

AN OLIVE LEAF

LONG ENOUGH, CLOSELY ENOUGH

By Wayne C. Booth

With the recent passing of Wayne C. Booth (see page 79), Mormonism has lost one of its most unique and insightful voices. Luckily, Booth leaves behind a wonderful legacy of written works, three of which SUNSTONE was blessed to publish. This excerpt is from his lively essay, "Confessions of an Aging, Hypocritical Ex-Missionary," from the March 1998 issue. In it, Booth searches for common ground between his present and past "selves," and, in so doing, teaches us about the value of truly listening to "the Other," whoever that may be.



UNLIKE SOME FRIENDS WHO could discern no middle ground and consequently leapt off into being not just "jack-Mormons" but non- or even anti-Mormons, I found that my search for shared ground removed all reasons for a break: increasingly I discovered that most of what I most deeply believed was derived from Mormon teachings: "Do what is right, let the consequence follow," "Have I done any good in the world today? If not I have failed indeed," "All is well, all is well." Though ensuing decades yielded many moments of radical doubt about various notions of God and various choices made by Mormon authorities, I never came to doubt that Mormonism is *one* of the "true religions."

. . . [M]y hypocritical years taught me the inherent value of one kind of hypocrisy, what I have elsewhere called "hypocrisy upward." The word hypocrisy originally meant "playing a role on the stage," and it is clear that all of us at least some of the time are playing out roles we think appear superior to what we "really" are. Every parent tries to play a role that he or she knows is to some degree doctored, purified for the child's consumption. Every teacher knows that the "self" who stands before the class is an utterly different and (usually) superior person as compared with the one who the night before swore over her income tax returns or slapped his five-year-old daughter. If we did not rise above our "everyday selves" in that way, hypocritically enacting superior selves, our culture would collapse much faster than even the most cynical see it as collapsing today.

While not defending such acting out when it is used to exploit others, should we not defend it when it helps us practice being "characters" superior to our ordinary selves, thus learning how to be such characters? When I hypocritically act like a person of saintly generosity, am I not learning how to be generous? When I hypocritically enact the role of someone who believes in a belief I question, am I not likely to discover that thinking in that previously detested way actually makes sense?

WHAT my [practices as a] missionary taught me was that if I pretended to listen sympathetically to beliefs I detested, I would sometimes discover that they were better beliefs than those I had held when entering the discussion. And even when that did not happen, my "hypocrisy upward," or "outward," did at least broaden and deepen my own grasp of the world and of how we limited creatures can deal with its mysteries.

I hope it is clear that nothing I've said suggests that all "religious" or "Mormon" "views," open or disguised, are in my view equally defensible. . . . Some religious commitments save; some destroy. Some "hypocritical" efforts to listen can reveal beliefs even worse than they appeared at the beginning. To "take in" or "act out" the "other" with full empathy, learning to think with the other, is no surefire route either to self-improvement or to brightening some one corner of the world's darkness. . . .

But surely our world would be a better one if more of our brothers and sisters more of the time would practice not the kind of lying, self-aggrandizing hypocrisy so prevalent around us but hypocrisy upward: the aspiration, through taking on roles or taking in "the other," that produces genuine understanding. Would not the Church itself be radically improved if more of us—not just lowly active members and peripheral hangers-on but the highest authorities, too—would really listen lovingly to "the enemy" long enough and closely enough to discover what is really there?