'm continually amazed at comments that imply SUNSTONE has a broad network of friends and correspondents who send us news clippings, reports, and submissions from around the world, and we just sort through the abundance of missives. We don't. We need readers to contribute items for the magazine. Consider these sections:

- *News stories*: most of our Update news reports are summaries from the Salt Lake papers, and while that is a valuable service, it makes our Church news too Utah-based (as Violet and Stan Kimball periodically, but charitably, remind me). We need reports of program innovations and other interesting developments outside of Utah.
- *Of Good Report*: this section near the front

of the magazine features a quote from a recent non-Mormon book that would resonate with Mormon readers.

- *Out of the Best Books*: this excerpt in the Cornucopia section spotlights a new Mormon book worthy of recommendation.
- *All-Seeing Eye*: this Cornucopia feature pictorially documents Mormonism, such as with an intriguing or ironic photograph.
- *CyberSaints*: interesting gleanings from the internet.
- *An Olive Leaf*: our last-page, LDS inspirational gleaning from a relatively unknown historical document, such as a diary, or a contemporary Church speech.

For all these, we welcome (and need) referrals. Keep us in mind in your reading.

## IN REMEMBRANCE

AS the croci, tulips, and daffodils poke their heads up and bloom this spring, I've been thinking a lot about Easter and the hope of resurrection that the flowers sprouting from dead seeds and bulbs engender. I've also been considering which church I'll worship in on Easter Sunday. I am deeply moved by a beautiful, "high church" Easter service. The exulting music and liturgy in a vaulting space parallel the yearnings of my heart to rise to heaven with the risen Jesus. Easter in the spring spiritually culminates Christmas in winter: that small, hopeful light that flickered into the world in the bleak midwinter solstice is now a brilliant sunrise making all things bright and beautiful.

I like the way the traditional Christian calendar was tied to the rhythms of the earth, to its seasons (at least in the northern hemisphere). Easter now occurs when it does because that's when Passover is, but we max out the spring analogs nonetheless. Christmas, however, was reportedly placed in December to co-opt a pagan solstice holiday. No matter; it works: Christmas in December is an effective pedagogical tool for teaching God's intervening love for our dark, bent world.

The Christian and Jewish religious calendars, full of days commemorating foundational events, were constructed for people who couldn't read and rarely thought abstractly. Then, ritualized drama and storytelling were the best tools to teach the mass of humanity who they were and what God expected of them. Dramatic rituals still work well today, even with highly educated congregations. On most Christmas Eves I attend midnight mass, where the baby Jesus is pro-

cessionally placed in the heretofore-empty manger. Even in LDS temples, the Adam and Eve drama is the best remembered instruction of the endowment, effectively constructing our view of our human existence.

In contrast to some Eastern religions, both the Jewish and Christian faith traditions are historically rooted. That is, their foundational stories cannot be separated from the religion, and hence, the retelling of the story is integral to maintaining the religion. So it is not surprising that each has ritualized its storytelling.

Mormonism is similarly rooted in an integral historical story, and while we tell our story over and over, we have not (yet) developed a religious calendar as was done in preceding dispensations—a fact some Saints lament, especially converts. And it does seem a little sad that even Easter is often just another Sunday with a theme sacrament meeting, unless, of course, general, stake, or ward conference happens to fall on it. And Christmas is a religious day for Mormons only when it falls on a Sunday.

I suspect the primary historical reason for the absence of the Christian religious calendar in Mormonism is that our early Saints and leaders came from "low church" Protestant traditions, which celebrate simple worship over pomp and ceremony and high ritual. There is value in that, and I prefer the democratic simplicity of our very human weekly worship services, which nevertheless are also highly structured rituals. And, while we feel no need to adopt the ceremonial accretions of the "apostate" Christian church (Lent, Pentecost, et al.), in all his restoring of Old Testament teachings and practices (including polygamy), why couldn't Joseph Smith have restored some of the Hebrew holidays, too? (Whether or not to maintain Jewish traditions was hotly debated in early Christianity.) For instance, can you see Mormons celebrating the minor merry-making festival of Purim, where the story of Esther is reenacted as a melodrama to an enthusiastic cheering and jeering audience. Actually, I can't, either; it just doesn't speak to what we're about as Mormons, but it does provide a different alternative to storytelling besides the preached sermon.

Given our current LDS services, an outsider observing a Mormon ward could easily wonder what gives Mormonism its vitality—certainly not its admittedly (even by devout Mormons) boring services. It takes time to see the life and spirit that in fact permeates Mormon services, for they are part of an incredible weaving of individuals' lives into a communal tapestry. And without that sense

of connectedness to the community, it's hard to see that a boring talk by an unskilled layperson is the beatification of that thread in the communal cloth. But with that insight, a bad talk becomes a good one when you see the individual's growth, and, too, the talk binds the speaking Saint to the congregation and the congregation to the Saint. It is amazing how just beneath the still, almost lifeless surface of the pond of a Mormon meeting thrives a vibrant ecology of life.

Having said that, however, I still like pomp on Easter, where, in the twinkling of an eye, a trumpet actually sounds to herald the last day. There are times when the soul wants to exult, and Mormon services rarely complement that deep, spiritual need, so I supplement them by joining with other Christians. And having a bent for mentally tinkering with how we "do church," I ponder what a Mormon religious calendar would be like and how it could add color and fun and diversity to our collective events. Just what values do we prize that we could structure into an annual day/ritual/event to remind us of them and to instill them in us?

Mormonism may not have developed its own religious calendar because it grew up in the literate, modern United States. Our meetings reflect that fact: we have an administrative calendar. Instead of rotating around the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our annual cycle rotates around *semi-annual* general and stake conferences, *annual* ward and all-Church Young Women's and Relief Society conferences, *monthly* fast and testimony meetings, home teaching visits, and PPIs, *weekly* quorum and auxiliary meetings, and a plethora of leadership meetings, which because of our lay clergy are woven into the fabric and vocabulary of every active LDS family. One result of our pattern of meetings is that we're trapped by a habit of speech-giving as our nearly exclusive form of communal worship. When Mormons meet, they preach.

Nevertheless, perhaps Mormonism is slowly developing its own religious calendar—special days that commemorate events tied to the Restoration. We are still, after all, a very young religion, and our organization is in flux as we go international. The U.S. Church, led by Wasatch Front expatriates, has always celebrated July 24th with dances, fireworks, parades, and picnics. Yet, until recently, Pioneer Day seemed to be one more American cultural artifact that we weren't exporting to the international Church. Now, we have begun other annual Church-wide commemorations of Mormon history. The restoration of the Aaronic priest-

hood is an example; so is the annual First Presidency Christmas Fireside. But both of these events illustrate how we draw from our limited administrative-meeting tradition—these commemorations are just one more meeting where we sit and listen to people talk to us. Perhaps that's the Mormon way, but I believe we can be more creative and effective.

Last summer's all-Church sesquicentennial celebration of the Pioneers entering the Salt Lake Valley by having Saints everywhere participate in community service projects was truly exciting, combining commemoration with activism. We drew upon our deeply moving heritage and applied it in a modern way. The early Pioneers mobilized themselves as the Camp of Israel by organizing into groups of ten, fifty, and a hundred, and that event spiritually bound together all who crossed the plains. Similarly, today's Israel, spread abroad, organized itself for community building and bound together all of today's Saints who joined in. That can-do, effective organizing is just as Mormon as are meetings and pulpits, and we do it year-round in serving. But by shaping our service in the Pioneer model, the sesquicentennial event dramatically told us who we are and what we're about as God's people. In organizing under the Pioneer banner, we ritually connected ourselves not only to our fellow living Saints but to all the Saints, and we made that foundational exodus story our own—just as Passover does for Jews and the Lord's Supper does for Christians. And it was fun, to boot! Wouldn't it be nice if Pioneer Day became an annual, world-wide Mormon holiday? That ritual day would do more to inculcate these values than would a hundred general conference exhortations.

Several decades ago, the U.S. government decided that Washington, D.C., had enough memorials that consisted of statues with protective buildings. Officials decided that most future memorials would be "living" ones that had an actual, functioning purpose related to the person they honored. Hence, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, and Theodore Roosevelt Island (a wilderness preserve). Similarly, Mormons don't need any more commemorative meetings where we give and hear talks. Such meetings have their place, but we have enough of them. What we need are more living commemorations where we act and interact while remembering and making the past live in and through us.

Oh, and brass in Church, at least on Easter, would be nice, too. ☐