

## PILLARS OF MY FAITH

*Compelled to think deeply about what I actually believe—and in the absence of an operative metaphor—I find what remains is . . .*

## A FISTFUL OF LISTS

*By Rebecca Chandler*

NOTED EDUCATOR AND LECTURER NEIL POSTMAN once told the faculty of my school, “You can’t really do an effective job of teaching, until you figure out what the operative metaphor of your teaching is.” He suggested some classic examples of teaching metaphors: the gardeners planting and nurturing seeds of knowledge; the builders who lay foundations and complete structures stone by stone; the coaches who want to see their students fight the good fight, finish the course, or play to win the game that is life. None of those seemed quite right to me. To come up with a metaphor that satisfactorily describes the complex relationship between a student and a teacher, between whom and what is taught, requires a leap of insight I’ve never been able to make. Is the brain a blank slate or an empty vessel to be filled? A muscle to be exercised? A complex set of circuitry to be programmed? The possibilities boggle my mind, and after way too many years of pondering the complex interplay we refer to as education, I confess I’ve given up. But I haven’t stopped teaching.

I find the challenge of reinterpreting the metaphorical “pillars” of my faith to be equally daunting, and I ask you to forgive me for not coining a new metaphor. What I can do is tell you my story and hope that in some meaningful way it resonates with yours.

LIKE MANY SUNSTONE readers, I was born in Utah, in Salt Lake City—at the LDS Hospital on 8th Avenue and C Street—and raised just a few blocks southeast of that building. Our little house on “I” Street was not, however, the “house of faith, house of prayer, house of miracles” that I have heard many of you describe when reflecting on your own



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Mormon upbringings. I would have to characterize ours as a “house of tension.” Some tension was probably inevitable, given the times and the personalities in our household, but a fair amount came from living in Salt Lake City, in the very shadow of the temple, with parents who were essentially inactive most of my life. This situation did not preclude my indulging the perception that virtually everyone and everything around me was somehow Mormon, and I had little contact with the world outside of Utah. I remember reading *Little House on the Prairie* and being disappointed in Ma and Pa because they drank coffee. And I was horrified whenever anyone I admired pulled out a cigarette, as Snookie Lanson did one night on *Your Hit Parade*.

Mormonism was the natural order of things. The very presence of the temple spoke to that. I knew there were other temples in other cities too, and I knew a veritable army of missionaries out there would one day convert the entire world. David O. McKay was clearly a prophet. Anyone could see that, and the gospel simply was, well, everything everyone said it was. It was my family, clearly, that was out of step, and the older I got, the more determined I became to one day raise a family that was not. My family would march in cadence with the revealed word of the Lord.

My mother and father were actually and respectively, second and third generation Latter-day Saints. Mom’s mother, born in 1881, exactly a century before my youngest daughter, Alexis, had heard the gospel as a young girl in Leith, near Edinburgh, Scotland, and, convinced of its truthfulness, made plans to be baptized and to immigrate as soon two things happened: she had to turn eighteen, and her mother had to die. When both conditions had been satisfied, she and one of her sisters came by ship to Boston and thence by train to Salt Lake City, arriving just in time to see the turn of the last century. (Because they had missed the handcart/wagon train experience, I was told that I could not claim membership in the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers.)

She married my grandfather, whom she had known in Scotland before they both emigrated and with whom she may have had an “understanding,” and they settled down in the Avenues to raise their family. Unhappily, my grandfather, who

I have been given to understand was a remarkable man I would have liked, died in his early thirties, leaving my grandmother widowed with six children to raise during the Great Depression. She never remarried, and the family did not fare particularly well. There were no missions and no college educations to brag of. Only two of the children retained any kind of ongoing relationship with the church that had occasioned their birth on American soil. Grandma herself remained faithful to the end, committed to the gospel, though I never knew her to have a Church calling. She attended meetings and quite often the temple, with a thermos full of tea, all of her eighty-four years. If it was painful for her to see her children out of the Church, I never heard her talk about it. I remember her as gentle and lovely. She spoke with a Scottish brogue, and she knew David O. McKay from his missionary days in her hometown.

Dad's family might have been more illustrious in the conventional pioneer ancestry sort of way. I understand that one ancestor, John Isaac Worthen, apparently an earlier immigrant from England, joined the Church during the Nauvoo period and participated in the great trek west, but this was not a story I grew up hearing. This was the part of the family who did not speak to each other. I did hear other stories—about a bishop a couple of generations later, and then the proverbial son of a bishop who left home early and went to South America to work, who later ran a speakeasy in Salt Lake City during prohibition, eventually liquidated the family's assets to his alcoholism, and subsequently died at his own hand. That would be the patriarchal line through which my blessings came. If I sometimes had problems with "youth of the noble birthright" rhetoric—and I did—perhaps you can see why.

This man's second son, my father, was an intelligent and resourceful man who attended the University of Utah and obtained a degree in industrial engineering from the Montana School of Mines, making him the only college graduate on either side of my family. He was well read, had many hobbies and many friends, but, at least during my formative years, he also had "Word of Wisdom issues" and very little use for the Mormon Church. My mother, while only marginally active herself, was something of an apologist, and clashes over "the damn church" were common. I grew up apprehensive of genealogy—what I knew about my family tree did not inspire me to learn more—and with the simplistic notion that if Dad had just honored his priesthood, and had *taken* rather than *sent* his children to church, we would have had instant and

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perennial peace in our home.

What we had instead was compromise—the kinds of compromise that are often made in religiously divided households. We had a short blessing over dinner every night. Mom had bought a book of little prayers, most of them poems, that my sister and I learned by rote. These recitations, offered with our eyes squeezed shut—sometimes with some improvisation at the end—served as bedtime ritual and substituted for personal or family prayer. There were no "Family Home Evenings" unless staging one was required for one of us to earn a gay note in Primary or an honor badge of some kind later in MIA. In the interest of maintaining family peace, Mom limited her own activity to meetings she could take in during the week. She attended Relief Society and, more significant for us, she taught Primary.

Because I was not taught the gospel at home, my relationship with the Church was, thus, primarily (no pun intended here) an institutional one. I have written elsewhere about my memories of attending Primary in the North 21st Ward, just three blocks from our "I" Street house and separated only by a hedge from the other formative institution of my childhood, Longfellow Elementary School.<sup>1</sup> The church building, itself, has since been demolished. All that remains is a single stained glass window that was incorporated into the standard-plan building that replaced it. The meeting house was always kind of old and crumbly, and the grass was ragged and patched—but my memories of the inside are all good ones. The chapel was cool and quiet; the walls were creamy plaster edged with white. Windows on both sides were high enough to let in light but still keep us sequestered from the neighborhood outside. The aforementioned stained glass window, a dignified and delicate gothic arch directly below the steeple, presided over what must have been one of the few Mormon church balconies in Salt Lake City at the time. I remember all this with a reverence that recalls not only an awesome sense of quiet and peace, but also the dedication I sensed from my teachers, for whom Primary was a genuine consecration. Most especially, I remember singing there. I don't think it is possible to overestimate the influence of Primary music, which taught me gospel principles far more eloquently than any sermons or manuals have ever since; and the sight of Primary children lining up to sing, even now that my own children are no longer among them, still puts me in that precarious emotional situation that embarrasses teenagers *to death*.

My sister and I also attended Sunday School, sitting in miniature wooden pews lined up before a child-sized podium in the Junior Sunday School room upstairs. The fact that a special part of the building had been reserved for little children to use on Sunday mornings told me how important Sunday School was, and how important we were. Even those of us who walked to church unaccompanied by our parents, who had not been born in the covenant, and who did not regularly come back in the late afternoons for sacrament meeting knew there was a place for us in the Mormon church on the corner of K Street and 2nd Avenue. I was baptized by a neighbor who held the priesthood and confirmed by a man I didn't know at all, but whose picture I had seen in my baby book holding me the day I was blessed. I can't think of a soul in my family who ever bore testimony to me, but by the time I had worked my way through the Homebuilder Girls program, I was hooked, and it was Church programs that had hooked me. I wanted to be Mormon—not Mormon like my parents. Someday I wanted to be a really good one.

**T**HAT THE CHURCH also had something of a dark underside was a fact of life I pretty much absorbed with my baby food. Utah's acrimonious politics—I grew up during the era of Mayor J. Bracken Lee—were an ongoing source of vitriolic commentary over the morning paper. My parents had also argued over which paper to take, and my father won: we took the *Salt Lake Tribune*, which came in the morning, rather than the Church-owned *Deseret News*, which was delivered in the afternoon. Closely related was the Church's monolithic presence all over the city. The fact that presiding Church leaders were often people who had grown up with, or gone to high school with, or were otherwise known to family members, sometimes kept them from being looked upon with much deference. Stories of unfair treatment of friends and family, or perhaps unethical business dealings of highly placed Church authorities, were everyday fare, and sometimes these tales hit close to home.

Both my mother's older brother and my father's very best friend since high school were in the advertising business. Each had his own agency, and they often competed with each other for commissions. This was all taken in fairly good stride. Sometimes one got the job, and sometimes the other did. Sometimes they both lost out to another competitor. That was simply understood to be the nature of the advertising business—except when any business was connected to the Church. On those occasions, an agency owned by a gentleman whose brother was an apostle *always* seemed to get the commission—even when his agency hadn't done much about competing for it. Both of my parents were angry about this situation, but they reacted in different ways. Mom made no excuses and saw the situation for what it was, but she refused to let such matters interfere with her own commitment or level of Church activity. For my dad, it was simply one more nail in the coffin.

We eventually moved up the hill—not the “I” Street hill where we had been living, but one on Laird Avenue—and

found ourselves in Bonneville Stake. The day the bishopric came to call, Dad was in the front yard with a rake in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Mother was humiliated. My sister and I weren't home, or we would surely have died of embarrassment. I was in sixth grade, and Yale Second Ward became the ward of my youth, just as North Twenty-first Ward had been the ward of my childhood. I attended MIA (we called it “Mutual” then) and started going to sacrament meeting as well. During my years at Roosevelt Jr. High and then East High School, I was finding my stride as a student and was willing to work very hard to see my name on the honor roll. Church programs, which were achievement-oriented and sometimes competitive, called forth a similar response. If it was possible to get an Individual Award with seventy-five percent attendance, I wanted ninety-five percent. Some years, I didn't miss a single Church meeting. (Actually, I had no life; I just didn't realize it until later.) I participated in just about any activity that was offered, went to MIA Girls Camp in Brighton, and enjoyed it all enormously.

During those years, my father somehow found his way back into Church activity, and my parents went to the temple, accompanied by a score of relatives I had never seen and what must have been half our ward. There was a reception afterward at Bishop Boyden's house across the street in Uintah Circle. The “Backer Bakery” Backers were members of the ward, and they supplied a sheet cake with the Salt Lake Temple in slate grey frosting and the words “Eternal Happiness” in the sky next to the Angel Moroni. Maybe there was hope for our family after all.

Dad was subsequently called to the Sunday School superintendency and one summer, found himself short of teachers. I was sixteen and deemed old enough to accept a teaching assignment. The course of study was “Leaders of the Scriptures,” and the class was composed of ten- and eleven-year-old girls. I learned to love both the Old Testament and the kids—especially the kids. Attending weekly prayer meetings and monthly stake inservice meetings (which at that time had standing roll call), I felt very grown up. This summer replacement calling became a permanent one, and I wasn't released until after I had graduated from high school.

I also took four years of East High seminary. In contrast to the pressure BYU-bound kids feel today, we were encouraged to consider seminary, but many active kids from active families did not attend. Year after year, I agonized over what high school courses I would have to forego in order to fit in another year of seminary, but I kept coming back, and in my senior year was “called” as a seminary officer. I loved that experience as well. I still have my journal from Grant Hardy's thoroughly memorable Church history course, and I'm astonished at how often, even now, I recall discussions from those classes.

Another highlight during those years was Bonneville Strings. Like about half the young violinists on Salt Lake City's east bench, I took lessons from Dr. David Shand, who lived around the corner. Dr. Shand had a small string orchestra—comprised largely of his own students—that rehearsed on Saturday afternoons at the Bonneville Stake Center and played

principally in local wards. We also performed for Bonneville Stake quarterly conference, where we sat, literally, at the feet of apostles and prophets.

The course was now clear: I just needed to live worthy of that returned missionary, marry in the temple, and build the kind of family I had wanted in the first place. College would help me be a better wife and mother. If it turned out to be at all possible, I wanted to find a way to live in the mission field where I could really make a contribution—and where I wouldn't have to feel quite so vanilla as I did as just another Mormon in Salt Lake City.

**F**AST FORWARD AN entire generation to where my youngest daughter, recently energized by a week with Especially For Youth, is growing up in the Shaker Heights Ward, Kirtland Ohio Stake. There are possibly a dozen kids in the entire ward, but these kids are devoted to each other, and as a co-educational group that spans five or six teenage years, are perfectly comfortable together. This is the same situation Neal and I found when we first moved to Cleveland Heights and were called to teach seminary, and it is exactly what we wanted for our kids. But it has not always been like this. Some years our children have had virtually no LDS peer group—at one point, two of our sons were the entire Aaronic

Priesthood of the ward—and sometimes the kids who have been available haven't been particularly compatible with each other. Either a stake or a general edict prohibits "units" from combining just the youth to provide some critical mass, and statistically, our stake doesn't profile particularly well. The percentage of young men serving full-time missions is currently nineteen, compared to a Church-wide rate of about a third and an Intermountain west average of nearly half. Raising a family in the mission field has presented some challenges I didn't anticipate, though it's hard to tease out just what difficulties we might have encountered anywhere.

I've learned some things the hard way; some make me sad, and some make me angry. I've learned, for example, that Church activity is unfortunately but often unmistakably correlated to conditions that are outside and sometimes beyond a member's control. Some people seem to simply be hardwired

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Rebecca and Neal Chandler, Dresden, Germany, 2000

in ways that make accepting the gospel and participating in Church activity feel right and good; others encounter problems almost from the get-go. One fairly obvious example would be missionary work, to which some people are drawn and which they thoroughly enjoy, while others dread it. Ross Peterson speaks of his own experience growing up Mormon in Malad, Idaho, and recalls that his father, like the fathers of many of his friends, while a very decent and a very generous man, seldom went to church. He wasn't comfortable wearing a white shirt, and he didn't like to pray in public—certainly didn't want to preach or teach.<sup>2</sup>

Successful Mormons are often great planners and natural leaders. While it is true that accepting and magnifying Church callings may lead to personal growth, some people will remain more comfortable than others in those roles. We talk a lot about gaining a testimony, of being sensitive to the Spirit, but I think it's often hard to tell where an intuitive personality leaves off and what we call genuine spirituality begins. My guess is that there is a lot of overlap. The trouble often is that those members who don't seem to be subject to regular "promptings of the Spirit" may spend a lot of time wondering what is wrong with them or with their relationship to the Lord when other explanations might be valid.

Unhappily, we seldom discuss personalities and personal predispositions in ways that might be helpful to such members.

Two poems by Emily Dickinson are instructive on this point. When we hear her very famous lines

I never saw a Moor—  
I never saw the Sea—  
Yet know I how the Heather looks  
and what a Billow be

I never spoke with God  
Nor visited in Heaven—  
Yet certain am I of the spot  
As if the chart were given—

we marvel that this young poetess should have religious sensibilities so like our own. She dressed all in white, didn't she? What a great Latter-day Saint she would have made. Has

anyone done her temple work? But leafing through the anthology a little further, we come upon some verse much less often quoted:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—  
I keep it, staying at Home—  
With a Bobolink for a Chorister—  
And an Orchard, for a Dome—  
  
Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice—  
I just wear my Wings—  
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,  
Our little Sexton—sings.  
  
God preaches, a noted Clergyman—  
And the sermon is never long,  
so instead of getting to Heaven, at last—  
I'm going, all along.

On second thought, perhaps Emily Dickinson wouldn't be all that comfortable as a Mormon, attending meetings on the block schedule in a cinderblock building.

There is also the matter of the shape life finally takes. Someone once observed—in the BYU alumni magazine, actually—that Church programs are tailored to meet the needs of a certain prototypical family: temple marriage, a given number of reasonably compliant children, a job that provides for a family's needs without making inordinate demands on the breadwinner or challenging his values—and that would be “his,” as mothers are still encouraged to stay home full time.<sup>3</sup> And as it turns out, not that many families (something like twenty percent or less) manage to fit that model that much of the time. Little in the background of a card-carrying Mormon will help him or her deal with the truly unexpected: a divorce, say, or a family member with a mental illness or a substance abuse problem, a financial reversal, a family member who is gay, a Church disciplinary council.

The experience we all have with Mormonism, especially for those of us in the mission field, is actually lived out on the local level, and that experience can vary widely. Local leadership may be accepting of us as individuals, loving and supportive through difficult times, or they may be indifferent, even punitive. Ward members may through their love and concern provide a supportive community or ease a difficult situation, or through judgmental attitudes and gossiping be a huge part of the problem itself. In C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*, a senior devil reminds a young intern to make use of the “law of undulations”—something I've certainly been aware of during the more than two decades we have lived in essentially the same ward. There have been times we have felt comfortable and supported, have been extended opportunities for service, and times when we have not. The correlation between what we have needed and what has been available to us has not always been optimum, either. I think many active members find they have to be willing sometimes to endure periods when all they can do is try to hold on.

There are also the inexorable correlations with financial success. Some neighborhoods, some suburbs have staggering

levels of activity. Others, often areas where problems are greater and the support of a faith community the most sorely needed, just struggle. My own family's experience may be prototypical. Did the fact that we had moved to a more affluent neighborhood have anything to do with my father's reactivation? I have often wondered.

The very strengths of our church sometimes seem to be our biggest problems. If a huge part of the satisfaction of being Mormon is the opportunity to participate fully—to magnify talents and build camaraderie in the trenches, and for many of us it is—that experience is greatly diminished when such opportunities don't seem to be forthcoming. The strong emphasis on family seems like a pretty good thing, but when marital and family status become defining characteristics—when wards have to be organized around the perceived “special needs” of, for example, the unmarried—what has happened to the notion of coming together as a faith community to worship God? Lay leadership presents the same combination of strengths and difficulties. We learn from childhood that the priesthood has been given to serve members, and there is no question that, in the humility of administering ordinances and taking responsibility for the welfare of others, priesthood holders often do just that. But the fact is that the priesthood is also a hierarchy, and when we say “it doesn't matter where we serve, but how,” we are not quite telling the truth. There is power and prestige in presiding, and there are dangers both when callings are extended and when they are not. “My husband would be active,” more than one woman has confessed to me, “if he were just put in charge.” And for those who are in charge, there is sometimes inexperience, human error, and the “nature and disposition of almost all men” (D&C 121:39) that have to be acknowledged and somehow dealt with.

**S**O WHERE DOES all this leave me now? Less “actively engaged” with my ward at this point, frankly, than I ever thought I would be, and for reasons I never would have expected. Compelled to think deeply about what I actually *believe*—and in the absence of an operative metaphor—I find what remains is a fistful of lists. I suspect I may not be alone in this approach. There is the list of things of which I remain certain. It isn't very long. And there is a more substantive list of things I still essentially believe, and then a pretty long list of hopes. Then the lists get shorter again, rather like a bell curve. I have a list of wishes. I also have a list of items—some policies, some practices, some purported doctrines—I find confusing, a list of things I wish were different, and then there is a mercifully short list of things that really make me angry. I won't inflict all these lists on you, just a few items from the middle part of the bell curve.

I FIND I still essentially believe in the gospel as set forth in the Articles of Faith. For that I am indebted both to Brother Talmage, for his book of that title, and to my years as spiritual living teacher in Relief Society. But I also must credit all those Primary and Sunday School and seminary teachers for their

good efforts and all the positive associations I have with growing up Mormon in a much less complicated era. I can still recite all thirteen Articles of Faith verbatim, (along with their “key words”). More important, they still make sense to me, they still feel good and right, and they anchor my personal theology.

WHILE I HAVE not been wildly successful with personal study programs, I do genuinely love the scriptures—especially the Old and New Testaments. I’m glad we use the King James version, which appeals to my poetic sense, if not always to reason and clarity. “Behold the Lamb of God” has more power for me than, “Look, there goes Jesus,” though the latter rendition is admittedly less obscure. I am not bound to Biblical literalism. That may be a result of my training in literature, where it is all very well to know the history and the context—to know something about the author and his or her life—but ultimately, the text has to stand on its own. Rather than addressing the accuracy of a text or its historicity, I just want to know if the story is a *good* one—if it can be deemed valuable for one reason or another. What is it about this particular story that has kept it around this long or that got it included in the canon in the first place? What can I learn about my relationship with God or with others? Satisfactory responses on those points generally overshadow for me whatever other inherent textual problems there may be.

I am less enthusiastic about the Book of Mormon, which I find far less readable, and which is never my favorite text in the four-year Gospel Doctrine cycle. I agree with Neal that the stories themselves are less compelling, less instructive, and altogether less memorable, but it is clear to me that many people do not agree with this assessment.<sup>4</sup> If the Book of Mormon does change lives, if it does bring people to Christ as it claims, then I must acknowledge that power.

LIVING IN THE Kirtland Stake as we have for more than twenty years, we are steeped in Church history, and I really like that. I like having access to the Kirtland temple. I have even been lucky enough to attend some worship services there. I have sung within those walls and with all my heart “The Spirit of God Like a Fire is Burning” with a group of Midwest Pilgrims on two occasions, and just this spring with Latter-day Saints of all stripes when the Mormon History Association held its annual meeting here. Our stake center is across the road and down just a bit from the temple. You have

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to pass the Whitney Store to get there, and our stake welfare project is located on the historic Johnson Farm. There are plenty of problematic issues in Church history, and I don’t ignore those, but for the most part, I am proud of our legacy as Mormons and happy to play my part in its unfolding drama. I value our pioneer heritage, even though I have no particular claim on it through my personal ancestry.

I BELIEVE IN families. Who among us does not? Coming out against families would be like coming out in favor of dirty words. Even though it sounds and feels like a cliché, I must say that the experience of being a parent has exceeded all my expectations, and I have loved my children with an intensity that sometimes scares me. Neal and I are long past the days of standing in the doorway with our arms around each other watching our children in dewy slumber. Our kids are all grown up (and some of them

look kind of gross now when they’re asleep) but we remain overwhelmed with and deeply grateful for the experience of being parents.

I BELIEVE IN music. I love listening to it and especially participating when I can. I marvel at this gift to mortals given which has such power to unite and to satisfy. I also believe in food, which I believe has similar properties—especially when combined with community.

While I don’t have every single aspect of the entire plan of salvation firmly imbedded, I do have hope in the resurrection. One of my attendant hopes is that the Second Coming will not be presented in essentially a conference format and brought to us via satellite courtesy of Bonneville Corporation. I hope the nature of the event is more like a huge, happy, noisy family reunion. I know it is a little presumptuous to do this, but I have some suggestions: The event should be scheduled in the spring because I would like flowers, lots of flowers, and I would like all of them to be real. I also would like music—much of it “inappropriate.” I would like trumpets and French horns and guitars (though if your taste runs to zithers and dulcimers, I hope you get what you want, too). And food. We’ll need lots of food, because we’ll all be hungry. Except for those changed in the twinkling of an eye, the resurrection will be the culmination of a pretty substantial fast. I propose a traditional Mormon potluck. You bring your favorite family recipe, and I’ll bring mine. We should have Relief Society Tuna Noodle Casserole and Mormon Red Death Punch, all of the colors of

the Jell-O salad matrix, and BYU brownies—the ones with a layer of mint frosting under the chocolate—and maybe cherry chews and Y-Sparkle. I will bring Festive Yam Casserole, which my children despise. But if the resurrection is to involve the restoration of all things, they must surely expect to see Festive Yam Casserole restored. Moreover, in their perfected state, my children will *eat* it, and they will *like* it!

For now, that's about it—pretty far from the automatic declarations of certitude I hear every month in ward fast and testimony meeting (often from remarkably tender subjects), but a pretty good distance from anger or apathy. And, I'm indebted to many of you for my having gotten as far as I have with this personal lexicon of belief. When I hear assertions that “alternate forums” destroy faith, I'm a little incredulous, because so many of you have been of substantial help to me. Without the publications—*Dialogue*, *SUNSTONE*, *Exponent II*, without Sunstone Symposiums—in Salt Lake and Chicago and Boston and Washington, D.C.—without Midwest Pilgrimage and annual Exponent retreats, I wouldn't know much of this, and I wouldn't know very many of you.

I'm indebted to Lavina Fielding Anderson for her analysis of revelation.<sup>5</sup> Like many of you, I also grew up with the “red telephone model of revelation,” as she put it, with one designee sitting around with nothing to do but wait for it to ring and the rest of us in metal folding chairs, pencils poised over steno pads so we can be given the message *du jure*. Lavina's alternate scenario of a room with lots of phones ringing, lots of messages coming in, file cabinets slamming and people

passing notes to each other, makes profoundly more sense, especially in light of the way I know Lavina lives her life.

The phenomenon that is Joseph Smith can be a sticking point for anyone seeking to develop a thoughtful, honest faith, and I'm indebted to Peggy Fletcher Stack for her straightforward testimony on that subject. One of the pillars of her faith several years ago was the simple statement: “Joseph Smith was a prophet”—a statement I'd heard myriads of times before, often in some pretty strange contexts, but it caught me by surprise in this one. She went on to suggest that, like many prophets, he was deeply flawed, but concluded that a prophet in any dispensation can have significant problems and still be regarded as “chosen of the Lord.”<sup>6</sup> This position is much more comfortable for me than any of the polar alternatives usually presented.

J. Bonner Ritchie may have been applying the most fundamental principles of organizational behavior when he observed that it is in the nature of all organizations to become more and more conservative as they grow, but it was news to me, and it has helped me contain my dissatisfactions over the changes I've seen as the Church of my childhood morphed from about a million members, most in the Mountain West, into to a monolithic organization ten times that size. His assertion that all institutions—*all* of them—are essentially amoral doesn't make me very happy, but it has saved some hand-wringing not just in my dealings with the institution under discussion here, but with other institutions that hold sway in my life as well.<sup>7</sup> I'm thinking most particularly of the school in

THIS PAINTING HANGS in my classroom to help me keep things in perspective. Teaching middle school full time while raising a family has not always been easy, and it is tempting when life piles up, as it sometimes does, to feel beleaguered. I draw literal strength from reminding myself that Mormons are tough. That, as a people, we have accomplished remarkable feats. There is a can-do, roll-up-your-sleeves quality to Mormon life that has both amazed and sometimes comforted me. I see that energy in everything from roadshows and girls camp, to Relief Society “Super Saturdays” and the sometimes Herculean efforts to get a sit-down ward dinner prepared on a minimal ward budget. If these enterprises seem trivial, and I admit that they do, I also recall the Thanksgiving a thirteen-year-old girl in our ward went for a walk in the woods near Chardon with a friend and failed to return by dinner time. When reasonable efforts to locate them failed, the quorum networks went into overdrive, and manpower from three area wards was standing by to continue the search at dawn.



I also need to remind myself sometimes—when grades are due, when bills are due, when blueines are due, when every child in my life seems to need something, when there doesn't seem to be enough money or nearly enough time—that this isn't, after all, the trek across the plains and that it is unbecoming of me to make too much of my so-called vicissitudes.

which I teach—which for all its centennial history, its fine academic reputation, its gothic arches, its stained glass windows, and its Latin motto, certainly seems to have a dark underside as well—as does every university with which Neal has ever been associated.

I'm indebted to Cathy Stokes for a more personal perspective. Once when she had accepted an invitation to speak in our stake, she also accepted our invitation to stay with us, and we had a great weekend together. Monday morning, dressed in her red traveling suit, as she was getting ready to leave, she put her arms around me to say goodbye and added, "Well, my dear, this is about as good as it gets," and she went on to enumerate a few things she had noticed during her visit—about our home, our children, my husband, and our lives together. Everything she said was true; it's just that I also had an equal and opposite list of everything that was wrong with my house, children, husband—*especially* my husband—our ward, my schedule. Her simple observations brought me up short. *Is this as good as it gets? Does anyone ever get every item crossed off the list? Or does completing one list just lead to generating another, so we are in a perennial state of mild discontent? "As good as it gets" isn't half bad, and while I'm sure her comment wasn't meant as a rebuke, I felt admonished and tucked the list of what's wrong with my life into a less accessible corner of my mind. I didn't immediately turn into Merry Sunshine, but ever since her visit, I have cherished a more comfortable sense of gratitude.*

Finally, my wish list:

- I WISH WE could treat each other better—and I mean that on every level such a statement could be made: I wish Primary children were nice to each other; I wish MIA Maids didn't form exclusive little cliques; I wish Relief Society sisters didn't gossip; I wish dental students didn't huddle in discontented little groups and ignore the permanent residents of the ward; I wish the hierarchy spent more time with the rank and file.


- I WISH WE could be more honest with each other. I have enormous faith in our ability to help and to heal one another when we treat each other honestly. One reason I particularly value my weekends with Midwest Pilgrimage is because of the honesty I find there. We leave our Sunday clothes and our Sunday faces home and sit around in jeans and talk about what's going on—about what's *really* going on—and I usually go home feeling better. This approach works in twelve-step programs; I can't help wondering if we couldn't find a way to make simple honesty work in our auxiliaries and more of our day-to-day interactions with each other.

- I WISH WE could be more flexible. I wish we could look at the needs of actual people a little more often when we weigh them against the perceived needs of the organization. I wish we could meet folks halfway sometimes if it means keeping, say, a part-member family involved and feeling a part of the

Church even one generation longer. The consolidated meeting schedule, especially in the mission field where distances to meetinghouses are often considerable, fosters an all-or-nothing approach to Church activity. My childhood was full of Mormon kids whose parents seldom went to church, and many of these kids grew up to be active practicing Latter-day Saints. I also remember many, many women whose husbands often stayed away. My mother was able to make some compromises in Church activity and keep the family in a positive state of association—if not in full activity—with our Salt Lake City ward, and I think she was right to do that. Sometimes half a loaf is better than none. I wish we could accommodate interfaith marriages more successfully. Whenever we treat a marriage outside the temple as a second-class union, the odds are pretty good that couple won't be coming back for more Mormonism and that ultimately they and their children will be lost to us.

- I WISH THE Church were more of a home to more of its people. Whenever this sentiment is expressed, someone usually quotes Robert Frost—or more often misquotes the poem, "The Death of the Hired Man." The line is, "Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in," and far too many members of this Church do not have any confidence in that default. We all know of individuals who have been treated in ways unworthy of any institution that bears the name of Jesus Christ.

A story is told of a rabbi whose son left home without his permission—without even taking his leave. Surprised and hurt, he sent a messenger to bring his son back home. But when the messenger returned after several days, it was not with the son, but rather with another message: "Your son says he cannot return." The rabbi had a lot to weigh in his response. His patriarchy had been challenged, his ecclesiastical authority and his standing in his community perhaps questioned. But then there was his love and concern for his son. "Bring him back as far as he will come," he finally replied, "and I will go to him."

A good model, I think, and one I would happily see us endorse. 

## NOTES

1. Rebecca Chandler, "Of Primary Concern," *SUNSTONE* (Dec. 1994): 66–70.
2. F. Ross Peterson, "A Boy Trailblazer: Growing Up in Mormon Idaho in 1945–1957," presentation at 1998 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, tape SL98–325.
3. Carri P. Jenkins, "The Changing Family," *BYU Today* (Mar. 1990):26–31.
4. Neal Chandler, "Book of Mormon Stories that My Teachers Kept from Me," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 24, no. 4 (winter 1991): 13–30.
5. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "In the Garden God Hath Planted: Explorations Toward a Maturing Faith," *SUNSTONE* (Oct. 1990): 24.
6. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Tales of a True Believer," originally delivered as part of the "Pillars of My Faith" panel at the 1991 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium; later revised and printed in *SUNSTONE* (Apr. 1995): 48–54.
7. J. Bonner Ritchie, "The Institutional Church and the Individual: How Strait the Gate, How Narrow the Way?" *SUNSTONE* (May-June 1981): 28–35; reprinted in Silver Anniversary issue, with additional commentary, as "The Institutional Church and the Individual," *SUNSTONE* (June 1999): 98–112.