

FROM THE EDITOR

THROUGH THESE PEOPLE

By Dan Wotherspoon

I WAS IN one of those “feeling the weight of the world” moods as I read the Book of Mormon one morning near the end of my mission. From time to time in those final mission months, I had been thinking about the future—imagining my return to “normal life,” school, eventual marriage, family, job, mortgage, church responsibilities. I wasn’t going to be able to put off “growing up” much longer. My thoughts were drifting along those lines again that morning as I read, my focus returning to the scriptures right as I was reading Mosiah 4:14–16:

And ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry, or naked; neither will ye suffer that they transgress the laws of God, and fight and quarrel one with another, and serve the devil, who is the master of sin, or who is the evil spirit which hath been spoken of by our fathers, he being an enemy to all righteousness.

But ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to love one another, and to serve one another.

And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish.

Panic! *Man, there are so many things to do to get this life right! It’s too much!*

On and on I went, riling myself up, imagining all the balls I’d have to juggle someday, and turning the development of even basic Christian character traits into monumental, tedious chores.

Feeling exhausted after ten minutes or so of internal ranting about everything God requires of us, I reluctantly willed myself back to my scripture reading. *Where was I? Oh yeah, Mosiah 4, King Benjamin.*

As I turned my attention back to the text, I realized I couldn’t remember anything I’d read up to those verses that had sent me into my momentary crisis of confidence and will,

and so I began again at the top of the chapter.

As I did, I discerned a much gentler voice than the one I’d heard by tuning in only at verse 14. In verse 9, I heard the call to “believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things . . . ; that he has all wisdom, . . . that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend.” *That’s cool. I believe that.*

In verse 10, that I should believe in the need to repent of my sins and to humble myself before God, to ask in sincerity for forgiveness. *A bit tougher, given my raging ego. But, yeah, I believe that’s important. I can do that.*

Verse 11 reminded me of God’s goodness to me in the past, the love I’ve felt from him, the joy of repentance and a clean start. It then asked me to keep all of this in remembrance daily. *All right. I’m feeling that. I can handle that.*

Then magic! I saw the shift I’d missed earlier. I saw verses 12 and 13 for what they are—descriptions of what naturally flows from following those gentler commandments:

And behold, I say unto you that if ye do [these things] ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God, and always retain a remission of your sins; and ye shall grow in the knowledge of the glory of him that created you, or in the knowledge of that which is just and true.

And ye will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due.

I saw how this shift from commandment to consequence led into my scary verses—that the love I’d feel and the mind I’d acquire through right remembrance would naturally cause me to teach and care for my children, to succor those who need succor, to administer my substance, and not suffer the beggar to petition me in vain. *If I believe and do as those earlier verses remind me, all these “things to do” will simply come forth; I’ll do them because they’ll be character traits.*

What had started as a rant ended up being one of my most exciting encounters with scripture ever. All that day, and for the next

few weeks, everything was infused with light. I forgot my worries about the future; I taught and served with greater clarity and intention; I loved easily.

I HAVE never forgotten those moments with these verses. They drove home to me how genuine understanding of the nature of things and remembering our blessings and their source are the key to turn “dang things I’m supposed to do” into actions and attitudes that flow naturally from within. I recall the verses whenever I read of Lehi tasting the fruit of the tree of life or Enos receiving forgiveness of his sins and their immediately wanting to share it with all others—even enemies. I think of these verses every time I hear from the pulpit, “Oh, brothers and sisters, if only we could see things the way God sees them, we’d rush out to do our home and visiting teaching, to magnify our callings, to . . .”

I recall these verses when I read the determinism in Plato’s ethics—summed up in the phrase, “knowledge equals virtue”—and think about his notion that those who truly see things as they are (the philosopher-kings) will naturally make the best rulers, that enlightenment is always accompanied by a desire to help others escape the suffering brought on by ignorance.

Whenever I consider Mosiah 4 today, I’m struck deeply by the strong resonance between these insights and certain Buddhist teachings, especially the notions encapsulated in the “Eightfold Path.” According to Gautama, to receive genuine enlightenment, we must come to fully understand the relationship between desire and suffering laid out in his Four Noble Truths, but these can only truly become transformative through our attaining and practicing:

1. Right view.
2. Right intention.
3. Right speech.
4. Right conduct.
5. Right livelihood.
6. Right effort.
7. Right mindfulness.
8. Right concentration.

Buddhists typically divide these eight qualities into three sections. Qualities 1 and 2 deal with attaining wisdom (*pañña*), a correct view of all things in their proper relationships. Qualities 3 through 5 focus on ethical action (*sila*), our conduct toward others, including what we say and how we behave in our lifestyle and jobs (even teaching that some ways of earning a living will never be conducive to enlightenment). Qualities 6 through 8 focus on mental training (*samadhi*),

“YOU’RE MISSING THE POINT. THE VALUE LIES NOT
IN MY COMING BUT IN YOUR WATCHING.”

our proceeding at the proper pace and intensity, disciplining our awareness, continually contemplating with our deep mind, and being mindful, living always in the present moment.

Though one finds a few Old Testament-like warnings about one’s eternal welfare here and there within Mosiah 4, the chapter contains direct parallels to every part of the Eightfold Path. One match, between verse 27 and Buddha’s quality number 6, I find particularly helpful at times.

And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength. And again, it is expedient that he should be diligent, that thereby he might win the prize; therefore, all things must be done in order.

For fledgling buddhas and fledgling saints, it’s a long haul. And though desire prompts us to hurry, we’ll invariably exhaust our strength, stumble in will, and backslide. But with the right view, intention, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration, each continually reinforcing all the others, we’ll be transformed.

SUNSTONE issues come together in different ways, and as each one advances toward publication, I always come to notice deep connections and rich cross-fertilization between the various elements that weren’t necessarily apparent as each piece was selected individually. Sometimes, we’ll deliberately group pieces to create sections on particular topics. At times, we’ll select enough pieces on a similar subject to give the impression that we decided to do a “theme issue.” When this happens, we usually do it with a decent amount of forethought. I’ll pursue symposium presentations to publish, and I’ll invite authors I know are doing interesting work on the topic to write something specifically to include alongside the other pieces.

This magazine issue, with its cluster of reflections on learning to see and act in accordance with the humanity and divinity within even God’s most difficult children, has come together much more organically. Ken Driggs’s article came in more than a year ago as a theological treatise—a study of LDS teachings about evil and human agency. I liked it, but didn’t feel it was right for SUNSTONE in that form. Several months later, I received two essays from Marylee Mitcham, but neither as

submissions for publication. Marylee and I are good friends, and she was simply sharing with me an essay she’d written nearly twenty years ago that had been published in *Commonweal*, along with a companion piece she’d written just recently telling the story of the earlier essay and her journey into Mormonism, which had occurred in the intervening years.

Not until June, when I received the fascinating article by P. D. Mallamo detailing his experiences talking with every street person in Salt Lake City he could during a several-week period this past spring, did I hit upon the idea of talking with Ken and Marylee about lifting up some of the personal stories in their pieces and reshaping them into more direct reflections on their experiences of learning to see beyond the violence and horrors so readily apparent in their work with clients in the court and prison system, and patients in psychiatric wards; to glimpse the fuller truths about them, their lives—who they truly are. Each agreed, and suddenly, we had the makings for a neat magazine section.

Then Frances Lee Menlove focused her devotional sermon at this year’s Salt Lake symposium on Christ’s parable of the sheep and goats, and how in serving the very least of God’s children, we are serving him. The next short story in the publishing lineup, Lewis Horne’s powerful “Healthy Partners,” happened to be about a street person who is invited by a goodhearted Latter-day Saint into his home to join his family for dinner. It is a fascinating study of the inner life of this difficult individual and the ever-so-slight shift that occurs because of his up-close encounter with goodness. In the winning essay of the 2006 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest, Stephen Carter tells of his journey learning to really “see” his younger brother Ron—the gentleness and integrity in the life of his family’s death-metal-rocking “black sheep.”

Through these many coincidences, a “theme issue” was born. When I decided to fully embrace this fact, I realized this would also be the perfect issue in which to run a beautiful talk given by Chris Kemp, a long-time Sunstone volunteer who several years ago passed away from colon cancer, which discusses life’s seeming unfairness in a very humble and extremely powerful way.

Ardean Watts says of composers who claim their music is “inspired,” coming through them exactly as created by the angels in

heaven: “That’s too heavy a trip for my taste.” Mine, too—so please don’t read too much into what I’ve shared above. I offer it simply as a tale of how we arrived at the pieces assembled into this magazine, and with the hope that you’ll get even a small taste of the sweetness we’ve known as some of the stars have seemed to align in producing this issue.

BESIDES my two-decade-long journey with Mosiah 4’s insights into the relationship between right vision and right ethics toward beggars who petition us, my thinking on this issue of recognizing deeper truths about difficult people has been impacted by two other texts in particular. The one I encountered first is V. Stanley Benfell’s powerful observational essay, “Falling,” in the Fall 1993 *Dialogue*.

In much the same style as P. D. Mallamo’s piece in this SUNSTONE, Benfell describes brief encounters with New York City street persons, criminals, crazies, and other down-and-outers, interspersing these anecdotal snippets with apocalyptic scriptural verses. He then brings us into his study as he prepares his next day’s Gospel Doctrine lesson on Matthew 24 and 25, which, because of their apocalyptic emphases, are two of his “least favorite chapters in the New Testament.”

As he prepares, he begins an imaginary dialogue with Christ about the very-distant-to-Benfell Second Coming. He challenges Christ for teaching in such a way so as to lead believers to think his return was imminent, and for the vagueness of supposed “signs of the times” and the ridiculousness of such things as looking for the “number of the beast.”

In his imagination, Christ replies that Benfell is approaching the whole matter of his coming in the wrong way: “But you’re missing the point. The value lies not in my coming but in your watching.”

Benfell remains confused for a while longer until Christ calls him to look near the end of the Matthean discourses he’s preparing to teach the next day. There Benfell sees the story of Christ’s being hungry and thirsty but then fed and quenched, of being a stranger who was taken in, of being naked but then clothed, and of being sick and imprisoned yet visited even in his duress. And also Christ’s response to those who didn’t remember ever serving him in those ways: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40).

In the imaginary dialogue, Christ then tells Benfell:

Don’t you see? They watched for me, they saw me in those around

them. I have come again every time a new child has come into the world. My light lights each one. They are the signs you should watch for. Watch for me and you will find me. My coming is this—when all of you see me in each other, I will already have come.¹

My other favorite text on this challenge to see light instead of darkness in the hard-to-love is the film *Entertaining Angels*, which depicts the early life and ministry of Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement.² Day's life is a parable in itself—a tale of a bohemian and radical journalist who, before her conversion to Catholicism while in her thirties and coming to understand her calling to serve the downtrodden, had an abortion as well as lived in a common-law marriage that produced a daughter.

The film has many wonderful moments, with terrific lines from her associate Peter Maurin about how the problem with the world is that “the people who don't think, act, and the people who do think, don't act” (*ouch!*) and how “God is as close as the closest human being—especially the poor.” But the most powerful moment comes as an extremely discouraged Day—in crisis over a revolt of her coworkers, who want to abandon

the messiness and difficulties in running soup kitchens and shelters and instead focus solely on changing things through the *Catholic Worker* newspaper—wanders into a cathedral and confronts Christ in the form of the church's large crucifix:

These brothers and sisters of yours—the ones you want me to love. Let me tell you something: They smell. They have lice and tuberculosis. Am I to find you in *them*? Well, you're ugly. You drink, and you wet your pants, and you vomit. How could *anyone* ever love you?

Still floundering after her rant against God's demands on her, Day goes home only to catch a woman she's been helping in the act of stealing money from her. In hysterics, this woman begins to beat Day with a cane. Finally grabbing control of the weapon, Day is about to strike back when her demeanor softens, and she exclaims: “I can see the light in you.”

Over this woman's protests that no, she can't, that “I stole from you—the only person who ever really cared about me,” Day continues: “[I can see] the courage and the love. You're very beautiful. I love you.” As the staff and tenants gather in response to the commotion, she continues, “We all love you. We're

going to get you upstairs, get you cleaned up, and something to eat.”

IN a wonderful song, Joan Osborne asks, “What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us? Just a stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home?”³

As we're able to ask such questions ourselves, we enter the current that runs through all true religion. May we not only ask if this might be the case, but also watch for God in each stranger we meet.

In *Entertaining Angels*, Day states that she believes that whatever God wants her to do, “It begins with these people—the ones that nobody else wants, the ones that hurt and are angry and have nothing left to give. They are my meetingplace with God. And if I will just give him a chance, I know God will fill me with love, fill me through these people.” ☺

NOTES

1. V. Stanley Benfell III, “Falling,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1993), 143–50.

2. *Entertaining Angels* (Paulist Pictures, 1996). The film's title is a reference to Hebrews 13:2, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

3. Joan Osborne, “One of Us,” *Relish* (Blue Gorilla Records, 1995)

Returns to Zion after a triumphant run Off-Broadway! "Compelling Confessional Theatre!" - NEW YORK TIMES

CONFESSIONS OF A MORMON BOY

A T R U E S T O R Y

Born as a reading at the Sunstone Symposium, this will be the final run of the nationally acclaimed, award-winning, word-of-mouth phenomenon in Salt Lake City!

October 5 – November 11
Rose Wagner

Performing Arts Center
138 W. Broadway • Salt Lake City
For Tickets Call (801) 355-ARTS
Online at www.ArtTix.org

Thursdays, Fridays,
and Saturdays at 8:00 pm
Sundays at 3:00 pm
Mondays at 7:00 pm

www.mormonboy.com

Written and Performed by **Steven Fales**

Directed by Tony Award Winner **Jack Hofsiss**

After excommunication, divorce, prostitution and drugs, “a Brokeback Mormon” (*Variety*) reclaims his “Donny Osmond” smile. An inspiring true story told with humor, song, and The Book of Mormon.

The book of the play
CONFESSIONS OF A MORMON BOY:
Behind the Scenes of the Off-Broadway Hit
(Alyson Books) IS ON SALE NOW at Amazon.com.
Includes the complete monologue script and the original Utah version of the play with production photos and a foreword by Jack Hofsiss (*The Elephant Man*).