

FROM THE EDITOR

HINTS OF PASTORING

By Dan Wotherspoon

We're excited to welcome Jana Riess as a regular contributing columnist (see her first column, page 66). Many SUNSTONE readers will know Jana from her cover article on "Mormon Kitsch" in the June 1999 issue. As that study showed, and as do several of her current projects—such as a forthcoming book on the spiritual aspects of the television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—Jana has had a long-time interest in understanding the way religious sensibilities get translated in popular culture. But she is also very attuned to spirituality, reverence, and the simplicity of our daily walks with God. I know you will enjoy getting to know her better.

ABOUT A YEAR ago, I learned something about myself that caught me off guard. I had been asked to take part in a panel discussion at a Mormon studies conference sponsored by Utah Valley State College in Orem. We were asked to discuss the question, "Can There Be a 'Mormon' Philosophy?"

Good topic, I thought to myself. *Of course there can be . . . if LDS philosophers play their cards right.* So, putting a few thoughts together, I headed to the conference.

Our discussion unfolded well, and everyone, including the audience, seemed to enjoy the give and take. But during the final panelist's remarks, and even more during the exchanges that followed with each other and with the audience, I noticed something that surprised me: I was the odd man out in the way I had interpreted our topic. Everyone else, including audience members who had joined in, seemed to have heard the term "Mormon' philosophy" as referring to particular ideas or positions Latter-day Saints might build into a consistent worldview, or that could provide a stable platform from which to approach various philosophical knots and ethical dilemmas. I had immediately zeroed in on trying to help create and suggest directions for a discipline, a movement of LDS philosophers who might be able to do some good thinking (or even some good deeds) together. My fellow panelists had keyed in on the "philosophy" part of the

phrase; my mind had immediately highlighted the "Mormon."

The conference was a rousing success; those with a genuine interest in Mormon thought seemed to leave energized and thinking enthusiastically about something offered that day. I was a bit more pensive. *What has happened to me? I know for certain that when I was at BYU and even during most of my graduate school days, I would have responded to the topic question as those guys had. For years, I was certain that I was going to one day formulate the "Grand Theory of the Universe," for heaven's sake! When did my focus shift? Was it before or after I took the job with Sunstone that I quit thinking of Mormonism primarily in terms of its teachings and more in terms of its people? And why has my view changed? Did the jump occur because I grew more confident in my basic sense of who God is and what the universe is really like? Or did I just get frustrated and lazy?*

I'm still puzzling out most of those questions, but I'm more and more certain that somewhere along the way, my autofocus has indeed changed. My first interest in Mormonism has definitely shifted toward connecting, joining with others, getting good things done together.

SO WHAT IS Mormonism, really? Is it primarily a set of theories, principles, doctrines, and laws (D&C 88:78) as my friends at the conference emphasized? Or is it best understood as a community—a view I was surprised to learn I leaned toward?

We might as well ask if light is wave or particle, because we know, of course, it is both and much, much more. As scientific shamans from this past century have taught us, the secret at the base of the universe is that everything exists in relation to everything else; there are no isolated parts—including ourselves! Light, or electromagnetic radiation, will manifest its wavelike properties when we perform one kind of experiment and its particle-like properties when we apply different measuring tools. Whatever light is, it's *both-and*. It is a teeming poten-

tiality waiting for us to interact with it and tease out one of its aspects. As Werner Heisenberg, a pioneer in quantum mechanics, states, "What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning."¹

One of the long-story-short insights that follows from this and other principles of the "new physics" that emerged in the past hundred years is the impossibility for anyone to be a mere *observer*. We are *participants* who play a large role in determining what we actually discover. And the more we force one desire, one lens, one measuring tool in trying to get a bead on a particular thing, the more other things we're interested in knowing about become proportionally fuzzier, less certain.²

COMING to this understanding about the shift in my basic approach to the Church has turned out to be a blessing to me in several ways. Where I used to regularly get down on myself for not working harder to magnify some of my intellectual gifts, I've learned to be more forgiving and willing to explore and value more highly some of my other abilities. I still have a long way to go on this next one, but by being better able to think of the "body of Christ" in terms beyond just common doctrinal beliefs (which, in my case, were becoming increasingly difficult to articulate), I've begun to feel less like a stranger and foreigner among my fellow Church members. And even by the simple act of naming and making more conscious what I hope to find in my religion—like a physicist testing for a specific potentiality in the underlying reality—I'm actually getting better at finding it.

Now, learning to acknowledge "good things" at a personal and local Church level has really been pretty easy. I've had a far greater struggle testing for and finding trace evidences of what I long for at the general Church level. But, as a scientist might say to his research grant sponsors when he's on the verge of something but isn't quite sure what it is yet, my experiments are beginning to show "promising results."

Of the several teases that simultaneously calm and excite me as I've been testing at the general level, the ones I've been most clearly able to articulate to myself, are what I'll call, at least in this essay, "hints of pastoring."

AS I MENTIONED above, I've had pretty good luck establishing connections with local Church leaders. To be sure, I've had my fair share of struggles trying to be understood by a few of them, but we've usually been able

to find a comfortable stride, a relationship where, although I might still be a puzzle to them (and very often a living, breathing “cautionary tale” about embracing too much secular learning!), we’ve learned to appreciate

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each other. My whole life, I’ve been moved when I see religion practiced at “the rubber meets the road” level, and when I see good people trying hard to help each other. I’ve seen that with almost all of my local leaders, and it’s been easy to like these folks.

But following the same formula that leads to the conclusion that “all politics is local,” until this year, I’ve been fairly certain I wouldn’t find this kind of religion much beyond Church wards and stakes. Elder LeGrand Richards once said something really easy to laugh along with, but also, I think, easy to believe in a little too much: “Everything above the bishop is all talk.”³ I’ve been lazy. I haven’t been looking to prove this idea wrong.

Somewhere along the way, my view has begun to change. For years, I’ve been fairly successful at trying to think well of all Church leaders, including the Brethren. Baseline, I always try to give them the benefit of any doubt, especially concerning motives. When they say or do something that frustrates me, I pretty easily imagine that the rub probably stems from our having a different temperament or our having not read the same books or simply because we have different jobs that naturally lend a different perspective on the Church’s mission and how best to accomplish it.

But only recently have I remembered with any consistency that whether or not they’ve just said or done something that drives me crazy, all of them were once pretty good bishops. Once upon a time, when they were, first and foremost, pastors—ministers who weren’t forced to rely primarily on reports that were filtered to them through “proper channels.” They saw the work and the pain and the triumph and experienced it all firsthand. They had the local perspective, they worked at the level below Elder Richards’s line of “just talk.” It makes me think that they and I could have probably found a comfortable stride together.

Remembering to remember this has helped me. It’s calmed me, it’s given me a bit more hope for the long run, thinking they have experiences that might ultimately serve

as self-correcting mechanisms when institutional-think threatens to overpower rubber-meets-the-road common sense, experiences that serve as a reminder that God is most easily found where “two or three are gath-

ered.” Searching for these hints of pastoring has led me to suspect that the Brethren also recall, with some degree of longing, their ward and stake leadership days—a time when someone “a little different” was fun to get to know and learn to love, days when they could just listen and mourn and rejoice, and not always be expected to teach or fix.

Applying this lens has helped me see more glimmers of genuine concern and tender feeling in what would typically strike me as just more calls for obedience and faithfulness that could make the larger “work of the kingdom” easier to manage. Testing for pastoring has led me to find it more often in the stories they tell that might otherwise have struck me as contrived or told for purely pedagogical reasons. I’m getting better at realizing they might actually be telling this or that story because it is genuinely one of their touchstone memories, a recollection of one of their best moments of true, locally experienced, religion.

THIS SUNSTONE issue contains the first of two sets of reflections on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the June 1978 revelation removing race restrictions from priesthood and temple blessings. It features essays by Newell Bringhurst and Armand Mauss that give us a glimpse into their personal journeys with the black/priesthood question, a topic each has devoted a good portion of the past thirty-plus years to understanding better. It also contains a challenging essay by a young black scholar and Latter-day Saint, Darron Smith, concerning the larger racialized “discourse” that did not automatically vanish in the U.S. when the most visible civil rights battles were won, nor within the Church when the priesthood and temple ban was lifted. Since all three scholars feel a strong need for there to be an official repudiation of lingering folklore previously used to explain or justify priesthood denial, this issue also presents several examples of old and damaging understandings about blacks and priesthood from books and pamphlets still in print and available, either in bookstores

or on CD-Roms. Although not placed in this same grouping of essays, Dale LeCheminant’s reflection, “To Cure Them of Their Hatred,” discusses the broader issue of overcoming, in a rubber-meets-the-road way, prejudice in all its forms, making a nice companion piece to these others. The next issue will feature, among other reflections, direct responses by black Latter-day Saints and other Church-watchers to the question, “Where are we now?”

I’ve highlighted my recent success in trying to find pastoring at all levels of the Church because it is the basis of my hope that we’ll collectively do better on this issue of race. As I’ve worked with the essays in this magazine and the stories for the next SUNSTONE, my own take on the question “Where are we now?” is that we’ve got a long way to go. Smith’s essay in this issue reminds us that racist acts aren’t committed just by individuals but also by institutions. I agree. But just as “all politics is local”—and just as I’ve come to believe religion really works best on the small stage—my recent immersion in this question of lingering racism in the Church has reminded me that it is primarily *people*, not institutions, who meet and inhale and mourn and absorb the pains associated with racist and spiritually damaging teachings. I think pastors understand this. And I’m holding out hope for even more hints of pastoring. 🌱



NOTES

1. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 107.

2. My shorthand here is in lieu of an extended discussion of the “uncertainty principle” as articulated in quantum physics. Described originally by Werner Heisenberg, the first-brush definition is that it is impossible to know both the precise position and momentum of a subatomic particle. In itself, that might not be very interesting. But things become more intriguing when we see that the reason this task is impossible is because any choice we make to try to pinpoint either position or momentum affects our ability to measure the other. The more we push to get an accurate take on the one, the more the other eludes us. The uncertainty principle articulates the proportional relationship between the two.

We can also find the gist of these same insights in the notions loosely bundled as “postmodernism.” Postmodern catchphrases such as “Truth is made, not discovered,” “All knowledge is historically and socially constructed,” or “Every reader is an author” all follow from a broad application of the idea of the observer-as-participant.

3. Quoted in Elder Robert D. Hales, “The Mantle of a Bishop,” *Ensign* (May 1985), 28.

FOLLOW UP ON "BAR-RAISING" OF MISSIONARY STANDARDS

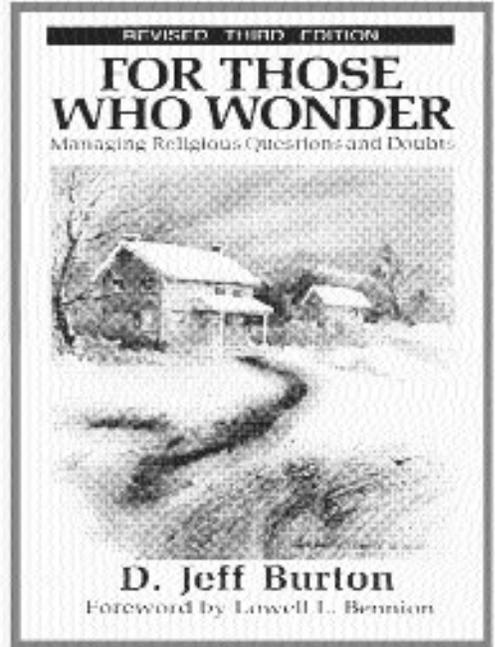
MORE DETAILS HAVE emerged about the Church's new standards for missionary service, the "bar raising" spoken about by Elder M. Russell Ballard at the October 2002 General Conference. (See SUNSTONE, Dec. 2002, 4, 75.)

The following are excerpts from a 11 December 2002 letter to stake and ward leaders from the First Presidency:

Moral Worthiness. Prospective missionaries who have been guilty of fornication, heavy petting, other sexual perversions, drug abuse, serious violation of civil law, and other transgressions are to repent and be free of such for sufficient time (not less than one year from the most recent offense) to prepare themselves spiritually for the temple and a sacred mission call. Individuals who have been promiscuous with several partners or who have been with one partner over an extended period of time in either a heterosexual or homosexual relationship will not be considered for full-time missionary service. Stake presidents and bishops should help these individuals to repent and assist in providing other meaningful ways in which to serve the Lord.

Physical, Mental, and Emotional Stability. Missionary service is extremely demanding and is not suitable for persons whose physical limitations or mental or emotional disability prevent them from serving effectively. Candidates for missionary service who have had significant emotional challenges or who are dependent on medication are to have been stabilized and found to be fully functional before being recommended.

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