

*These are my people, my brothers and sisters, this is my Church,  
and my religion—and I love them all.*

# MORE FAITH THAN I'D THOUGHT

By Curt Bench



**W**HEN ASKED TO PRESENT THIS reflection, I agonized over how many pillars of faith one should have and did some research. I discovered one of the first mentions of pillars in the Book of Genesis. It was in conjunction with Lot, who had only one: his wife. Thereafter I discovered the Two Pillars of Hercules and the Five Pillars of Islam. Eventually I came upon T. E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. I thought: if he can come up with seven pillars, I can do . . . at least half that. So, I came up with four.

In this very personal essay, I briefly examine my own pillars and explain how they were built and judge how well they're standing up after a half century of construction, repairs, and rebuilding. As I contemplated this daunting task, I wondered how much faith I really have and worried that it isn't enough to qualify for Sunstone's venerable "Pillars of My Faith" series. But at least one friend reassured me by saying, "I'd bet you have more faith than you think." I wondered if that were true since I have more than my share of skepticism and sometimes even cynicism.

But such debating is not really my fault: I have a genetic disorder. I was born with a "why" chromosome which causes me to question everything. I understand that this condition, while rare, is nevertheless quite prevalent among SUNSTONE readers, and other known cases are scattered throughout the world. This condition is known to cause severe agitation and even hypertension when a sufferer hears an authority figure say or ask things such as: "Because I told you so!"; "Why do you have to ask so many questions?"; or "The thinking has been done; the debate is over."



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**F**OR THOSE OF us who sometimes have questions or doubts and who worry that those who say that faith and doubt cannot exist at the same time might be right, there is great comfort in the exchange between Jesus and the man who brought to him his son to be healed:

Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. (Mark 9:23–24)

Hermann Hesse affirms the coexistence of these two elements: "Faith and doubt go hand in hand; they are complementaries. One who never doubts will never truly believe."<sup>1</sup> In an Easter sermon, the Rev. Jay Sidebotham points out that "the gospels make sure we realize that many disciples responded to the Easter news with doubt and skepticism." Sidebotham quotes author Frederick Buechner, who said "If there's no room for doubt, there is no room for me."<sup>2</sup> Tennyson's words resonate with me: "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds."<sup>3</sup>

For many years now, I have identified more with Richard Poll's "Liahona Saints" than with "Iron Rod Saints." According to Poll, an Iron Rod Saint

does not look for questions but for answers and in the gospel—as he or she understands it—finds or is confident that the answer to every important question can be found. The Liahona Saint, on the other hand, is preoccupied with questions and skeptical of answers, finding in the gospel—as he or she understands it—answers to enough important questions so as to function purposefully without answers to the rest.<sup>4</sup>

Joan Chittister, a well-known Benedictine sister and author, writes that in her spiritual journey, she eventually "found the answers to be worse than the questions could ever be."<sup>5</sup>

Many great scriptures and treatises attempt to explain faith and what it is. Alma 32:21 explains what faith is not: "And

now as I said concerning faith—faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.” For some reason in the Church today, it seems unacceptable to say “I believe” or “I feel” something is true. Unless we “know” whatever it is “without a doubt” or “beyond a shadow of a doubt,” it is implied that we are spiritually or morally lacking.

This state of affairs is confusing to those of us who give credence to the scores of references in scripture and other writings that faith is a belief or confidence, not a definite knowledge, that a principle or idea is true. It is noteworthy that all but one of our own “Articles of Faith” begin simply with, “We believe.” For me and others, there can be shadows of doubt. A shadow does not cause total darkness—it brings only a cast of gray. Through my years of experience with life, religion, and

yearning for truth or longing to commune with God, to feel that he is there and that he knows me and loves me. Sometimes I feel he is there, and at other times I wonder why, if he loves us, he seems so distant and seemingly uncaring.

There have been times when I was mad at God, such as when my youngest son, Landon, developed epilepsy as a toddler and we watched him have dozens of grand mal seizures, writhing on the floor, unconscious. The day we took him to the hospital, he had a seizure as I held him in my arms and turned him over to the E.R. staff. Months of seizures became years. Various medications were tried and discarded. Blessings were given and prayers offered, and it seemed that they, too, were discarded. I poured out my anger and grief to the heavens, but they seemed sealed. But then the seizures became less frequent and eventually stopped altogether. Landon is



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CURT BENCH SURROUNDED BY GOOD FRIENDS AND GOOD BOOKS

the world in general, I have come to believe that far more is gray than black or white. Things that once seemed clear and sure are more obscure and tentative. I can relate better to Paul, who said, “For now we see through a glass darkly,” seeing only “in part” (I Corinthians 13:12). The trials and realities of life can sometimes dampen or even threaten to destroy one’s faith, but the fact that they do not extinguish it makes faith all the more real for me and gives me hope.

#### HOPE

*Holding the place until faith develops . . .*

**T**HIS PREAMBLE LEADS me to my first pillar—the Pillar of Hope. Without doubt (oh, sorry, I mean *clearly*), I often have more hope than faith. Sometimes, hope is a substitute for faith, taking its place until belief or faith develops. I like many of the synonyms for hope: desire, expectation, dream, yearning, or longing. I find myself

now twenty and has not had a seizure since he was five years old.

Late one night about six years ago, I felt severe chest pain which turned out to be a dissecting aortic aneurysm. I was rushed to the hospital, and just before going into the O.R. for emergency surgery, I received a priesthood blessing. Some ten hours later, I emerged, alive, but with a “zipper” and some hardware in my chest. Later I was told that I had been very close to death and that more than half the patients with this type of aneurysm die.

Fortunately, an excellent medical team performed well while loved ones prayed for me and exercised faith. Under the circumstances, I did not have much time to exercise my own faith before my operation, but I did not believe I would die. I certainly had hope—a yearning and a desire to live, for I had so much to live for.

There is no doubt in some minds that a miracle occurred that night. Others may think the doctors did what they do

best, and the patient survived. The same reasoning might apply to Landon's seizures. Regardless, I am happy to give the doctors and medicine and God the credit for preserving my life and taking away my son's affliction. I can't explain what happened, but I am extremely grateful for the way everything turned out.

#### BOOKS

*Just as with thinking, let there be too much reading rather than too little.*

**T**HOUGH IT MAY seem a bit unusual, maybe even a bit wobbly, my next pillar is formed of books. Since childhood, I have loved books and reading. I grew up in a Los Angeles suburb and frequently went to the beach with friends. When we were going to be there for several hours, I

one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.

I figure that when God commands us to read books, we'd better do it.

For most of my life, I have read and studied a variety of books and subjects: fiction, history, biography, scripture, and many others. Reading, especially history, can be very pleasurable but is sometimes disturbing. In the search for religious truth, both author and reader bump up against some unpleasant facts and come out bruised—or worse. Those who are not well-grounded or open to the idea that even human beings called by God to do important things are still human may even have their faith damaged. Some who develop doubts or have questions about Church history or doctrine, for example, may find few who will sympathize or understand their



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THE BENCHES FOLLOWING CURT'S 2000 SURGERY

(Surrounding Curt, from left to right): Landon, Pat, Chris, Gordon (Curt's father), Brittany, Emily

would take a book to read, earning the not-affectionately-meant nickname "bookworm" from my friends. I would later become a bibliophile, develop into a bibliomaniac, and finally further degenerate into a biblioholic. At the monthly B.A. meetings, I stand and say, "My name is Curt, and I am a biblioholic." Desiderius Erasmus must have been talking about me when he said, "When I get a little money, I buy books; and if any is left, I buy food and clothes."<sup>6</sup> So was James Logan, who said, "Books are my disease."<sup>7</sup> I'm not sure this will comfort my wife, Pat, but S. J. Adair Fitzgerald and I have this in common: "I have no mistress but my books."<sup>8</sup> Thomas Jefferson could have been speaking for me when he wrote, "I cannot live without books."<sup>9</sup> I also love films, but after Richard Dutcher told some of us a few years ago about his forthcoming film on Joseph Smith, I said to him, "I think I'll wait for the book."

I have taken seriously the admonition in D&C 88:118.

And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach

dilemma or crisis of faith. They may be treated with pity, or worse, suspicion and condemnation.

Someone recently told me that his brother read and studied Church-related subjects extensively and became so disturbed that he quit studying. I often see this sort of thing in my business of selling LDS books to people all along the Mormon spectrum. Many individuals have called or come to our store who are hurt, confused, or angry that as they have read widely and then asked questions of friends, family, or leaders, they have been rebuffed, warned, or even punished. This is tragic and unnecessary. If we possess the truth, then what do we have to hide or be ashamed of? As Saints, should we not at least "be willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light" and "mourn with those that mourn" and "comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:8–9)? Have we not been told to leave the ninety and nine to search out and bring back the one?

Just as with thinking, I say, let there be too much reading rather than too little. Books should be our friends—and even pillars—not our enemies, and we can draw great strength and comfort from them. Although we can't take the books with us when we leave this life (though if there is a way, I'll find it), we can take the knowledge we glean from them. I have a faithful LDS friend who told me that after having read as much Church history as I have, I must have a lot of faith to remain an active member. I simply reply that for good or ill, books and reading have helped make me who I am today.

#### FRIENDS

*Sharing without fear of censure or judgment.*

**A**LTHOUGH SOME PEOPLE would not necessarily call some of my friends towering pillars of strength, they are pillars of faith and hope to me. Many friends have had incalculable influence for good on me throughout my life. Many have set an example of faith and what it means to be a true latter-day Christian. They are models I have tried, not always successfully, to follow.

I belong to a small group that calls itself the Latter-day Latitudinarians, inspired by the 17th-century Anglicans who downplayed dogma and allowed wide latitude and tolerance in religious beliefs. We frequently have lunch together and talk about many things, including the gospel, the Church, and the challenges and questions that sometimes arise in our journeys with them. We have probably never been accused of being pillars of faith standing firm; more likely, we're probably more like drunken sailors trying to hold each other up. But we can talk about anything without fear of censure or judgment; no topic is taboo. We may tease each other, but we're safe from criticism or disparagement. I feel very fortunate to have a safe place to be—with friends who care and give support—because I know many who do not have such a source of strength. When one of us is despondent or angry about something that happened or was said in a Church meeting, the others offer encouragement and sympathy. We talk the problems out and try to help each other resolve them. Though it may not always seem like it at the time, we often come away stronger and more determined to live as good Mormons and Christians.

#### FAMILY

*Let an outsider attack my family or Church,  
and I will jump to their defense.*

**M**Y FINAL PILLAR consists of two families: my natural family, which includes my birth family and my wife and children, and the Church, which I view as a family of sorts. Both are occasionally dysfunctional and unforgiving but also harmonious and loving. For Latter-day Saints, these two "families" are sometimes so intertwined that separating them is difficult. Both have their share of skeletons in the closet, black sheep, crazy aunts and uncles, and elephants in the living room that everyone sees but won't talk about. We always love members of our family even though we

may not always like them or what they do. It is the same with the Church. I sometimes do not like something it does or certain individuals in it, but I still love it and them. Just as I occasionally become annoyed or angry with a member of my family, I may feel the same way toward the Church. But let an outsider attack my family or Church, and I will jump to their defense. I am at least a fourth-generation Mormon on more than one side of the family.

Growing up Mormon in southern California, I was one of about twenty Latter-day Saints in my high school. Much to the embarrassment of my friends, an LDS buddy and I used to take our scriptures to school and would bash with the Jehovah's Witnesses during lunch period or argue with RLDS friends after class. I went to early morning seminary for four years, served several youth missions and later a full-time mission, played Church sports, was active in the ward Boy Scout troop (in which I proudly achieved the exalted rank of "First Class"), participated in annual road shows—just about everything Latter-day Saint youths can do.

My parents were devout members who gave years of service in various callings. They did the best they could, loved us, raised us in the Church and taught us the principles of the gospel. Even so, two of their four children left the faith as teenagers, and one brother who had severe problems with substance abuse, took his own life at age thirty-three. At an early age, I saw free agency in action and learned that as dear as freedom to choose is, sometimes the consequences of wrong choices can be devastating. My oldest brother and I stayed in the Church and made it an integral part of our lives. My second brother does not attend church, but he's as good a person as you'd want to meet and a great one to have in your corner.

My wife Pat and I have always been active and committed Church members, have held numerous leadership and teaching positions, and have tried to live the gospel principles we always espoused. All four of our children participated actively in the Church during their formative years, and although not all of them are fully participating today, they have each grown into loving, caring, moral adults. Almost as important, they love books, reading, and learning. Each has had a powerful impact on my life in more ways than I can count. They are now as much my friends as they are my children.

Not long ago, Pat was released as our ward Relief Society president. She is loved and appreciated by ward members, especially by the Relief Society sisters, many of whom were the recipients of her love and concern—as well as her delicious hot meals. A natural caregiver, Pat (and my kids, too, of course) cared for (and put up with) me daily during the long, difficult recovery from my operation, helping me get through a very trying time of my life, mentally and physically. She is one of the most giving and unselfish persons I know—a genuine follower of Jesus Christ. Because of those qualities, she puts up with my occasional heterodoxy and loves me anyway. My families are pillars of strength and love who constantly prop me up. After many years, I have at last learned to separate the Church and Mormon culture from the gospel. In 1984, I was

greatly heartened by Elder Ronald Poelman's conference talk, "The Gospel and the Church" but dismayed when I found out he was told to make substantial changes in content and videotape the talk again. In the original talk, he said:

Both the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Church of Jesus Christ are true. However, there is a distinction between them which is significant and it is very important that this distinction be understood. Of equal importance is understanding the essential relationship between the gospel and the Church. Failure to distinguish between the two and to comprehend their proper relationship may lead to confusion and misplaced priorities with unrealistic and therefore failed expectations. This in turn may result in diminished benefits and blessings and, in extreme instances, even disaffections. . . .

The gospel is the substance of the divine plan for personal, individual salvation and exaltation. The Church is the delivery system that provides the means and resources to implement this plan in each individual's life.<sup>10</sup>

In his classic essay, "Why the Church is as True as the Gospel," Eugene England writes:

In the life of the true Church, as in a good marriage, there are constant opportunities for all to serve, especially to learn to serve people we would not normally choose to serve—or possibly even associate with—and thus there are opportunities to learn to love unconditionally (which, after all, is the most important thing to learn in the gospel).<sup>11</sup>

Seven years ago, I had an amazing spiritual experience. As these are rare for me, I call them "Random Acts of Inspiration." Though rare and mysterious, they are powerful and fortify my faith because I can't explain them in any other way than spiritually. My wife and I were on a BYU Travel Study tour in the Holy Land, and in our group was a middle-aged couple who were very loud and obnoxious. The husband constantly cracked jokes or told us all about what we were seeing because they had been there ahead of the group and had previewed many of the sites. He loved being the center of attention, and we were getting very annoyed. I didn't know how I was going to stand being with them for nearly two weeks, and we avoided them as much as possible. My discomfort was spoiling the otherwise great visual and spiritual experience of the Holy Land.

One day we went to the Orson Hyde Memorial on the Mount of Olives. One of the men in the group was quite ill and asked us to give him a blessing. As we stood on the mount, the men in the group consecrated some olive oil we had bought locally. As luck had it, I was standing right next to the irritating boor. But as we formed a prayer circle, he put his hand on my shoulder, and I felt as if an electric current passed through me. I had to turn my head away as tears flooded my eyes, and I felt all my ill feelings and anger toward this man drain from my whole being. As they flowed away, they were replaced by feelings of love and forgiveness. A warm sense of calm and peace came over me. I suddenly

saw this man, not as an enemy or irritant, but as a brother in the priesthood and the Church. It was an amazing transformation, totally unbidden, unexpected, and mystifying—but nevertheless very real. From that moment on, nothing he or his wife said or did bothered me; in fact, we talked and laughed together often and got along very well. I found out they were actually very nice and generous people. I had badly misjudged them, and I believe God helped me see that and healed me spiritually.

**I**N MAY 2005, my family and I attended the Mormon History Association meeting in Kirtland, Ohio, the scene of much crucial LDS history. One day, more than three hundred of us, members of both the LDS Church and the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church), met in the Kirtland Temple and listened to talks and sang some of the original hymns of the Restoration. A select choir, divided into four groups and standing in the corners of the temple's main floor, sang and then was joined by the congregation. It was one of the most powerful and moving experiences of my life. The sound was so fervent and heavenly that I almost expected a repetition of the Pentecostal event the original Saints experienced during the 1836 dedication of the temple. By the time it was over, few eyes were dry. I even saw one veteran and somewhat hardened historian emerge with tear-filled eyes. One friend in the choir, who calls himself a "Mormon agnostic," was so filled with emotion, he could not finish one of the songs. I'm sure many felt as strongly as I did that these are *my* people, *my* brothers and sisters, this is *my* Church, and *my* religion, and I love them all. Perhaps there is a logical, natural explanation for all these experiences and feelings; but if so, I don't know what they are and feel I must attribute them to God.

In spite of my fears, uncertainties, questions, doubts, and grumbling, perhaps my friend was right. Maybe I do have more faith than I originally thought after all.

## NOTES

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