

Pillars of My Faith

TRIBUTARIES OF FAITH

By Jana Riess

In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands of you an accounting for the hope that is in you.
—1 PETER 3:15 (NRSV)

I WROTE A SATIRICAL ARTICLE FOR SUNSTONE LAST fall on how *not* to give a talk in sacrament meeting. It must necessarily follow, then, that having once been critical myself of the substandard Mormon talk (which begins with a prolonged discussion of where you were and what you were doing when you received the call to speak, describes your nervous apprehension in excruciating detail, and then utilizes the remaining two minutes to provide a *Webster's* dictionary definition of the assigned topic in question), I have opened myself up to criticism of any talk I will henceforth give in church or other Mormon settings. I believe that part of the repentance process for any satire I write is to then be asked to participate in whatever I've just made fun of.

So, for the record, I was folding laundry on the day this spring when my friend Dan Wotherspoon invited me to give this talk, and I was quite surprised by his request. *I am still in my 30s*, I thought! Surely one should have to be a grandparent before being asked to give a Pillars talk.

Of course, being a good little Mormon, I had to go look up “pillars” in the dictionary. (*Webster's* is canonical for birthright Latter-day Saints, but online versions are acceptable for an outsider-convert-type like me, who can be presumed not to know any better.) And here is what I found:

1. *A slender, freestanding, vertical support; a column.*

Well, now, it was hard to see how definition number 1 might relate to me. I am supportive, sure; freestanding, ab-



JANA RIESS is a Relief Society teacher in the newly created Cincinnati Ward in the Cincinnati Ohio Stake. She is the religion books editor for Publishers Weekly and is the author or co-author of six books, including *Mormonism for Dummies* and *What Would Buffy Do? A version of this essay was given at the 2007 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium* (CD or download SL07291).

solutely and proudly; vertical most of the time since I joined the LDS Church and became a teetotaler; but not so slender since I joined the LDS Church and became a teetotaler. (One has to make compensations.) Let's try definition number 2.

2. *One who occupies a central or responsible position: a pillar of the state.*

Well, sort of. As a writer and editor, I do have a central and responsible position in the shaping of public opinion. Sometimes, anyway. And as regards my faith, I certainly hope that my faith is strong and centered on the core, Jesus Christ. But in thinking about it, I realized that the image of a pillar is just not the best metaphor for describing my faith.

To me, a pillar may be strong, but it is also inflexible and impossible to move. Pillars do not recognize when they are positioned in the wrong place. They are respected precisely because they are fixed, undeviating, unchanging. My faith, on the other hand, is *unfixed*—centered, but also open to new possibilities. My faith is not, and I hope never will be, made of marble or granite. If it had been remotely pillar-like back when I was an evangelical Christian during and after college, I would never have been open to reading the book that changed my life in my early twenties—a weird, wild, and wonderful volume called the Book of Mormon. And if it were pillar-like now that I *am* a Mormon, I think I'd be an insufferably self-righteous git. So, if a pillar doesn't work as a metaphor for my faith, what might fit better?

I have settled on the image of flowing water, and I am here to speak about five tributaries of my faith. I'm drawing on Richard Foster's book *Streams of Living Water*¹—I recommend the writings of Richard Foster pretty much wherever I go—who in turn is riffing on a line from the Gospel of John, where we learn that out of a believer's heart should flow streams of living water (John 7:38).

Tributaries of faith are those moving waters that lead to the community, which is the river of all of us. A tributary is a small, energetic, and constantly changing flow of water. It's in perpetual motion, but it never loses sight of its end goal, which is to *contribute* to the larger river and keep it flowing. Like the tributary, my faith is in flux, but I believe that is a good and

healthy thing. My faith is usually moving forward, spilling over such obstacles as it may encounter in its wake. It contributes to the river that is the LDS Church—also constantly in motion—which in turn has something to offer to the wide and salty sea that is the worldwide body of Christ. Like a tributary, my faith does not exist to serve itself, but to contribute something to the river and, I hope, the sea.

Sometimes my faith takes a little detour. With tributaries and rivers, this is a known and expected phenomenon called a *meander*—who knew that was a noun? It's how the water responds when resistant material is present on the banks. I've learned to welcome these meanders and not be afraid, knowing that they are an essential part of the journey. As a convert, I am sometimes saddened by the narrow views many Mormons hold about doubt. Conservative Mormons seem to

RESTORATION

I GREW UP in an atheist/agnostic family, where organized religion was regarded with deep suspicion and even derision. Yet even as a small child, I was fascinated by religion. Each year at sleepaway camp, I attended both the Catholic mass on Saturday night *and* the Protestant church service on Sunday morning, just out of intense curiosity. I was a rather strange child.

My first impression of Mormonism was not a super one. Just before seventh grade, I took a summer College for Kids course called "Nauvoo and the Mormons." I didn't know what Mormons were, and I'd never heard of Nauvoo, but the course description came with the magic words "field trip," so I signed up immediately. I was always eager to get out of the small



suggest that doubt is dangerous, that it is something to be feared and avoided, since it could cause someone to lose a testimony. (What kind of weak testimony would that have been in the first place?) But many liberal Mormons have also taken this attitude to heart, so much so that when they begin the organic and perfectly natural process of questioning their religious beliefs, they become terrified and imagine that they are somehow spiritually lacking. Some leave the Church for this reason, including several people I hold dear. I hope that more of us can move away from the model of linear progression for faith—assuming that there is a single, straight-as-an-arrow path to follow—and think about faith as more of a river. If you're *not* meandering and testing and changing, then something is wrong. As Heraclitus taught us, it's impossible to step into the same river twice.

IT WAS HARD narrowing my testimony down to five tributaries. The ones I've chosen to highlight are Restoration, Renewal, Responsibility, Relationship, and Redemption. You'll notice the gimmick that all of these begin with "Re." And you'll notice that some "Re's" aren't here. Republican, for example. And also, surprisingly, Reading, which is pretty much my life—avocation and vocation. And Revelation, which is a huge part of my spiritual journey but will be a topic for another time.

A tributary is a small, energetic, and constantly changing flow of water that never loses sight of its end goal, which is to contribute to the larger river and keep it flowing.

Midwestern town I grew up in, even if that meant spending a day in an even smaller Midwestern town.

The class lasted for two weeks, during which we were supposed to read parts of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's history and watch a lot of cheesy filmstrips during class. But then on the last day, we drove the eighty miles or so to Nauvoo. We saw the Carthage Jail, had cookies at the Scovil Bakery, and went to both visitors' centers, RLDS and LDS. It was there that I had one of my first impressions of Mormon womanhood. In the LDS Visitors' center, I went into a room that was dedicated to some of the handiwork and achievements of Mormon women—beautiful quilts, letters, old photos, and so forth. In my memory, however, the crowning glory in this room was an enormous portrait of Marie Osmond and her mother, with a caption describing how the Osmond women were very important models of virtue in the LDS world.

I wasn't that impressed (though I had loved the *Donny & Marie* variety show when I was little). And I was even less im-

pressed when I went back to Nauvoo in high school and saw that room again. Marie, fresh from a divorce I had read about in some gossip magazine, was nowhere to be found. For me, a budding feminist, it was a sad commentary about what Mormons seemed to expect: that women had to be above reproach, that there was little forgiveness for wrong choices. It put me off the Mormon Church for years.

Yet I kept returning to Mormon theology. At Wellesley College, I began reading LDS texts because I had a couple of Mormon friends whom I respected very much. They lived for principles I admired although they had bizarre-sounding beliefs I did not share. I did my senior religion thesis on Mormonism. Then, challenged by a cantankerous senior sister missionary in Vermont, where I spent the summer after college, I agreed to read the Book of Mormon and meet with the missionaries. I kept that agreement, but I made no decisions because I was



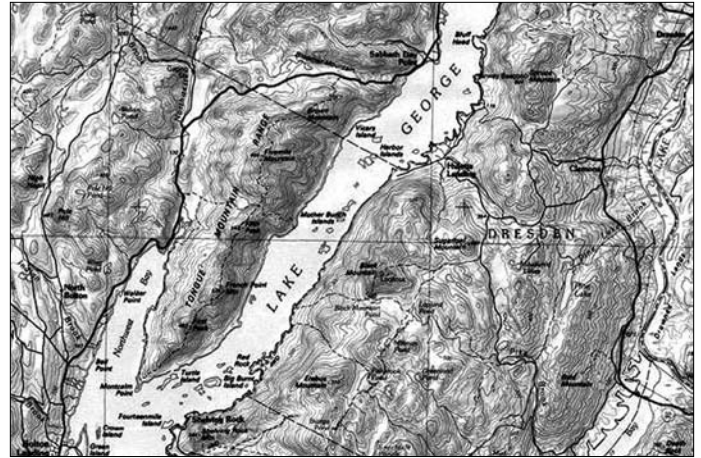
ON THE STEPS OF THE WELLESLEY COLLEGE CHAPEL, 1991

heading on to seminary to become a pastor. At seminary, though, I was still thinking about Mormonism and still writing papers about it for my American religion classes. I read everything I could get my hands on: I would just sit in the stacks at Firestone Library at Princeton University and start pulling things off the shelves: *Dialogue*, *Journal of Discourses*, missionary stories. Gradually I had to admit that I was not interested in this for purely academic reasons. I had fallen in love with the Book of Mormon and, secondarily, with the Mormon people.

It took me a long time to be baptized, though, as I still had many doubts. I read and re-read Alma 32, about faith and doubting, and decided that my faith needed to be more experimental. I needed to *do* something instead of just waiting for something to happen. I started keeping the Word of Wisdom about six months before my baptism, taking literally its notion that it was for the “weakest of all saints.” I figured that statement applied to me. I also went to my first Sunstone symposium in Washington, D.C., and continued reading *SUNSTONE* and *Dialogue* as well as the *Ensign* and some biographies of the prophets. It was critical to me to know beforehand that if I committed to becoming a Latter-day Saint, I would not have to check my brain at the door.

I was finally baptized in the fall of my senior year of seminary. This was late September of 1993, so you can imagine that it was disconcerting to read in the newspapers in those weeks about the high-profile excommunications of feminists and historians whose work I admired. As I headed into the water, however, I remember thinking that even if there was no place for me in the Church as a feminist and budding historian, I was still making the right decision. I knew the Lord was leading me. I would be a pioneer like the ones I had read about in Mormon history.

One lesson from Mormon history, though, is that it kind of sucks to be a pioneer. I was very lonely those first couple of years. I had made a huge change in my life; culturally, it was no small thing for me to consider forever uniting myself with a people for whom a “salad” seemed to require pastel-colored marshmallows, and theologically, I was still trying to work out



**I agreed to read the Book of Mormon
and meet with the missionaries, but
I made no decisions because
I was heading on to seminary
to become a pastor.**

my faith. It was hard for me to talk about my Mormon conversion to other people, especially in the seminary setting. One of the only people I told at that time was a gay friend who had come out to me the year before, hands trembling and voice shaking. So, hands trembling and voice shaking, I revealed my secret religious identity to David in a crowded cafeteria. As he was theologically a fairly conservative Protestant, his initial response was to warn me away from a dangerous cult. His second response was pure compassion: “This woman just came out to me!” He listened to my story and was incredibly supportive. These were words I needed to hear, because apart from my husband, who took my conversion in stride, other friends and family members were confused and did not really understand. I worried that I was letting some people down by my decision, especially my wonderful mom, who had been an ERA activist in the 1970s and was still pretty ticked off at the Mormon Church for its role in defeating the amendment. But

ultimately, I knew I had to be true to myself. Goethe said that when we trust ourselves, then we will know how to live.

My conversion process was fraught with incessant theological questions. To me, one of the greatest attractions about Mormonism was also its most vexing problem: restoration.

I want to think aloud about what we mean when we use the term “restoration.” When I was a kid, my parents took to restoring the 1896 Victorian house we lived in. Apparently this was so much fun for them that they had to buy a *Money Pit*-styled apartment house and do the same thing all over again a few blocks away. So I spent my summer afternoons learning to sand and stain floors, strip wallpaper, plaster, paint walls, and the like. My experience restoring these homes has caused me to think a good deal about what Mormons mean when we throw around the terms “restoration of the gospel” and “the restored church of Jesus Christ.” Clearly, not many of us must have ever actually restored historic houses. The goal in historic restoration—a little distinct from renovation or rehab—is to bring things back to their *original* state. When you restore a home, you don’t tear it down to its very foundations and construct a McMansion on the same spot. You begin with the respectful notion that the building that’s already there is sound and fundamentally worth preserving. You take off the horrid wallpaper from the 1970s—what were they *thinking* with those silver flecks?—and you painstakingly sand the floor down to bare wood before giving it a glossy new veneer. But you don’t destroy the foundations; you assume they are solid and will stand the test of time.

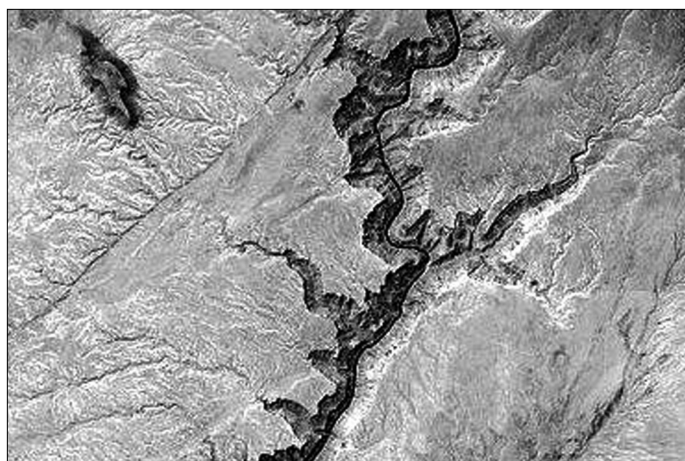
Recently, my husband, who is Episcopalian, came with me to testimony meeting, where a very sweet guy expressed his profound gratitude for being a member of “the only true and living church on the face of the earth.” Phil and I grinned at each other, and I whispered, “Sweetheart! Look at the time. You’d better hurry up or you’re going to miss the 10 o’clock service at your false and dead church.” I’m sure if we asked that nice LDS brother what he meant by asserting his membership in the world’s only “true and living church,” he would soft-pedal, and so he should. I worry that many Mormons have absolutely no inkling of the logical consequences of their words. How do we imagine that such rhetoric is going to be heard outside the Mormon enclave? As we think about Mormonism in the public square, we need to confront this issue: Our radical and exclusive truth claims are off-putting, to say the least. Is there a way to speak authentically about them, about the truth of our gospel’s restoration, without alienating the rest of God’s beloved children?

So, for the record, and also for my daughter, who at age eight is trying to navigate the complexities of a Mormopalian family, I want to bear witness that I believe deeply in the restoration of the gospel. And to be clear, what *I* mean by that is that God has broken into history in an alarming way by aiming to perfect the Christ-story in us—in our institutional church and our individual hearts. I believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God—not in the cheap and triumphant manner of a Church video, but in a hard-won, Old Testament way, where a frustrated God chooses one who is willing to serve despite person-

ality flaws and limited understanding. I believe in a loving but absurdly human Joseph Smith who had the courage to risk everything as God required. I believe that the LDS Church today is poised to contain the fullness of the gospel of Christ, whenever we as individual members of it are prepared to accept his invitation to participate in redeeming the world rather than merely reveling in our comfortable and unearned status as chosen people. Harvard chaplain Peter Gomes sums up my feelings well in his book *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*:

If God is the God of all, and not just a tribal deity, then God has made provision, not necessarily known to us, for the healing and care of all his creation, and not simply our little part of it.²

(Here endeth the restoration sermon. And I promise the other tributaries won’t take as long.)



Too often Mormons adopt a legalistic view of spiritual practice—what matters is that you do it correctly, not that it changed you or that you are growing from the practice.

RENEWAL

HOW WE COOPERATE in the world’s redemption brings me to the second tributary of my faith, Renewal—spiritual rejuvenation through concrete, regular disciplines. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Sabbath-keeping, and fasting invite us back to God. They give us a rhythm for the days, the weeks, the months, the years. In Mormonism, we have a wonderful tradition of emphasizing the vital importance of the spiritual disciplines. *We want to do it right*. But the flip side of that emphasis is that too often Mormons adopt a legalistic view of spiritual practice—what matters is that you do it correctly, not that it changed you or that you are growing from the practice. We need to guard against dead legalism and rote religion.

We also need to guard against our unstinting activism. Don’t get me wrong; one of the things I find most attractive

about Mormonism is our firm tie to this world and to its people—we are here to serve one another. This is key. But what we lack, and what Christian history can teach us, is the equally important value of contemplation. Holding action and contemplation in a balanced tension is one of the greatest calls of the Christian life. About every year or so, I go on retreat for a few days at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. These times have become a deep well of renewal and invaluable solitude for me. I've discovered that "retreat" is a word that many Mormons simply don't understand; basically, we only know how to "advance." One Relief Society sister asked me what I do for four days on a silent retreat. As I was opening my mouth to answer her, I realized that the truth—which is mostly "just thinking"—would open a whole can of worms, so I told her another truth, which is that I bring several theology books and novels, and my computer, so I can read and write. She also seemed relieved to learn I do a fair bit of hiking while I am there. I've discovered that many lifelong Mormons don't have a frame of reference for understanding a contemplative religious retreat as a valuable thing in and of itself. I would love to see more room in Mormonism for contemplation, solitude, and retreat.

Practicing the spiritual disciplines is a serious leap of faith. Basically, we are telling God that our time will be structured His way, not ours. Our money will be His first, then sort-of kind-of ours. Our bodies will be clothed by Him. The food we eat and the beverages we drink will be the ones that equip us to serve God and care for each other. In the right spirit, the disciplines can be life-giving and life-changing practices, a chance to put faith into action.

RESPONSIBILITY

I COME NOW to the crux of the chiasmus of my five tributaries, which is Responsibility—agency and its twin, accountability. I once sat in a church meeting in which a visiting member of the stake high council declared quite emphatically that obedience was the *first* law of the gospel. I would counter just as emphatically that agency, not obedience, occupies that exalted place as the first law of the gospel. According to the Mormon story, God sacrificed quite a lot so that we could enjoy freedom and choice, as well as their sisters, responsibility and accountability. In no other way could we grow. Through no other method could we become like God—through our screw-ups, our loving moments and our hateful ones. The Mormon God is not looking for automatons who abdicate their own spiritual responsibility to others. In fact, in Mormonism we have scriptures that specifically recount that this kind of picture is actually Satan's plan. God wants us to grow up.

Theologically, I see Mormonism as a religion that blithely passes out car keys to eight-year-olds, and I mean that as a compliment. So much is given to us—belief in divine nature, particularly, and the ultimate claim: that we actually *chose* to come here, to take up this mortal life with all its pain. We Mormons can never say we didn't sign up for this.

And then there's the issue of blame. What child of God hasn't been deeply distressed by the theodicy problem—namely, how suffering and evil can exist so flagrantly in a world that a loving God created and declared to be good? The agency model places the uncomfortable weight of suffering where it belongs, right back on our shoulders—not in the manner of the inane bestseller *The Secret*, where you got cancer because you were afraid and not powerful, but in the interconnected way of social responsibility. I've seen in my own family how disastrous personal choices can bring terrible suffering to ourselves and others. Even suffering that many people would blame squarely on God—take, for example, the 2004 tsunami or the 2005 devastation of Hurricane Katrina—we can see through a Mormon lens. We are learning more and more how human greed and the lust for power are changing our very environment. I don't mean to get too political here, but I do believe that more natural disasters are likely on the way if wealthy nations continue to put our fists in our ears and refuse to see the warning signs that we are chipping away at the world God created.

That's agency on the macro level. On the micro level where most of us live, agency is at work in all our choices and relationships. It's why, for example, I have such a strong testimony of the Word of Wisdom. I have lived with alcoholism and drug abuse in the home, and I am perfectly aware that the great sin of alcohol and drugs is not just what they do to our bodies, which we Mormons teach are temples of God, but what they do to our souls. Anyone who has ever lived with an addict has witnessed the tragic destruction of the soul, as addicts make daily Faustian bargains and trade their spirits for a mess of pottage. It's horribly, horribly sad, and if it makes *me* weep, I can only imagine how it makes God feel—the one who gave up so much that we might have freedom, only to see beloved children exchange that freedom for bondage and slavery. "Wherefore, for this shall the heavens weep . . ." (Moses 7:40).

For me, a final aspect of agency that's been critical is in one of our Articles of Faith: we will be punished for our own sins, and not for Adam's transgression. Mormonism has allowed me to radically reinterpret the Fall, since I felt damaged by the Catholic and Protestant misunderstanding of Eve as a temptress and the sole source of human ruin. In the Mormon story, Eve is a courageous inductor of humanity.

But more than doing away with the stain of original sin, the Mormon belief in agency has freed me from a family history that can feel somewhat devastating. It gave me the courage to try having a family of my own when so many of those old scripts in my own family were of desertion, divorce, abuse, and addiction. (Cheery stuff.) I've shared at Sunstone before how this teaching of not being responsible for Adam's transgression came home to me about ten years ago when I discovered that all my husband's people come from the same sparsely populated county in Arkansas where so many of the ill-fated Fancher party got their start. If you think my husband is not somehow related to at least one of those victims of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, then honey, you don't know the

South! Someday, maybe when I am retired, I hope to do research and figure out all the family connections. But for now, my Protestant husband and I are grateful that we both believe in this particular Article of Faith—we will be judged on our own merits and demerits, and not for those who came before us. For freedom, Christ has set us free.

RELATIONSHIP

THIS EMPHASIS ON agency does not mean that Mormonism is encouraging the rugged individualism of solo religion. Which brings me to my fourth tributary, Relationship. We exalt the family to unprecedented theological heights, and we aim for nothing less than uniting the whole dang human race through temple sealings. A bit ambitious. So it's probably no surprise that relationships feature prominently in my own the-



ology, and this is certainly not unique to me or to Mormonism.

I recently read a hilarious and absolutely wonderful book that I've been recommending to everyone I meet. It is called *The Year of Living Biblically*. Basically, author A.J. Jacobs, a secular Jew, decided that in order to better understand the increasingly important role of religion in the world today, he needed to try living the Bible for a whole year. Not just the well-known parts of the Bible, like not coveting (very difficult in 21st-century American culture) and not gossiping, but the really obscure stuff, too. He stopped mixing wool with linen in his clothing, ate chocolate-covered crickets, blew a shofar once a month, and ceased using pagan names for the days of the week or the month. (You can't say you'll meet someone on the first Thursday in January, because you are dishonoring the commandment to never utter the name of false gods, in this case Thor and Janus.) And on and on. It's an incredibly funny book, and also kind of poignant, because the happiest moments of Jacobs's whole utterly weird year are those he spends with other people. Never having known a real religious community, he eats it up: dancing with the scrolls with the Hasids on Simchat Torah; having his twin sons circumcised; visiting with religious people of all stripes. He discovers that a vital part of religion is belonging in community, whether or not we always understand (or agree with) why that community does

what it does. One of the book's most illuminating moments, in fact, comes when Jacobs tries to think like a creationist and realizes that despite its wrong-headed abuses of science, even creationism is at its heart a theology of human relationship.

Mormonism has given me incredible relational experiences, both in and out of the ward. First let me rave about the ward experience, which to me is one of the coolest aspects of being Mormon. In one ward I lived in, where I felt I had very little in common with the people, I learned that we don't just pay lip service to the idea that the ward is a family. A family is composed of people you didn't choose to be with, and you have a whole heck of a lot at stake together. It's not casual in the way being Protestant is casual—you don't get to just up and decide to go to another ward if you feel you don't fit in. (I know this because I tried it, and, thank God, I failed.) A ward is a real community, not an *ad hoc* one. We create our communities



THE "MORMOPALIAN" RIESS-SMITH FAMILY, 2007

"Sweetheart! You'd better hurry up or you're going to miss the service at your false and dead church." I worry that many Mormons have absolutely no inkling of the logical consequences of their words.

where we live rather than seeking out the folks with common interests who are in our precise socioeconomic bracket. It's one of the things I absolutely love about the Mormon experience. It's the only way to create a real community.

And outside of the ward, the Mormons I know make me a better person. There's a purity to many Mormons that is tremendously attractive, a certain light and beauty in their families and communities. There's nothing profound about what I'm saying here, and I'm certainly not declaring that Mormons have a monopoly on loving lives. But we do community exceptionally well. Many of the people who have been instrumental in making me feel a valued part of that community are here tonight, and I just want to recognize a few of them: Ray and Roberta Black, who have been surrogate parents to me and

who open their wonderfully loving home whenever I come to Salt Lake; Chris Bigelow, my wonderful co-author of *Mormonism for Dummies*; and Dave and Ariane Dansie, the best home and visiting teachers I've ever had, who unfortunately for me have just left our ward in Cincinnati and moved back here to Utah. My friends Dan and Tom, and lots of folks from MHA. Curt Bench is also here, and I should say that it was through his beautiful Pillars talk at Sunstone a few years ago that I made up my mind that he and I should be friends. All these people, and many others I don't have time to mention, have opened to me a community based on warmth and caring and inquiry. The most important parts of my Mormon story are those that happen in communion with others.

REDEMPTION

MORMONISM CASTS ALL of life into a holy light by making the audacious claim that every single experience we have here is something we can use in the hereafter. We can, and do, take "it" with us. No other Western religion I've studied makes this claim, though many individual people of other faiths believe it. What we tend to emphasize is that our family relationships will endure beyond the grave. But another, less discussed, aspect of Mormon theology is that every experience we have here, every joy, every sorrow, every new idea we've ever had, will attend us in the life to come. We will begin to understand why we had some experiences and not others, and why we made the choices we did.

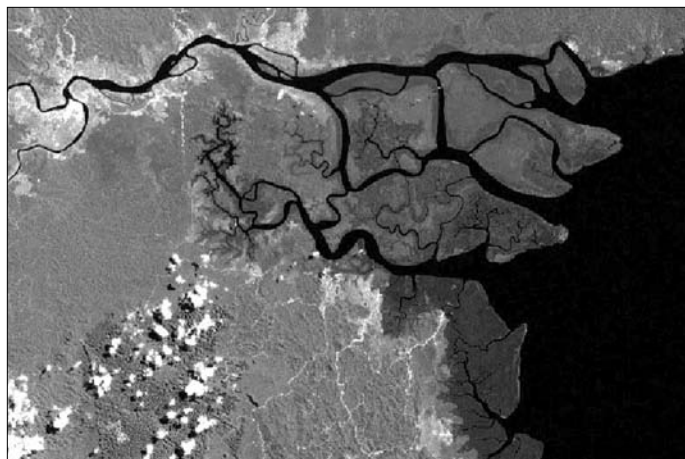
When I was a Protestant, one of the notions that drove me crazy was that an individual was either "saved" or not, and that this single moment of decision was the only thing that mattered in one's eternal fate. As long as the individual had accepted Christ as a personal Savior, emphasis on *personal*, he or she would head merrily off to a Disneyesque Elysium at death. I could never reconcile the idea of God using this one culturally conditioned moment of conversion as the sole factor in such a high-stakes game. What about how we treat people? What about ethics? Considering how much of the Bible is pre-occupied with how human beings behave toward one another, it seemed to me profoundly unbiblical to then claim that this one salvific choice overrode everything else. Mormonism solves this problem nicely by insisting that *both* things matter and, in fact, work in concert—accepting Christ's atonement and responding to that grace by living the commandments.

But Mormonism also redeems the rest of the human story—all those other moments. Those billions of other little decisions we make. Nothing, not one experience, is wasted or lost. This is a perfectly shocking theology. Not one thing we do is irrelevant. It's scary, yes, but I also find it immensely comforting. All the painful experiences I had as a child, including the loss of knowing my grandmother, who was killed when I was little; the loss of my father, who abandoned us when I was fourteen in order to find himself (apparently he is still looking). . . . It's not just that those early losses made me who I am as an adult, but they also helped shape the person I will become throughout eternity. And there are more recent losses,

too: the beloved dog who died in June, the miscarriage I had three weeks ago. (And incidentally, Mormonism has been hugely comforting to me in the wake of that miscarriage, because the Mormon insistence on the sanctity of all human life, no matter how nascent, has given me a theological permission to grieve in a culture that keeps suggesting it was only an embryo, and better luck next time.)


I don't know what pain you have experienced, and it's probably worse than mine. In the spectrum of human history, my own life has been a picnic. I've never been in a war, nor seen a child die of famine or disease. I didn't even have to cross the freakin' plains. But life is still so, so hard, and I sometimes feel broken down by it.

When I feel that way, Mormonism steps in and offers a kaleidoscopic perspective on my pain. I happen to love kaleidoscopes, to witness the patterns and gorgeous colors that can



Nothing, not one experience, is wasted or lost. Not one thing we do is irrelevant. This is a perfectly shocking theology.

be created just by cranking a handle. I find it mesmerizing. But kaleidoscopes exhibit a beauty that is born of pain—those patterns that we see from a distance are actually created from seemingly random shards of broken glass. Just bits and pieces of crushed, broken, colored glass. If every painful (and beautiful) experience I've had is a shard of glass, Mormonism gives me the promise that not one of those shards will be wasted. All the bits and pieces of our broken lives will be used to make something beautiful, to create a pattern of wholeness and grace. That's a belief that keeps me going and enables me to contribute to the river and the sea.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. 

NOTES

1 Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

2 Peter Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 62.