

## THE MORE THINGS CHANGE . . .

By Kathleen A. McDonald

**A**FTER WEATHERING A layoff, starting our own business, and preparing emotionally and financially for years, my husband and I finally achieved our goal on 6 September 2001: I quit my job as an attorney at a major law firm in order to spend more time with our three young children, ages seven, five, and fourteen months. I had tons of plans: shuttling the kids to ballet, horse-back riding, and flag football; overseeing homework; volunteering in the classroom; preparing nutritious meals and snacks; spending mornings one-on-one with the baby; increasing the client base of our business; writing. In short, I restructured my life in order to give my children a better one. All that seemed to change on 11 September 2001.

As the airplanes shattered against the buildings and the buildings shattered to the ground, I felt my dream of providing my kids a more nurturing childhood also shatter. The world now seemed dark and Orwellian, full of fear, mistrust, government intrusion, and war. I ruefully contemplated the irony that no sooner had I taken the final step to improving my kid's lives than cataclysmic events threatened to ruin them.

Then, I realized that the specters of ongoing terrorism and the bloodthirsty response of some cannot damage my ideals, values, and notions of right and wrong unless I let them. Most significant, my vision for guiding my children to enjoy what they can, be grateful for what they have, and look for

ways to lighten someone else's load need not change at all.

Although the baby doesn't know what happened on 11 September, and the older children can't possibly appreciate the far-reaching repercussions of that day's events, the way I choose to react and conduct myself will impact their lives far more than any act

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of terrorism or our national response. Five hurdles await me, and the dexterity with which I approach them will determine whether I raise children who are cynical, negative, and fearful, or children who are intelligent, loving, and benevolent:

1. *Allowing my emotions to govern my actions.* When someone hurts my kids, I teach them that it is not OK to reflexively hurt that person back, so I had better follow the same rule. I am as devastated over the terrorist attacks as the next person, but I need to govern my behavior by principles of justice, truth, and compassion, not raw emotion.

2. *Fearing any person who is or appears to be of Arab descent.* For most of my adult life, I

have battled assiduously to eliminate prejudicial thoughts and behaviors; I'm certainly not going to give in to prejudice now. For all I know, my Iranian neighbors may be undercover terrorists, not the doctors they purport to be; however, I'd rather be dead, trusting them, than alive, perpetually mistrusting.

3. *Acquiescing in the rescission of my constitutional freedoms.* As a lawyer, I am keenly aware of the protections the U.S. Constitution provides us as a nation and as individuals. While I support implementing certain increased security measures in the wake of the terrorist attacks, I decry government intervention that disregards my basic liberties in the name of "protecting me."

4. *Jumping on the war bandwagon.* It is tempting to join the throngs crying for expanded military action, but I choose to study the lessons learned from our past unsuccessful military involvements and advocate not repeating them. I will model humility to my children as I try to ascertain what other, more experienced nations might advise in terms of addressing terrorism.

5. *Failing to take responsibility.* When my daughter comes to me crying that my son has hit/kicked/pushed her, I usually ask: what did YOU do to HIM first? Since 11 September, I have done considerable introspection. The U.S. is not wholly blameless for the present trouble; other countries do have some legitimate grievances against us. I will examine whether my actions or omissions have contributed to my government's foreign policies that at times have hurt innocent people around the world. I will teach my children to be active and engaged citizens and to take responsibility for the consequences of their country's choices.

**A**LTHOUGH everything changed on 11 September, actually nothing essential changed at all: I still plan to teach my children the higher principles of love, compassion, tolerance, and restraint. I still plan to engage my children in various service projects. I still plan to teach them that living in the United States is a blessing—not because, as some would have us believe, this nation is favored of God, but because so much of the rest of the world does not have the basic necessities we take for granted. Certainly, the future of our country is uncertain, but the ideals I strive for as I mother my children remain crystal clear. ☐



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## STILL CIRCLING THE WAGONS: VIOLENCE AND MORMON SELF-IMAGE

By Mary Ellen Robertson

VIOLENCE IS AN inescapable part of human experience.<sup>1</sup> From the stories we hear almost daily of gun violence, assassinations, riots, extreme sports, war, genocide, hate crimes, racial persecution, serial killers, rape, spouse/partner/child abuse, gay-bashing, and gang violence, we easily grasp the many ways it affects our everyday lives. Konrad Lorenz, whose work focuses on aggressive behavior in animals and humans, writes, "With humanity in its present cultural and technological situation, we have good reason to consider intraspecific aggression the greatest of all dangers."<sup>2</sup>

Violence has likewise played a significant part in Mormon experience. It's a major theme in our scriptures—particularly the wars described in the Book of Mormon.<sup>3</sup> It has shaped much of our religion's history and still affects Mormon experience today.

Because violence has played such a role in our past, we can rightly ask if we Mormons react differently to violence than do our contemporaries of other faiths. Is there a distinctively Mormon understanding of or response to violence?

For the most part, we Mormons reacted to the tragic events of 11 September much the same as people did all across the United States. We mourned the loss of loved ones and strangers alike; we donated to relief efforts; we sought comfort in our faith communities; and we forged ahead with life in a more uncertain and hostile world. These similarities aside, Mormons seem to be wired a little differently when it comes to confronting violence. A brief review of Church history may help us understand our different

"wiring" and how past persecutions have molded Mormon self-image.

### VIOLENCE IN CHURCH HISTORY

VIOLENCE has played a central role in Mormonism since its beginnings in 1830. Religious leaders verbally abused Joseph Smith for his claims of visions, angels, and gold plates. Mormons fled or were kicked out of settlements in New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, before they trekked West. In various incidents, Church and personal property was vandalized. Homes and businesses were damaged; crops and livelihoods were destroyed. Men—especially Church leaders—were attacked, beaten, and subjected to the indignity of being painted with tar and covered with feathers. Women and children were threatened, physically assaulted, or chased from their homes. At Haun's Mill in Missouri, a militia of more than two hundred men killed seventeen Latter-day Saints and wounded thirteen others.<sup>4</sup>

Polygamy increased the tension between Mormons and others. Repugnant to the Victorian moral standards of nineteenth century America, the rumors about and the practice of polygamy caused much friction.

Outsiders considered Mormons dangerous—in their beliefs, practices, and ever-growing numbers and political clout—which escalated anti-Mormon violence. Perhaps the ultimate act of violence in Mormon history, at least the one having the greatest impact upon the psyche of the early Saints, occurred in June 1844 when the

Church's president and prophet, Joseph Smith, and his brother Hyrum were murdered at Carthage Jail in Illinois.

### THE INFLUENCE OF VIOLENCE ON MORMON SELF-IMAGE

THE persecution directed at early Mormons not only affected the people who experienced it directly but also subsequent generations of Latter-day Saints. The telling and retelling of persecution stories, the actions of anti-Mormon individuals and groups, and the hardships our ancestors suffered makes the experience of violence very real for many contemporary Saints. For those whose ancestors were members of the early Church, family and Church history are virtually indistinguishable, and the violence directed at long-dead ancestors becomes intensely personal. As a result, there seems to be a specifically Mormon mindset—almost a collective unconscious—concerning the violence and trauma in Church history.

Mark Koltko-Rivera, a psychologist who has analyzed elements of Mormon psychohistory, declares, "The Mormon mind has been powerfully shaped by Haun's Mill and other massacres, the Missouri Extermination Order, Carthage Jail, the ordeal at Winter Quarters, and the shallow graves left on the exodus to the Salt Lake valley."<sup>5</sup>

Contributing to Latter-day Saint reactions to violence is an aversion to owning our part in creating the conflicts. Although the early Saints contributed to the tensions with their neighbors, they tended to see themselves as "without sin"—innocent of wrongdoing. They saw themselves as victims and martyrs, rarely acknowledging how their attitudes, their invasion of established communities and bloc voting, their opposition to slavery, their friendliness to Native Americans, or their transgression of cultural marriage norms may have provoked some of the intense negative sentiment and violence directed against them. And in our retelling of Church history even today in Sunday School or seminary, we often perpetuate these blind spots. We tend not to spend much time putting these events into the larger historical context. It's easier for us to think of our ancestors as innocent victims than it is to acknowledge they might have been part of the problem.

According to Koltko-Rivera, the retelling of anti-Mormon persecution stories has affected the Mormon psyche in another way:

Due to the crisis of prolonged persecution, Mormonism has adopted



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a siege mentality, like settlers with the wagons in a circle. The circumstances demand that the people adopt a herd mentality that stresses conformity above all else; to think otherwise is to separate from "Us" and become one of "Them." Such an approach was perhaps necessary for the survival of the church in an earlier age. It is easy to see, however, that this is still essentially the attitude taken by many church members and leaders.<sup>6</sup>

We Latter-day Saints haven't distanced ourselves much from the mentality Koltko-Rivera describes, even though it has been some time since we as a group were in significant physical peril. We are not under siege. We are not being physically assaulted or killed for our beliefs today. Yet we are still "circling our wagons" when, at worst, our pain comes from finding ourselves the butt of a few polygamy jokes and unflattering portrayals in the press.

Related to this siege mentality is a "persecution complex" that exists among many Latter-day Saints today.<sup>7</sup> Based on the past, Mormons today seem to anticipate mistreatment from non-Mormon peers. We are overly sensitive to criticism (either real or perceived) from people outside the Church. Likewise, there is little tolerance for critics within the Church. Many among us seem quick to interpret anything less than positive about the Church as persecution, not simply as bad information, poor research, or an example of an individual's bias.

I saw this persecution complex in action while completing work on my master's degree. At one point, my advisor informed me that I needed to rewrite significant portions of my thesis. When I told my family and friends at Church about this turn of events, their initial assumption was *not* that my thesis needed work (which was true), but rather that my advisor *had* to be an anti-Mormon to make such a request. I was astonished that so many Mormons independently leaped to the same erroneous conclusion. It seemed indicative of the Mormon mindset: anything negative said about a Mormon or the Church must be persecution.

Another facet of our mindset is the belief

that persecution simply comes with the calling as God's chosen people. Historians Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton write: "It was all part of the persecution that, whatever excuses might be offered, would always be the lot of the Saints of God. The Mormons could also regard persecution as 'a blessing in disguise,' a perception that helped them in dealing with the psychological trauma." Even in the worst of circumstances, early Saints seemed able to wrest something positive from their sufferings. Leaders such as Brigham Young said that good came out of persecutions, considering them a "refiner's fire" for the early Saints. Arrington and Bitton

and its contributions to a common Latter-day Saint mindset gives us a springboard to discuss how some Mormons responded to the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

#### VIOLENCE HITS HOME

As noted earlier, Mormons responded to the terrorist attacks the same way as other Americans did. We reacted with feelings of disbelief, shock, grief, fear, and anger to the terrorists' attacks. But some Latter-day Saints responded more uniquely by circulating reports through the Internet that no Mormons had been killed in these events. Several such reports appeared on email lists I participate in, and an article in the 12 September 2001 *Deseret News* indicated that no Church members or missionaries in New York had perished in the tragedy. Later news reports showed that a number of Mormons had died in these events.<sup>10</sup>

Stories of Mormons being spared seemed a new symptom of "Chosen People Syndrome." I was alternately embarrassed and angered that people would fabricate and circulate this kind of fiction. I agreed with the assessment of these rumors by Robert Kirby, a *Salt Lake Tribune* columnist who often has his finger on the pulse of the Mormon community:

Currently circulating the LDS gossip mill are reports of a miraculous sparing of Mormons in the Sept. 11 disaster. The most prominent of these is the story of how missionaries in New York were supposed to attend a conference in one of the towers, but every single one of them overslept, or got stuck in traffic. It's a nice story but also an untrue one. No mission conference was scheduled for the World Trade Center. All the missionaries are safe, but it's a fact that probably has more to do with geography than justice. Believing that God spared your faith while letting the equally innocent of other faiths die is nothing more than ecclesiastical conceit. I am not saying that God does not protect his children, or even that those who

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being physically assaulted or killed for our beliefs today. Yet we are still "circling our wagons" when, at worst, our pain comes from finding ourselves the butt of a few polygamy jokes and unflattering portrayals in the press.

continue, "This sense of persecution as both fate and test of the chosen people had developed early in the church. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

A longing for uniqueness seems to be part of our Latter-day Saint mindset as well. We are told to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. We seem to take pride in referring to ourselves as peculiar people, not realizing this term was used by many nineteenth-century religious groups. Granted, we do have quite a few unique theological concepts; so many in fact, that some Christian groups don't consider us to be Christian at all. Throw in angels, gold plates, rituals such as proxy ordinances for the dead, polygamy, and funny underwear, and we can sound a little . . . out there. At times, our sense of uniqueness can be accompanied by an attitude one colleague refers to as "chosen people syndrome,"<sup>9</sup> wherein we as Latter-day Saints consider ourselves more blessed, more special, more correct, more protected, more righteous, and more worthy of God's favor than anyone else. At times, we also seem intent on making everyone around us aware of our "chosen" status.

Again, this is not an exhaustive catalog of the elements comprising the Mormon self-image. But this look at violence in our history





















