

TOUCHSTONES

A WINDOW OPENS

A MISSION—REALLY?!

AS THE CHAOS of the remodel drew to a close and the last of the carpet was laid, our two oldest children settled into their new basement bedrooms. We soon noticed, however, that the new screen on our son's window was missing. Turns out he wasn't up to anything sinister; it was just easier for him to get out of the house by climbing through the window than by winding his way through the hallways and stairs to the distant front door. But we still ordered a large, noisy metal grating. When it arrived and we slipped it over the top of the window well, his temptation to use the "bat cave exit" dissipated. There were too many things to slide, lift, and replace. Besides, it wasn't worth losing his phone over. After all, his cell phone was his true gateway to the world, giving him unfettered access to friends and the occasional girl.

The oldest of five, our son is almost eighteen, and he is really a good kid despite being the son we continue to make our mistakes on. He's also at a significant crossroad—he still wants us to solve his problems, but he has had a brief, alluring taste of freedom and I can hear it calling to him. It is healthy for young people to eventually break free of their parents, to make their

own mistakes, and to enjoy the successes they build for themselves. And at some point soon, I do want him to be autonomous. I want him to exit that window. My hope is that he will take advantage of his opportunities and find something really extraordinary out there. I want him to wrap his life up with something meaningful and fulfilling—or if not that, at least something that pays well enough to keep him out of the basement.

HE has recently been talking about serving an LDS mission. This is something that I know many fathers would rejoice to hear, but I'm not one of those fathers. I'm not sure I want him to climb through that particular window. I remember my mission to the Deep South as a tangle of weird rules and disjointed values, a frustrating period of number games, and thousands of hours spent in humiliating, mind-numbing door-knocking and people-annoying. But when I stop to really consider that time, I realize that my experience was mixed. I'm fairly sure I had an undiagnosed form of depression that was exacerbated by my conviction that I could never really be successful as a missionary. This is how I understood missionary work: If you obey all the rules to the letter and still don't

baptize anyone, you have failed. If you screw around like crazy but have lots of converts, again, you have failed. If you obey every rule and baptize a lot of people, you really could have done more. If you make peace with failure, you're going to hell.

I spent two decades making sense of my mission experience, telling people about my adventures of teaching Klan members, working in the projects, witnessing the poverty, unkindness, human suffering, funerals, converts, and odd southern food and customs. People seemed to enjoy my stories, and by telling them, I managed to make peace with my mission (and yes, I am going to hell).

My son wants to go on a mission? Really?! I'm not sure what to do. Should I discourage him? Should I encourage him? Or should I step back and let him make his own decision?

In an attempt to figure out a healthy approach to this dilemma, I began questioning my assortment of friends who, like me, are all returned missionaries but who also have complex views of Mormonism.

Knowing what you know now, would you still have gone on a mission? "Of course," comes the chorus. I ask further: *Despite the fact that you are no longer a believer, would you still have gone on a mission?* "Yes, I would still have gone." *Despite the fact that you are now a happy, successful, and openly gay man, do you wish you would have pushed on with college rather than serve a mission?* "I learned another language on my mission, and my experience there is a large part of who I am. I'm glad I went." *Despite the fact that you are presently an atheist, would you go back and change your mission experience?* "No, it was an important part of my personal development." *Despite the fact that you are bitter toward the Church now, do you wish you had done something else?* "No, I don't suppose I'd change that experience."

Really?

"YES!"

My son will soon be his own man. Regardless of my feelings or arguments, he may well choose to climb through that mission window. I guess what worries me is that on a mission, he may find the God I once believed in. If he does, will it change his view of me? Will I become less 'Dad' and more 'apostate'? Will he pity me instead of love me? Will the Church gain a son while I lose mine?

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TOUCHSTONES was inspired by "Readers Write" in The SUN magazine. TOUCHSTONES topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for a wide variety of personal expression. Writing style is not as important as the contributor's thoughtfulness, humor, and sincerity. SUNSTONE reserves the right to edit pieces, but contributors will have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication.

To submit a reflection by email, send it to Touchstones editor Dan Wotherspoon at: DANWOTHERSPOON@ME.COM. If submitting by mail, send it to Sunstone, 343 N. Third West, Salt Lake City, Utah 84103. Submissions should be kept somewhere under 500 words, but we are willing to make exceptions for exceptional pieces.

Please submit something right away for these upcoming topics!

Upcoming Topics: { PROMISED LAND
HOPE



EVEN IF IT IS CHILLY

WHEN WE THINK of “opening a window,” most of us think of viewing some aspect of the outside world we know little about. We glimpse what it is like to be an American Muslim or how an itinerant fruit-picking family lives. We peek in on a Mormon in Nigeria or a highly paid fashion model in Manhattan. We seldom think about opening a window into our own lives. But years after my father died, a window flew up, and I gazed at a central quality of his that I had seen, yet not seen, all my life.

My father, I now believe, could be best understood by what he didn't do. Here's what he did do: He brought home a paycheck every week and worked hard at his job, whether selling hardware in Montgomery Ward or assembling airplanes at Eastern Aircraft. He was a loving and faithful husband and an okay father who sometimes told stories and even sang songs, and sometimes gave your face the back of his hand.

Here's what he didn't do: he didn't go to any church, belong to any club like Rotary, Lions, or Masons; he didn't have a group of friends with whom he played poker or pinochle or pool; he never went fishing, hunting, hiking, boating. He didn't visit people. He didn't invite people to the house; in fact, he didn't like people to come to the house. If a car drew up to our curb, Dad would peer out the window and say, “Who the hell is that?” Of course, if people came into our house, Dad was pleasant and jolly, like the effective salesman he was. He never actually seemed relaxed with any

callers, however.

Dad had no hobbies. He didn't collect anything or make anything. He read two or three books a year, if they happened to be lying around, though he spoke with pleasure of books he had read as a boy.

He didn't go to concerts or to hear the German bands that abounded in our area. He never took Mom to the movies. He occasionally daydreamed about being an artist though he never painted or drew anything. If my mother encouraged him to take an art course at the nearby university, he would scoff and dismiss the idea. “Those guys are just full of hot air; I couldn't learn nothing from them!” Dad was a great scoffer. Of course he had no interest in politics; he wasn't just a skeptic; he was a cynic.

He did not like to travel. Once, in Arizona, Mother insisted he take a trip on his own to California, to see the sights and visit a chum he had worked with. He made it as far as the Arizona border, then turned around and came back, scoffing and insisting there was nothing out there to interest him. He was very healthy, if not exactly fit. He struck me as a contented man. Now I wonder how deep the contentment ran.

The window flew open after he had been dead a dozen years. I had been reading and also learning firsthand about anxiety, panic attacks, and in particular, the recently labeled agoraphobia. One and one started to add up. Of course, I was free to theorize, since dad was gone and nothing could be proved or disproved. But as I thought about his many early losses, especially of his beloved mother when he was nineteen (“That nearly killed me,” he'd say), and about the frightening effects of the Great

Depression that had swept the country just two months after he married, I began to see a possible explanation for his great reluctance to try anything new, to go out into the world and take his chances with what he found, to risk, even in fairly simple social situations. Dad wasn't lazy, as I'd always thought. He was a victim of panic disorder.

I could be wrong, of course—or, as Dad would say, “All wet!” But the opening of this window has given me a perspective to understand this nay-saying, insecure man, and his journey, as well as my own and that of my brothers. There is that about opening windows—it always lets in fresh air, even if it is chilly.

ELOUISE BELL
Edmond, Oklahoma

THE TRUTH INSIDE

THIS TIME LAST year, I lost my lovely mother. While this event caused a very big door in my life to close, it also opened a window.

I come from a very strong LDS family. Every discussion at every meal was about something Church-related. Everything I did or thought in my life was processed through a religious filter. Religion was a great motivator for some of the harder things I have accomplished in my life, getting my Eagle Scout award, going on a mission, and starting a family.

As I reflect on the first four decades of my life, I would like to think that I did all of these things because I had a great testimony and was a valiant soldier in the Lord's army. The reality was that I was doing what my mother had taught me. The

faith I had was hers.

A few years ago, as I was wrestling to know with some certainty that the Church was true, I started to augment my studies with Internet searches about various topics. Some of the information I found troubled me. I continued to live the way my parents had brought me up, but I was starting to get angry about the things that were bothering me.

Once my mother passed away and I was no longer trying to please her, a window opened into a new world. For the first time, I felt free to consider everything I had been taught as a child and decide whether or not I really believed it. I was 40 years old. *It's about time I figure all this out*, I thought.

What happened was wonderful. I realized that I could believe with my heart and that I didn't have to believe anything that didn't feel right to me. Jesus said that the truth will set you free, and it did. As I began to explore and trust what my heart was telling me, I was able to let go of all the anger and frustration I had been feeling.

I no longer care about Book of Mormon historicity, priesthood authority, DNA findings, and many other issues. There are many beautiful things about God and the LDS religion. I can love the Book of Mormon, hate polygamy, thank God for a prophet, and yet believe sexual orientation isn't a switch people can turn off or on. I am no longer consumed by a quest for the truth. The truth was inside me the whole time.

My mother passed away early in the morning. My sister had called to tell me that our mother was fading fast and that I should get over there if I wanted to see her again. Five minutes later, as I was scrambling to get out the door, a peaceful feeling such as I'd never felt before came over me. I knew she was gone. When my sister called a minute later, she simply confirmed what I already knew.

The truth is inside me.

KIRK BULLOUGH
Tooele, Utah

A VIEW FROM THE EAST

FOR SOME REASON, I always seem to come in on the end of a trend, so I had never read anything by Deepak Chopra until his 2008 book, *The Third Jesus*. As a lifelong Mormon, I've endured many Gospel Doctrine classes where time was spent speculating on how a few fish and a couple of loaves of bread could feed thousands or

how water could be changed into wine. Accustomed to such tedium, I felt wonderfully liberated to read Chopra's non-Christian take on the four Gospels—one that emphasizes message over miracles. Scriptures, like poetry, have nuanced layers of meaning. Seeing the Gospels through Hindu eyes takes me beyond familiar LDS interpretation to discover new meanings relevant to my spiritual growth.

Like Mormons, Chopra believes the early Church changed the character of a number of Jesus's teachings, with many of the changes emphasizing "worship over self-transformation, prayer over meditation, and faith over inner-growth."

As a Hindu, Chopra sees Jesus as an enlightened person, one who lives in God-consciousness rather than as a divine Savior. From this perspective, Chopra interprets Jesus's statement, "I am the Light of the world" to mean Jesus was existing in a state of God-consciousness or total unity with God—a unity available to all. Likewise, Jesus's claim that "the Kingdom of God is within you" is much like the Eastern idea of God residing within each person.

In support of this view, Chopra moves beyond the Bible's four Gospels and includes quotations from the Gospel of Thomas, an early Christian text discovered at the Nag Hammadi site. Many verses from Thomas support the idea of the light of God residing within each person—a thought close to Mormon beliefs about the "light of Christ."

Mormons tend to interpret the injunction, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect" to mean that we should keep every commandment scrupulously. Chopra interprets that scripture as a call to substitute karma—the law that gives us back what we deserve—with grace. With unconditional love, God gives us better than we deserve. In Matthew, Christ tells us that God "maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." Chopra believes Jesus is telling his followers to live on a similar plane—to extend grace and love as God does.

Jesus's advice to "resist not evil" is difficult to explain from a Christian viewpoint. Christianity is based on overcoming evil, not accepting it. Eastern religious philosophy, however, rejects this duality, seeing the universe as a whole, rather than as a conflict between good and evil. Chopra tells how evil has power over us only if we give it power. Furthermore, we cannot conquer

evil, and struggling against it only intensifies its power. He believes that instead of trying to overcome evil, Jesus was telling us to rise above evil when it is manifest in others and to accept and deal constructively with our own negative tendencies.

When we Mormons fail to live up to Gospel standards, we often believe we've succumbed to evil—to the temptations of Satan. Chopra explains that regression in living up to our potential of God-consciousness is part of being human. I suspect that guilt, while it may motivate some people to improve their behavior, causes many more to give up on themselves and abandon religious influence in their lives.

Jesus speaks often of faith, a virtue less emphasized in Eastern religions. Christian religions, following Jesus's emphasis, often view faith as the key to meriting blessings. Chopra bridges the gap by suggesting that Jesus's references to faith are best understood as referring to a higher state of God-consciousness in which "faith in God becomes the same as faith in yourself."

Luke 14:31–33 is one of Jesus's less familiar parables. He tells of a king preparing for war. Finding he is outnumbered, the king sues for peace. Jesus then admonishes his followers that no one can become his disciple without giving up all he possesses.

Chopra takes this story in a completely new direction, however, and interprets the enemy in this story as death, with Jesus advocating that the wisest course is to make peace with death long before it calls for you. I think of my elderly aunt, blind and in dementia following a stroke, yet struggling to stay alive—afraid to fall asleep for fear she won't awaken. I wish she could have reconciled herself to the inevitability of death rather than hoping to live until the Second Coming when people will be changed to an immortal state in the twinkling of an eye.

The point of reading the New Testament isn't to prove or disprove the literalness of its content. The point is to find a message to help us better understand ourselves and our relationship to God. Chopra writes, "Spirit, like water, remains fresh only if it flows." Scripture moves us only when we allow it to speak to us with new insights—and sometimes another person's point of view stimulates these insights. Chopra has moved my image of Jesus from white-robed perfection to a human being. One I can relate to.

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