

## I N M E M O R I A M

## NEILA SESHACHARI

By Levi S. Peterson



*Neila Seshachari died unexpectedly of a burst aorta on 10 March 2002. She and her husband, Candalai Seshachari, known as Sesh, were close friends and colleagues of Levi Peterson in the English Department at Weber State University, in Ogden, Utah. Neila and Sesh immigrated from their native India to Utah in 1969 with their two daughters, Roopa Hashimoto and Ruthi Priya Sanger.*

NEILA WAS A remarkable person in any context. Her body was lithe, her features compelling. Her dark hair hung in a braid to her ankles. She wore a native sari with complete elegance though she put one on only rarely during her later years as one of Utah's most prominent professional women.

I will not list her many achievements except to note the following. She was a highly respected scholar and teacher of American literature. Her female students were particularly inspired by the model of competence she gave in a culture not noted for encouraging the achievement of women. She served as editor of *Weber Studies: An Interdisciplinary Humanities Journal* for thirteen years, persuading authors of national reputation to publish in its pages. She produced prize-winning special issues, including one on Mormon culture for which she and her journal received an award from the Association for Mormon Letters. She did this on meager resources and with minimal assistance. She served as a member of the board and executive committee of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, bringing its annual conference to Weber State. She was the first woman president of the Utah Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters. She served on the boards of the Utah Arts Council and of the Utah Humanities Council. At the moment of her death, she was president-elect of the Association for Mormon Letters, only the second non-Mormon to hold that position, the first having been her husband, Sesh.

With Mormons in general, Neila was friendly, cooperative, and willing to grant a

spiritual parity between Hindu and Christian. Although she had reservations about Mormon theology, she had a comfortable, friendly relationship with numerous Latter-day Saints. The family values of Neila and Sesh were similar to those of most Mormons. Nonetheless, she confessed that a good deal of the culture shock she experienced during her early years in Utah derived from the attitudes and mores of the Saints. Like any immigrant, she suffered from social disorientation. She naively assumed that the United States would be a haven of equality and civilized acceptance. In Utah-Mormon America, she found persons of color were frequently discriminated against, whereas in India, her brown skin had been the norm. After securing a position on the Weber State faculty, she was astonished to find the pay for women incommensurate with the pay for men. Furthermore, she found herself baffled by the presumption of spiritual superiority on the part of Christians, which in Utah expressed itself in Mormon proselytism. During the flight between New York and Salt Lake City on her first trip to the U.S., a bishop from southern Utah instructed her on the values of Mormonism. Within a year or two of her arrival, she realized soberly that her children would have to seek their friends at the fringes of Mormon society.

She noted how excluded from Christian America persons of non-Christian faith are made to feel by the general custom of ending prayers in school and other public places in the name of Christ. As a Hindu, she accepted Christ as one among many manifestations of God. After twenty-five years in Utah, she would ruefully comment that she could re-

member only three occasions when she had heard a public prayer end without explicit reference to Christ. She herself had offered one of these prayers. I had offered another of them. She took particular umbrage over the Mormon practice of baptizing for the dead, feeling violated by the possibility that someone would perform vicariously in her name the ceremony which she had deliberately declined while alive.

I have been reminded of some of the foregoing details by rereading Neila's essay "Uprooting and Rerooting: The Escapades of an Immigrant in Mormon Utah," which was published in 1994, in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and which I highly recommend. Be it said that Neila remonstrated vigorously—though always with a warm affability—against the deficiencies of her adopted society. She supported equalization of salary scales, spoke in behalf of diversity, and taught courses in feminism. As a result, she became widely known and respected throughout northern Utah. She fraternized warmly with persons of many faiths. She insisted that we should do more than merely tolerate another person's faith; we should respect it because it is sincerely held. Of particular note here is the fact that, despite her reservations about Mormon theology, she won her way among both liberal and conservative Church members. Had she lived to serve her term as president of the Association for Mormon Letters, she would have applied her considerable energy to furthering the stated aims of that organization, especially the aim of fostering a Mormon literature of artistic and intellectual merit. She would have also influenced her associates in that organization by her personal spirituality, probably without being conscious of doing so.

I WAS impressed over the years by Neila's spirituality. She and Sesh regularly meditated and read from Hindu scriptures at a shrine in their home and from time to time held a more formal worship service called a "puja" to which they invited friends. In time, Neila herself became a lay Hindu priest—an individual matter because there is no hierarchy or assertion of corporate authority in

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Hinduism as there is in Christianity. Duly licensed by Weber County, she began to perform weddings and funerary rituals among the sizeable Hindu community in northern Utah and elsewhere. Indeed, she performed weddings all over the country, including one at the historic Concord, Massachusetts, church. The weddings were not only between Hindus but also between Hindus and adherents of other faiths and between couples of Anglo-American and Indo-American background. She had the advantage of an academic minor in Sanskrit, the classical language in which the Hindu scriptures are written and Hindu ceremonies are conducted.

My wife and I were fortunate enough to be among the guests invited to the home of Neila and Sesh to observe the final funerary ritual performed thirteen days following the death of Neila's mother. Attired in a sari, Neila sat crosslegged on the floor of their living room before candles burning in small holders. She chanted a number of prayers in Sanskrit, urging the spirit of her mother, thought to be still lingering in the mortal realm, to say its final farewell and journey definitively into the great spiritual being lying at the core of all existence. I felt strongly at one with her and Sesh, sharing their sorrow, their reverence, their intuition of the intangible. Above all, I was keenly aware of the universality of human experience.

Neila loved Utah. She had a great regard for Mormon history and the pioneering spirit of the Mormon people. Their Zion had become her home, for she had connected with its landscape, its history, and its people. Such a vibrant personality will be sorely missed by her many friends and loved ones. A loss of particular moment will be the influence she exerted toward a recognition of the oneness of humanity, a quality much needed in a divisive and contentious world.



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## FROM THE EDITOR

### A PARTICULAR ROLE

By Dan Wotherspoon

I HANDLED SOMETHING very poorly in an elders quorum meeting five or six years ago. I still believe I had a good point to make, but I sure botched the way I presented it. In fact, I pretty much hijacked the lesson, throwing it off course and ruining the spirit of the meeting. I felt so badly, I called the instructor at home a few hours later to apologize.

The lesson that week had been about teaching our children to value "womanhood." And before I began my bluster, everything about the meeting had been pretty standard stuff. The instructor had read quotes from Church leaders and the scriptures about the eternal importance of womanhood. Several elders had shared how much they loved their wives and mothers, and how they felt about their responsibilities as fathers. Up until that point, I had also been playing my usual role, sitting there kind of bored, uncomfortable, not really sure if I should say something. And I wish things had stayed that way, but whatever restraint I had been feeling just sort of evaporated when our instructor shared his view that women should be placed on a "pedestal."

(Me blurting): "I'm sorry? A pedestal? I've been sitting here for a while wondering if I should say anything, but now I just can't help it. This entire lesson is about the *wrong* thing. It starts from the *wrong* premise. Even the title is wrong. We shouldn't teach our children to value "womanhood"; we should teach them to value "women." Real, live, breathing-in-and-out, day-to-day women. Putting them on pedestals takes away everything real about them. If we put women on a pedestal, we end up loving our *ideas* about the women in our lives instead of the *actual* women in our lives. Valuing a caricature or an ideal is easy. Valuing someone who yells and screams at you and drives you crazy with the way she thinks . . . now *that's* the thing we should be teaching our children to do."

**T**HIS editorial isn't about womanhood or even about women, for that matter. It's really about Sunstone and one of the things I think we do well and should continue to do more of: to value and make space for "particulars."

By choosing the term particulars, I am plugging into a debate begun at least as long ago as the days of Plato and Aristotle, when they argued about what is "really real." Is it "universals," the non-spatial, non-temporal, eternal attributes that are instantiated by the various things in the physical world? Or is it "particulars," things that exist in time and space? For instance, is there really such a thing as "justice" or "mercy" (universals) apart from individual "just" or "merciful" acts (particulars)? Is there such a thing as "womanliness," something that constitutes a universal shared by all women? Or is it that there are really only "women" and all our musings about the qualities or attributes they share are just our own extrapolations?

I'm not going to try to answer this question except to say that I believe in some form of "realism": that there are universals that exist independent of any particular instantiation.<sup>1</sup> But even as I believe this, I very much prefer to think and live in the more rough-and-tumble world of particulars. I would rather deal with specific instances of things in all their complexity—their relationships with other occurrences, the emotions we feel as we encounter them—what William James referred to as the "full fact" of a given experience. I would rather deal with these particulars than with generalizations, even if idealizations are much simpler. Call me crazy, but if my goal were to really understand "womanhood," I would prefer becoming closely acquainted with actual women to reflecting abstractly on the possible universal qualities that make them "women" in the first place.

**S**O, what does this discussion have to do with Sunstone? I think part of the answer is found in the first words of the phrase that follows SUNSTONE magazine's subtitle: "Mormon experience." In our symposiums, in our magazine, in the kinds of discussions we as an organization try to facilitate, I believe our strength is that we emphasize individual stories and particular "takes" on various subjects over abstract or universalizing principles. Yes, we deal with themes that seem universal in nature, trends and characteristics of human life and spiritual

journeying that seem to cut across space, time, and cultures. But we do it primarily through stories and views that are grounded in particularity, that reveal idiosyncracy, that aren't presented as if they should be considered the "final word" on a subject.

What a luxury that is—and one not enjoyed quite as easily by Church authorities and official publications! We have a freedom many Church-related entities don't, for we're not in great danger of having statements in our symposiums or magazine taken as authoritative or binding "just because" they were said or read in connection with Sunstone. If something true in a "heavy trip" sort of way gets said in one of our forums, that truth will have to win its way into the hearts and minds of listeners and readers by proving itself in the marketplace of ideas. (I'm tempted to focus the rest of this reflection on how our lack of official "clout" allows us to host discussions and print things that are actually *interesting*, but I'll keep those thoughts to myself.)

Just as I admit that I believe somewhat in universals, I also believe there is truth in the saying "you can't see the forest for the trees." Yes, we need to constantly check for the big picture, for perspective and links to theory; but let's not go overboard and forget that without individual trees, there is no forest. The famous definition of "truth" found in D&C 93:24 tells us that "truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come." The last half of this definition highlights the universalizing dimension of truth: a knowledge of all things past, present, and future. But let's not forget the particularizing dimension. This definition begins by saying that truth is a knowledge of *things*! It's great to try to circumscribe all truths into one great whole, but we need to remember that every whole is made up of parts or particulars. I love having a job in which I get to emphasize trees, things, and parts!

**I** HOPE you'll consider the blessings of particularity as you read this issue of SUNSTONE and as you peruse this year's symposium program (see detachable center pages). Please know that you have every right to disagree with the people you meet in these pages, with their premises and their ideas. We don't have official ties to the Church and are not expected to be authoritative. We strive to select for the magazine, as well as for the symposium, presentations that are intelligent and have a respectful tone. Still, remember that most of what you'll encounter in our forums will be the stories of individual trees, not overarching analyses of the forest.

I love the essay and stories H. Wayne Schow shares in the pages immediately following this editorial, but I don't agree with everything he says. Why should I? Although I connect in some ways with his feelings, they are *his* stories, written from a particular painful place that I haven't experienced but that I'm grateful I get to learn about. The stories of Keith Norman and his son, told in our April issue, were wonderful, as was Holly Welker's very challenging memoir of her mission to Taiwan in the January issue. But they weren't wonderful in the sense that they were easy; each, like Schow's essay, contains implied (as well as not-so-covert) criticisms of various strains of thought found in the Church, of bureaucratic layers and attitudes and cultural baggage that are very frustrating. Though not easy, these pieces are intrinsically valuable *because* of their particularity, *because* their voices are tree voices—and we cannot know a forest except by its trees, nor the "body of Christ" except by its members.

**I** VERY much like the approach taken by theologian Bernard Loomer when he is confronted with a different or unique view. Loomer states:

I am first of all interested not in order to criticize, but rather simply to be with it for a while. The criticism, if it comes, will come later. . . . I believe that the greatest criticism of another can be given by one who is first of all content to understand the other, to hear the other out, to let the other be . . . [and] to do this without fear, without being insecure, to provide the conditions and atmosphere by which that other person in his point of view can become more fully what he is to become.<sup>2</sup>

I like Loomer's approach in that he recognizes that judgment does have its place, but I love his reminder that verdicts don't have to follow immediately upon hearing an idea! I love the "not yet, let's sit with this idea for a while" flavor of his style.

This same attitude about approaching

### Pontius' Puddle



JOEL KAUFFMANN

new or different (even uncomfortable) ideas could also apply when we meet something painful. We don't always need to rush to "make things better," to make the pain go away. Often it's best to simply "be with it for a while," just as it's often the best approach when we meet someone in pain to simply be with that person for a while. Perhaps this is part of Alma's charge for us to be "willing to mourn with those that mourn" (Mosiah 18:9).

Jacob's reminder in the Book of Mormon about who it is who will ultimately judge our hearts is comforting to me: "And the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there. . . (2 Ne. 9:41, emphasis added). I'll take that particular gatekeeper because I sense that he doesn't just love us universally. I believe he knows and loves us all "one by one," as living, breathing-in-and-out, worrying, loving, struggling, particulars.

**I** DON'T know if my "perhaps good idea but definitely bad behavior" outburst in elders quorum meeting had anything to do with something that occurred a month or so later in sacrament meeting. I doubt it, but I loved what I heard: a young husband closing his talk with words about how much he loved his wife, Yvonne. And he loved Yvonne, he said, "Not just because she's my wife, but because of who she is. I love her personality, her integrity, and that we get to struggle together."



### NOTES

1. An example of a universal I believe could exist regardless of an actual instantiation is the geometric quality of triangularity. My hunch is that it is universally true that the sum of the internal angles of any triangle will be 180 degrees even if there were no actual triangles to measure.

2. Bernard M. Loomer, "S-I-Z-E," *Criterion* 13 (Spring 1974):6.

## TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

H. Wayne Schow

### SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES AND INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

*There are two languages that are quite distinct although made up of the same words; there is the collective language [spoken by the Church] and there is the individual one. The Comforter whom Christ sends us, the spirit of Truth, speaks one or other of these languages, which circumstances demand, and by a necessity of their nature there is not agreement between them.*

*When genuine friends of God . . . repeat words they have heard in secret amidst the silence of the union of love [that is, understanding intimately received from God], and these words are in disagreement with the teaching of the Church, it is simply that the language of the market place is not that of the nuptial chamber.*

—SIMONE WEIL<sup>1</sup>

**I** CONTEMPLATE THIS SUBJECT with ambivalent feelings. As a life-long Latter-day Saint, I've known from childhood that many Mormons are harmoniously comfortable in the Church. As President Gordon B. Hinckley recently said, they find in it "something they can get hold of that's firm and sure and an anchor in the midst of all of this instability in which they're living."<sup>2</sup> The explanatory narratives of the Church happily align with their reality, and LDS doctrines, rituals, and lifestyle satisfy their spiritual needs.

But with time and experience, I become more aware of those others around me who chafe within the confines of the LDS community. In one way or another, they find the institutional narratives and behavioral models incongruent with their experiences. These members are less visible, often suffer in silence, or simply go away. I say that I am ambivalent about this subject because I have sojourned on both sides of the divide.

The second group is undoubtably very substantial. Setting aside the question of how many practicing Latter-day Saints have mixed feelings about life in the Church, the number of less- or non-active members in wards and branches is astonishingly high, varying from roughly 30 to as much as 80 percent in some extreme cases.<sup>3</sup>



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me that to reduce the number of inactive members of the first group, we should ask how we can diffuse the stigma of nonconformity so these brothers and sisters can feel accepted and comfortable. And for the second group, we should examine why they might find our collective focus unrewarding. In other words, we should not so much ask how we might change *them* individually as how we might review our institutional patterns and practices to better connect with the realities of their lives.

But in those meetings, no one raised these radical questions. To pursue them seriously would mean starting at square one to ask what justifies spiritual communities in the first place; it would mean asking, without preconceptions, what role the Church should play in our lives. In short, it would require a major reassessment.

**T**HE noted deconstructionist, Jacques Derrida, asserts that we often organize our perceptions of the world using binary sets. For instance, we typically think of phenomena in dualities such as up and down, day and night, reading and writing, male and female. He claims we not only divide our world this way, we also tend to privilege one of the binary terms over the other. For example, in Christian culture, the spiritual is typically privileged over the physical. Derrida then says that in analyzing any text, we need to locate the binary terms to consider which is culturally privileged, and to think about what such privileging implies.

Derrida's method provides a means for analyzing an obvious binary set: the relationship between the more or less institutionalized church and individual members. Is one of these poles culturally privileged?

With regard to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I submit that very often the Church itself is privileged over the individual. Faithful members are most likely to believe individuals must come to the institution to be guided and validated in their spiritual lives. They might say: "The Church has the answers to life's most important questions, it has the values and the rules, it knows about spirituality, it has—above all—authority; and if I want access to those things, I must submit to its prescriptions." Little, if any, room exists in Latter-day Saint theology for individuals to find eventual exaltation as unattached "free agents." This privileging of the Church collective over the individual is also clearly apparent in Church claims of exclusive authority to perform ordinances essential for personal exaltation.

Is this privileging of the Church entirely appropriate?

Imagine spiritual communities dispersed along a continuum based on the degree to which their theology and practice privilege either the group or the individual. At one pole, imagine an institution where one finds security in a firmly defined theology with authoritative answers, where one seeks comfort through conforming in a homogeneous environment. Imagine that this institution offers, by virtue of its authority, reassuring credentials of legitimacy.

At the other pole, imagine a community of believers who, fallibly, join to assist one another in sorting out life's complexities as they pursue spiritual self-realization. Imagine this as a community where individual, experiential truth is respected, welcomed, and assessed in a climate of openness. Imagine that here one could raise the most pressing issues of daily life, those relating to the private self, not the public persona, because persons would be free to reveal themselves without fear of condemnation, without the demand for conformity.

Both extreme positions have a potential downside. Some seekers may find in the authoritarian community that the firm doctrinal positions are not always congruent with their life experiences; that the pressures for conformity are oppressive; that full fellowship, therefore, may come at the cost of personal authenticity. On the other hand, the community which excessively privileges individuality and a high degree of existential relativism risks so diluting what it stands for that it loses its centripetal force, its legitimizing power. In attempting to accommodate everyone, it might come to mean little beyond a generic support group.

Of course, the poles of the continuum by no means preclude the possibility of desirable hybrid combinations. But at what position will the best spiritual community be found, the one most helpful, the one closest to a Christian model? Given the wide differences in the psychological makeup and spiritual needs of individuals, possibly no one type of spiritual community will be right for all.<sup>4</sup>

Let me reflect on how some of these questions relate to the spiritual needs of one Latter-day Saint family—my own. Our particular experiences may not be typical, but they illustrate some of the problematic dimensions of the Church/individual relationship.

#### I. BRAD AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

**I** AM the father of a gay son. In 1979, when at age twenty Brad "came out" to his mother and me, I was caught completely by surprise. From my religious and general

social environment, I had long held the view that individuals "choose" a homosexual identity consciously, willfully, perversely. Since nothing in Brad's behavior nor his development had occasioned even the slightest suspicion of such an abhorrent possibility, and since I considered our family relationships normal and healthy, I thought he was naive and mistaken. Why would Brad ever "choose" that? I knew I must help him straighten this matter out, but I also knew it would not be quick or easy. I could see big conflict ahead.

### IMAGINE A COMMUNITY IN WHICH ONE COULD RAISE THE MOST PRESSING ISSUES OF DAILY LIFE, WHERE PERSONS WOULD BE FREE TO REVEAL THEMSELVES WITHOUT FEAR OF CONDEMNATION, WITHOUT THE DEMAND FOR CONFORMITY.

On one hand, I had this son I loved so much and considered to be a splendid young man; on the other, I was indoctrinated and surrounded with the view that his self-perceived identity was simply anathema. How could he and we tolerate the social stigma that must follow?

In our intense, ongoing dialogue after he came out, Brad proved to be a powerful teacher. I could not deny the integrity, the authenticity that characterized his quest for true identity. But while I came slowly and painfully to understand his homosexuality as both normal and God-given, I could not avoid the jarring confrontation with religious dogma and my conditioned respect for the authority in which it originated. What I needed was to turn to my spiritual community for help in sorting out the moral and practical dilemmas involved. Why did that impulse feel so strange to me? Well, it was much like a defendant going to the prose-

cuting attorney for legal advice—a situation characterized by a fundamental incompatibility of priorities. The Church had its firm essentialist position to defend, leaving very little room for considering homosexuality existentially as we in our family needed to. Nor could we seek solace from extended family or Latter-day Saint friends, for the influence of the Church in their lives was powerful, and their view would be—I assumed—predictably orthodox.

And so we hid our dilemma. We wore masks; we played roles; we fostered subtle and not-so-subtle deceptions. We hated the inauthenticity, but at the time we did not know how otherwise to handle it. Being in the closet is not where anyone wants to be. Being made invisible is not a happy condition. Having to bury your truth violates the soul. It was bad enough for me: it was, I know, ever so much worse for my son.

Brad died in December 1986 at the age of twenty-eight, spending the final year and a half of his life at home with us. Before he died, he insisted that there be no funeral, Mormon or otherwise. What a striking example of alienation! Indeed, for some years, he had felt not merely marginalized but cut off from his spiritual community: it refused to acknowledge as good what God had created in him. In that environment, the subject could only come up to be dismissed. Official Mormonism denied his reality; it judged him *a priori*, without bothering to look carefully and openmindedly at evidence relevant to homosexual orientation, without considering positive alternative possibilities for his life.

As I watched Brad struggle to establish his identity, as I saw how hard it was for him to love himself when his church and society undercut his effort continually, I became convinced that pursuing a vital, fulfilled spiritual life will be overwhelmingly conflicted and frustrated if someone cannot love himself. As the keeper of a narrow dogma and its accompanying climate of nonacceptance, the Church must bear considerable responsibility for that difficulty in his life. In Brad's case, I believe the Church asked the wrong question and therefore came up with a dubious answer. Rather than asking from an institutionally privileged perspective, "How can Brad find spirituality by conforming to our group-approved model?" it might more appropriately have asked: "How can we as a spiritual community reach out to him and others who are troubled, how can we create a climate of openness that will help him and others realize their best possibilities as sons and daughters of God?"

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And what about Brad's parents? In order to be honest with ourselves, we had to look squarely at homosexuality as it came into our lives. We had to discover—on our own—the appropriate questions to ask. We had to examine—on our own—the doctrinal and ethical conflicts which that experience thrust on us. Our understanding changed a great deal, but our truth brought us in conflict with the Church, which spoke another language.

In the year following Brad's death, several church groups in our city asked us to speak to them about homosexuality and AIDS: Episcopalians invited us, then Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Unitarians. I can't overstate how beneficial, how therapeutic these occasions were for Sandra and me. The opportunity to *express* what we had been through and what we thought of it to persons who seemed genuinely interested and caring validated in some way our experience, which validation we very much needed.

With sadness, I add that no Mormon congregation or group invited any expression from us. There was apparently no legitimate place for it.<sup>5</sup>

## II. SANDRA AND THE QUEST FOR INTEGRITY

**S**OME years ago, our youngest son, Ted, and his bride were married in the Logan Temple. Sandra, his mother, was not at the ceremony. She chose not to be interviewed for a temple recommend. Would she have liked to have been present on this happy family occasion? Of course. Why, then,

did she not submit to the interviews? Was she unworthy? Not if worthiness is based on personal spiritual integrity. A loving wife, a devoted mother, a thoughtful, compassionate neighbor and friend, Sandra was and is consistently characterized by Christian virtues.

But she had concluded several years previously that temple interviews are inherently coercive, that in her experience the questioning served not so much to promote individual spirituality as to reinforce institutional power. Too many of the interview questions privilege conformity and submission to the Church's power structure. She had decided that her own soul's worthiness was a matter between herself and God, and she vowed she would not in the future place that personal accounting in the hands of institutional interrogators. With this self-conscious protest, she deliberately chose not to support a practice she regarded as unjustifiably oppressive.

I cannot fault her analysis. I admire Sandra's courage and honesty in deciding, on principle, to resist. She did what she did in order to be authentic, in order to be true to her inner voice, the spirit of truth speaking, as Simone Weil calls it, "the language of the nuptial chamber." It was, she has told me, one of the hardest decisions she ever made. Her integrity in this matter of conscience makes her, in my eyes, preeminently worthy.

Now, whose interests were served, I wonder, by her absence on that occasion of celebration and joining? Certainly not those of the bridal pair (although Ted understood well his mother's motives and respected her for her decision). What more important witness could have been present? How ironic that a ceremony intended to foster family solidarity should require an either/or choice.



THE SCHOW FAMILY, 1978.  
BACK ROW: Mike, Brad, Roger; FRONT ROW: Sandra, Ted.

## III. WAYNE AND THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE

**A** WISE counselor in our stake presidency once questioned me as a young man about why I was not attending Sunday School. When I told him I had substituted private scripture reading at that hour because I did not find the Sunday School lessons engaging, he observed that he too had felt that way once earlier in his life, but had responded differently. If he did not get something from a class lesson, he would make it a priority to contribute something that others might benefit from. "Both giving and receiving are important in a religious community," he said, "and the direction and proportion may vary from time to time."

That was good advice, and I adopted it in my ongoing relations with fellow Latter-day Saints. But as years passed, that approach gradually ceased to be viable for me. Why? Though nominally we may be fellow believers, each of us is on an individual spiritual journey and unavoidably somewhat separated from others. The unique combination of each person's experiences—our physical and social environments, whom we talk to, what we read, where we go and what we encounter—explains this difference. An ideal community recognizes the desirability of such individual differences and encourages their expression. We have so much to learn from one another.

As individuals evolve, some revitalize their spiritual lives by modifying or finding new narratives and metaphors to express their spiritual perceptions. While such conceptual scaffolding is very useful as a means to an end,

narratives and figurative language should not be confused with spiritual truth itself.

But because so many Latter-day Saints around me view certain scaffolds as the main structure, and because many see epistemological questions related to such issues as heretical in nature, I have to be very careful about what I say for fear of creating discomfort, confusion, and dissension. Discussion is limited by definite boundary markers placed explicitly or implicitly by policy or dogma or tradition. For fear of giving offense, I can't contribute what I would like to, nor can I often get others in the group to help me where I am. As a member of a spiritual community, where does that leave me? Surrounded by others, I nevertheless feel as if marooned on an island. I confess I have grown weary of biting my tongue and thereby being marginalized in my need for dialogue. Silenced, too often I have come from church feeling inauthentic and weary of walking on eggs.

**R**EADERS will doubtless draw various conclusions from these examples. Some will say Brad, Sandra, and I have fallen out of proper conformity with Church doctrine and authority, that it is unreasonable for us to expect, and impossible for the Church to accommodate, our idiosyncratic concerns. They will conclude that we and others like us should simply repent and reform.

Somewhat more sympathetically, others might say that in theory and in practice the Church exists to help individuals at the general level. That is all it can do. So if individuals' circumstances are not well addressed by its *general* dogmas and *general* practice, they must simply find the courage to define a private standing place and forego the comfort and support of an institutional home. Realistically considered, this may be the best possibility for people like us.

Yet, isn't there a third alternative? Couldn't the Church reassess and adjust its understanding to incorporate more of our kind? Can't it take a more existentialist approach to serve more of its inactive and alienated members in addition to those active members it now serves very well?

This third alternative is the one my heart longs for. So much of my identity has found definition through my positive Latter-day Saint experience. Much valued learning has come to me under that umbrella. The Church has given focus and direction to my spiritual quest; it has been the strong glue that links my family vertically and horizontally. I am reluctant to have such benefits di-

minished in my life. But I also know that I must grow and change; and the environment of my spiritual community, if I am to have one, must be sufficiently flexible not only to allow but also to encourage that.

**I**COME back to the continuum that I proposed. At one pole is a religious *institution*, entrenched and formidably strong, providing security through its hierarchical authority and doctrinal certainty. At the other is a spiritual *community*, a different kind of safe haven, aware of its fallibility but open and respectful of individuality.

## FOR FEAR OF GIVING OFFENSE, I CAN'T CONTRIBUTE WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO, NOR CAN I OFTEN GET OTHERS IN THE GROUP TO HELP ME WHERE I AM. AS A MEMBER OF A SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY, WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE ME?

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints exists variously between these poles. In some situations and for some individuals it wears its institutional face; at other times and places it provides much in the way of an embracing spiritual community. But because of the natural tendency of any organized group to seek to preserve equilibrium and protect the status quo, I believe the Church inclines somewhat more toward the institutional pole, privileging its claims to exclusive possession of authority and truth over its pastoral work to create a vital and nourishing spiritual community.

Should the Church decide to adjust its course and find a different center of gravity, it would not need to reinvent itself but simply to reemphasize such doctrines as free agency, eternal individual progression, and ongoing revelation. Latter-day Saints who feel unambivalently content and fulfilled in the Church will likely not want to change a thing. But I

cannot forget all of those on the other side of the divide, those who feel separated from their spiritual community.

When I consider the words and example of Jesus in the New Testament, they seem preponderantly sympathetic toward the community side of the continuum. Jesus consistently challenged rigid laws, forms, and institutions in order to minister uniquely to individuals of all walks of life and soul-states. If we were to ask him directly about this continuum, I think he would respond, "Are men and women made for the Church, or is the Church made for women and men?"

In the spirit of loving invitation, Jesus said: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." To me, that invitation implies a Church which embraces those on the periphery and the outside, even those who are irregular and unconventional, so many of whom especially need his rest.

### NOTES

1. From a letter, "Spiritual Autobiography," Weil wrote to Father J. M. Perrin shortly before her death at age 34. See Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, Emma Craufurd, trans (New York: Perennial Library, 1973).

2. From an interview published in the *Los Angeles Times*, 8 Mar. 1997; reprinted in SUNSTONE (July 1997): 72.

3. I have heard these figures from unofficial sources. Although I am not able to verify their accuracy, I think they are reasonably close. Whatever the actual percentages of inactivity, they are much higher than Church leaders would wish.

4. In her remarkable apologia (see note 1), Simone Weil analyzes with extraordinary perception the inherent tension in the relationship between the individual and the church. She recognizes the indispensable role played by the collective, but she sees also that individual spirituality is fundamentally "other," that it has equal legitimacy. And, she believes, in the individual's relationship to God, this "other" must be privileged. One must heed carefully the private language of the Holy Ghost, even if that private language runs counter to generalized institutional priorities. I am grateful for her insights and cannot too highly recommend her essay.

5. In its broad outline, my family's experience of conflict and alienation over an issue of non-conformity is similar to that known by, doubtless tens of thousands of Latter-day Saints: those who struggle with sexual identity issues, those who suffer in broken or otherwise seriously dysfunctional families, those who are guilt-ridden because of depression or because they are working mothers, or because they are single by choice, or because they have overstepped boundaries of sexual behavior—in short, all who fall outside recommended patterns.



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