



CORNUCOPIA

SUNSTONE invites short musings: chatty reports, cultural trend sightings, theological meditations. All lovely things of good report, please share them. Send to: <editor@sunstoneonline.com>

'Tis the Season

A COLD DECEMBER MORNING

FAITH. THE CONCEPT HAS ALWAYS BEEN A BIT OF A sore spot with me. Back in my religious days, it was the main thing I was always trying to understand and get a handle on. Something I always knew I lacked. If all of Christianity were operating on faith, why did it seem such a hard thing for anyone to talk about, or to explain in any way that I could incorporate, or practice? It seemed like the people who had it couldn't tell me at all how they got it, which made me wonder if they had anything at all. Honestly, there towards the end, the mere mention of the word would bring me to near-rage. I was sure I'd never had it. Sure I never would.

It was nearly Christmas time. Fresh snow. Not a lot, but enough to cover the world. As I sat up in bed, my first glimpse outside was a still white blanket over the cars in the parking lot beneath the street lights. I crawled from the warm sheets and shut the cold bedroom air behind the door, the heat of the hallway feeling nearly as good on my skin as the sheets had. My daily ritual. I stepped into the bathroom then into the hall closet to gear up: tights, running bra, shirt, socks, shoes, watch. Headed straight for the kitchen to get coffee on.

I felt good. Happy. No real reason. I'd slept well, and I was kind of excited for the new snow out there. I went through my stretches on the living room floor, breaking a few times for a swig of coffee. By 6:30, I was bounding down the steps of my apartment, pulling on my gloves as I went.

The morning was magnificent. Though the sky was still dark and diffuse, the matted glow of the snow-covered streets gave the sense of dawn. Almost nothing in this world makes me happier than running, and, to be running on empty streets, on an inch of virgin snow, with no sound in the air but my own footsteps and breath and heartbeat—well, that's just about as happy as I get.

At one point, I was singing softly to myself—not something I do often. *The Messiah*, the Hallelujah chorus part. I know, it sounds corny, but I was alone, and my heart was bursting with joy. I don't know all the words or even how all of the melody goes, but what I was singing seemed to fit perfectly with the way I felt. Like snow in the dark, I felt an inner brightness. Ecstasy.

I wish I could tell you what I was thinking about as I ran

that day, but I can't. A lot of times on my morning runs, I think about some pretty heady things—get things in my life thought out. But on that morning, I just remember feeling joyous, noticing the way the trees looked with the new snow on them, noticing how clean the streets looked, everything all covered in white. I looped to the east end of town and back towards the apartment. By 7:15, morning traffic was starting up, so when I got to the driveway of the Catholic church, I turned in, as I sometimes do. I can follow the perimeter of the parking lot and get straight in to my apartment complex without being in the street traffic.

I was the first person to step foot in the church parking lot—I delighted in prancing my footprints across the straight field of white. This time, as I came around the bend, something about the snow made me look up. I slowed my pace immediately, realizing that in all the times I had run past it, I had never really looked at the church.

Mary, I guess. A big bronze statue out front on the pavement. I don't know much about Catholicism, but it looked like Mary—a woman, dressed in a cape of sorts, a shawl over her head all dusted with snow, holding something in her hands and looking up. I like art, sculpture especially, and with a quick glance around—some inexplicable desire not to be observed—I turned and stepped up on the curb. She was bigger than life-size, standing up on a pedestal. Startling. Holding a heart in her hands. Only it wasn't a real, anatomical heart. It was more symbolic, a valentine-shaped kind of heart, and although her face was turned down towards it, her eyes looked upwards—heavenwards, I guess. Mary holding a heart like this, in the still silence of the morning, seemed weird to me. Almost morbid in a way. But also kind of touching, as if I knew more about it, maybe I could find it kind of peaceful.

My side-vision saw something else in the background. More sculptures—people, these all in color. It took only an instant to recognize them. The Nativity. The full scene, life-sized, made of some kind of molded plastic. Standing together in a group off to the side of the double-door entrance to the chapel. The area was covered, protected from the snow, and a dim light fell on them from above. Except for the soft distant whirr of cars passing on the far end of the lot, the morning was still silent. It had been a lot of years since I've felt comfortable in a church, and walking up the porch there I felt uneasy—that I was in someone else's sacred spot and since I didn't know the proper way to feel or behave, I probably ought not be there. Slowly I stepped forward.

They were all there. The three wise men. Camels, sheep. All of them full-sized, looking quite real, silently standing and looking forward towards the same spot. With a look on his

All-seeing eye

ARE YOU A LIAHONA LATTER-DAY SAINT?



IN ORDER TO OBTAIN THE BRASS PLATES, NEPHI KILLED Laban. Would you be willing to pay \$295.95 for a replica of those precious records? “The 24 individual brass plates are a transliteration of the Book of Isaiah,” reads the description in the Deseret Book Christmas Catalog 2005. “Serialized, each set is accompanied by a certificate of authenticity.”

Deseret Book’s Liahona (\$299.95) is an almost precise replica of the sacred compass—as painted by Arnold Friberg, that is. The ball comes with two spindles, but no explanation is provided about how they work.

If you’re into the gory side of the Book of Mormon, for a mere \$345, you may purchase a sword of Laban replica, with wall mount. Alas, no photograph of the sword is provided on the website (http://deseretbook.com/authors/author-info?author_id=36290).

face of unbelievable tenderness, Joseph was kneeling near to his wife. Mary’s hands were clasped at her breast, as if in utter awe at the beauty of what lay before her. I felt a pull, as if I were a member of their group. I felt the desire to look forward with them, follow their eyes, and see what they were seeing. I felt like they were alive, real people who knew I was there but would not interrupt their gaze long enough to turn and acknowledge me. They were all so still, so silent, so intent.

I stepped around the rock pillar that had been blocking my view, knowing full-well what they were looking at and what would lie before me. I stopped short. The manger was empty. The box with straw and all was there, but no baby. Jesus was gone. Incredible! Someone had stolen the Jesus, I thought, and immediately, I chuckled, even out loud a little bit. Imagine someone with guts enough to steal the Baby Jesus right out of a nativity! Then some philosophical irony hit me as well. Isn’t that just perfect? Isn’t that exactly how it is? Everybody always saying Jesus is there, but when people go to look for him, he really isn’t. No sign at all. Nothing more than everyone’s imagination or desire to believe in something.

I looked back at the Wise Men. Suddenly, I regretted the echo of my laugh. The faces of the Wise Men hadn’t changed one bit; neither had Joseph’s or Mary’s. What was the deal? They knew the baby wasn’t there. They could see that. Yet they still stood watching, waiting. Hoping maybe. With absolute humility and adoration on their faces. And honest to god, for the first time in my life, standing there with the Wise Men and Joseph and Mary, I caught my first-ever glimpse of Faith. I stood several minutes with them all, none of us saying anything, just looking. Hoping mostly. Eventually I turned, walked, then jogged over to my apartment to get on with my day.

It didn’t change my life. Didn’t get me back to church or anything. But when I hear the word faith now, or when I think

of it, I have an idea of what it is. What it feels like. And I think I understand the reason no one ever explains it decently is because it can’t be explained in words. It’s something you just feel or don’t. And one Christmas season, in silence and stillness, I felt it.

DARLA GRAFF THOMPSON
Los Alamos, New Mexico

*This side of the tracts*MY ADVENTURES AS A
COFFEE ABSTAINER

I HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE OF GROWING UP IN AN orthodox but fairly relaxed Mormon home. My brothers, sister, and I were nurtured in an environment that just assumed we would follow all the teachings of the Church. None of us went through a particularly rebellious stage, and I don’t recall our parents working very hard to keep us in line. Of our two parents, mother was the main disciplinarian—and more doctrinaire. We never had face cards in the house, contenting ourselves to play *Rook*. Likewise because of her, we never had cola drinks. As for coffee, I don’t remember it ever being discussed. We were never exposed to it and never had any particular desire to try it.

Temptation first struck when I was a deacon. A close friend, whose father was our bishop at the time, invited me to his house one evening when his parents were gone. He led me to the kitchen and displayed a forbidden can of coffee. (It was used by his grandfather, a respected, even revered, BYU professor who had drunk coffee all his life. He was one of a great many who could not give it up when President Grant finally got serious about enforcing the Word of Wisdom.)

I was mesmerized as my friend prepared two cups of coffee. Like the forbidden fruit, it was suddenly there, and the pungent aroma was enticing. He handed me my cup, and for the first time, I faced an opportunity to experience the dark side. After taking the tiniest of sips, I made a hasty exit.

After that narrow escape, I managed to stay away from coffee until I was drafted during the Korean War. On my second week in the army, I ended up on KP duty. The head cook, a sergeant, told me to go make the coffee for the entire company. There was a huge coffee urn and a set of instructions outlining the procedure. The final step was to taste the coffee and adjust the strength as needed. I went to the sergeant and told him I couldn't complete the final step because I didn't know what coffee was supposed to taste like. I suspect that during his army career, he had heard every possible excuse by those trying to get out of work. The gist of his reply was that unless I wanted to spend the rest of a miserable lifetime on permanent KP, I would get out of his face and finish making the coffee. I went back and decided just to skip the final step.

About midway through the morning, our company commander, a captain, came in for his usual coffee. He walked over to the urn, filled a cup, and then sat down. Suddenly I heard him bellow, "Who the hell made the coffee today?" As I meekly approached, he informed me that his wife, when totally drunk, made better coffee than I had.

Following my army experience, I served a two-and-a-half-year mission in Sweden. Whenever we managed to be invited in, we would almost immediately be offered a nice hot cup of coffee. Coffee is a major part of social life there, and if you turn it down, no one knows quite what to do. We soon learned from the members to ask for *silverté*. It's a regular hot cup of coffee minus the coffee. Boil water, and then add cream and sugar. It sounds reasonable, but try drinking it at five or ten different houses. And try to keep from laughing out loud when a thoughtful hostess asks, "One lump or two?"

In Sweden, I came out victorious in avoiding coffee, but great chinks in my armor soon developed over cola drinks, which my mission president drank all the time. While in the army, I had carefully avoided Coke by drinking Dr. Pepper instead. I was quite shocked when a buddy informed me that the caffeine level in Dr. Pepper was higher than in Coke. I swore off both then, but after Sweden, my resolve faded.

Shortly after my return to Salt Lake, I attended a priesthood conference in the Tabernacle. Afterward, I saw a set of stairs leading to the Tabernacle Choir's practice room. Curious, I ventured down and soon found myself in a tunnel leading from the Tabernacle to the new north visitors center. About halfway along the tunnel, I spotted a large red and white Coke machine. I checked to make sure there were actually caffeinated Cokes in the machine and then left Temple Square, basking in the knowledge that if it was safe enough for the Choir and the Brethren, I could drink Coke guilt-free.

My mother stuck by her guns, however—or so she thought. While we attended a wedding breakfast together, the restaurant servers placed large pitchers of Coke and Sprite on each table. Mother picked up the pitcher of Coke and poured

herself a glass. I started to alert her about what it was, but once she began drinking, I didn't have the heart to speak up. Before long, she poured herself a second glass. Then she announced, "This is the best root beer I've ever tasted." It is a secret I kept from her for the rest of her life.

My next coffee encounter proved more serious. I had been serving as principal of Salt Lake's Cottonwood High School for about four years when student government officers presented me with a request to install a coffee machine in the cafeteria. They were bright and articulate and made a strong case for the change. Initially, I couldn't get very excited about the request. Not being a coffee-drinker myself, I had never thought about the subject. And I knew it would be political dynamite. Still, it was a legitimate request, and I felt I should not let the decision be made purely on the basis of my own religious convictions or political expediency. Was it a health issue? All our schools sold cola drinks and sugar treats, along with potato chips and high calorie junk. Just to be safe, I called an old Harvard acquaintance who was a high school principal in the Portland area. He assured me that all the schools he knew of served coffee.

So there it was: the absence of coffee machines in Utah's public high schools was apparently based only on religious grounds, and discriminating on those grounds would be indefensible in a public school. I knew better than to ask the district for permission, so I quietly had a machine installed, making certain that it also dispensed hot chocolate and soup.

Everything seemed to go fine for about a month. I made no announcements, letting word spread as students saw the machine themselves. Then one morning, I got a phone call summoning me to meet with the district superintendent (who was also a stake president) "right away." I got to his office quickly, where he delivered an ultimatum from the president of the school board: "Either that machine goes, or you go! You have 24 hours." I unwisely suggested that he only preached free agency while I was trying to practice it.

Early the next morning, an assistant superintendent came to the school to make certain the machine was gone. The crews hadn't arrived yet to pick it up, so he instructed me to keep the cafeteria locked until they did. Thinking this still might not be enough of a foolproof plan, he had me unplug the machine and turn its face to the wall, then lock the cafeteria.

Unlike the machine, I was not removed from Cottonwood immediately but was ultimately demoted to an elementary school with a pay cut. My aspirations to be a superintendent someday withered and died. Board members gave crazy reasons for my removal, but everyone knew the coffee machine had been the beginning of my end.

So there is my story. A lifetime of avoiding the coffee bean with all its attendant evils was not sufficient to save me from disaster. At this late point, however, I'm not going to take up coffee drinking. I'm perfectly content to go right on abstaining—and getting ready for my next game of *Rook*.

—REED WAHLQUIST
Salt Lake City, Utah



The Sugar Beet

“All the Mormon News That’s Fit to Print”

Unlike Nietzsche, The Sugar Beet is not dead. In fact, Mormonism’s favorite satirical news source will fill a page in Cornucopia each issue for your reading pleasure and to whet your appetite for the Sugar Beet’s forthcoming book, The Mormon Tabernacle Enquirer. Our stake president has authorized us to say that any money spent buying the book for self, family, and friends (Mormon or not, we don’t discriminate!) will count toward your tithing.

PRIESTHOOD HOLDER ASKS, “WHERE’S THE SIZZLE?”

By Christopher Bigelow

SANTAQUIN, UT—On a recent Sunday, area priesthood holder Dave Bons felt “a major disconnect” when his elders quorum president invited the brethren to attend a 7:00 a.m. stake priesthood meeting the following Sunday.

“All he did was stand up and state the time and place of the meeting,” said Bons. “His voice was monotone, and he said nothing about any features or benefits of the meeting. I couldn’t help asking myself, ‘Where’s the razzle-dazzle? Where’s the sizzle?’”

Bons said he might have considered attending if any tantalizing teasers had been provided. “Was there going to be a special guest speaker? A dynamic new gospel program? Some key piece of revelation for our particular place and time? A new look and feel for the stake newsletter? A new pill that cures pornography addiction?”

Bons says that he considers himself a gospel consumer. “I pay a lot of money into the Church, and I want a little romancing in return.”

In apparent response to his concerns, on Saturday afternoon, Bons found a postcard-sized piece of goldenrod paper taped to his front door that said, in 12-point Times New Roman italic font: *Come to stake priesthood meeting tomorrow morning at 7:00. It will strengthen your family.*

“I suppose that’s a start,” Bons said, “I dunno—I guess I just want to be targeted by a real Church marketing campaign for a change.”

Views from the Street

What are we wearing to church now that we can’t dress like we’re going to the beach?



Ummm. . . BLACK flip-flops?



Is it different for those of us who live in Sandy?



Does it mean, don’t dress like you’re going to the Hefner’s Bunny Beach or Cape Frostbite in Deadhorse, Alaska? I wish they’d be more specific about these things.



Whatever Paris Hilton was planning to wear to her wedding.



I will continue to wear to church the same thing I wear to the beach—a dark suit, white shirt, and tie.



Fine, so I’ll wear a top.

“TECHNICALLY A VIRGIN” MOVEMENT TAKING OFF

By Roy Thorne

OREM, UT—A new movement intended to promote chastity and virtue has become the new “hip thing” among LDS youth. Promoters say the “Technically a Virgin” movement is a “realistic answer to the vexing problem of teen sexuality.”

Tiffany Bingham, a junior at Mountain View High School in Provo says she feels “way better about myself” ever since joining the movement. “It used to be, I’d be out with Jared, my boyfriend, and we’d start fooling around, and I’d feel all icky and sinful afterwards. But now I think, ‘Hey, technically, we didn’t break any, like, major-type commandments.’ So it’s all cool.”

And Heather Hanson, a senior at Timpview added, “It’s like Sister Reeves, our awesome new YW leader says, ‘There may be a stain on your skirt, but there’s no stain on your soul.’”