

*Testimony of an atheist*YOUR OLD WOMEN SHALL  
DREAM DREAMS

By Sara Burlingame

## INTRODUCTION

**F**OLLOWING IS A VERSION OF A PRESENTATION I gave at the 2010 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium. Before I started, I called two women—Kynthia and Beth—to the podium and handed each a goblet filled with small squares of chocolate. Then I enjoined them to pass this “sacrament.”

As they made their way down the aisles, presenting the goblet to each audience member, I intoned: “As the cup is passed, please take a piece of chocolate, but don’t eat it yet.”

When everyone held a piece of chocolate, I continued,

Now that we have received this sacrament, I would like you all to lick or nibble a portion—not the entirety—of your chocolate. Brothers and Sisters, this chocolate is your intellectual integrity. Someday you are going to meet someone of another faith whom you will love very much. When that day comes, you’ll want to have a whole and unbesmirched chocolate to offer them. We can refrain from “tainting” our chocolate by refusing to slander people who believe differently than we do.

I hope this has been a meaningful and deeply impressive lesson for you all even though it has almost nothing to do with the talk I’ve prepared. I am counting on the old adage, “There’s nothing that Latter-day Saints love more than an object lesson—relevant or not.”



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That “opening exercise” seemed a cheeky way for me, a non-Mormon, to show that my understanding of Mormon culture went beyond denim skirts and green Jell-O. But how then do I explain the sadness that washed over me when I saw Kynthia and Beth cradling their goblets, solemnly moving down the aisles with their offering? I wondered how long those two had been waiting for someone to call their names; to ask them to come to the front of a congregation; to entrust the objects of ritual into their hands.

With that sadness came a clear vision—one I am grateful to own, even if doing so means I have to give up my atheist card. As those two women stood across from each other in the Sheraton Hotel conference room, reflected endlessly in the echoing mirrors, I also saw a host of faithful, stagnant women waiting patiently behind them, fanning out across time. I wanted to call to those women, bound in the wings, to take their rightful place—or at the very least, I wanted to proclaim, “This sacrament is real, too. We are still a people gathered, and you have served us. That *must* be holy.”

But what those women really wanted—to stand in front of their people and be recognized as beloved daughters of God, equal to their brothers, was clearly not in my power to give them. And that was heartbreaking. Ritual is important. I was foolish to forget that the act of ritual contains its own rules and that no person can control the results.

A year later, I still don’t know how I feel about that vision. I am content to have witnessed and learned something from it, even if that something was only a deeper understanding of the particular pain that exclusion carries.

## THE SPEECH

**I** WANT TO talk about faith and personal narrative today, and a good way to start is to tell my own story. I was raised Bahá’í by my parents, but as a teenager, I experimented with Christianity, Buddhism, New Age-ism and—perhaps most memorably for those around me—a very vocal Goddess worship. By age 16, I’d found what felt like my true calling and remained a staunch adherent to

atheism until I read an article in *Bust* magazine exploring the curious phenomena of Mormon feminism. I became a regular reader of the blog it cited and even began meeting the women who wrote for it. My curiosity about this peculiar people grew until I agreed to take the missionary discussions. Those naturally led to my conversion, a testimony of the Book of Mormon, my baptism surrounded by my once skeptical family who, inspired by my powerful example, soon chose baptism themselves. . . .

Not really. The stuff after the missionary discussions is imaginary. But I do recognize the resonance of that story. When I relate my actual story, I can hear the devout silently sketching in the right ending—the only ending that seems to make sense of my participation in their religion. Sometimes that narrative is so powerful I feel the pull of it myself.

**M**Y ACTUAL STORY is that I am an atheist and feminist who came to Mormonism *because* of my feminism—not in spite of it. I really did read an article in *Bust* about Lisa Butterworth and her blog, *Feminist Mormon Housewives*. And, being an enlightened do-gooder, I decided to help those Mormon women out. So I barreled onto the blog, no less ridiculous than the Margaret Sanger Society representative in *Cheaper by the Dozen* who shows up at the Gilbreth household: “Here I am, ladies! Hold onto your hats, I’m going to teach you about Real Feminism!” I spared myself some humiliation only because I followed my mother’s sage advice, “Wait to make an ass of yourself until *after* you know these people better.” The result? I was not the atheist who brought enlightenment to those sad, oppressed Mormon women.

But I was still an atheist. I still find the concept of patriarchy offensive. My skin crawls when I hear of the bureau-

cracy behind sealings and the folklore of a middle management style in the hereafter. But there is also the power of women blessing their own children—an innate connection to the divine trumping a lifetime of social conditioning. There is the LDS pioneer experience that resonates with many sagas of exile and redemption. Where in the atheist story can I voice my attraction to the particular grace I have

found only in fleeting moments of community? Where is the room for mystery? How good it feels to share my real and metaphorical scars with another woman whose life is both nothing like my own but also a mirror of the suffering and redemption that I have felt.

I have found myself outside of the atheist-turned-convert story popularized by Lee Strobel, C.S. Lewis, and every issue of *Ensign* I’ve picked up. I likewise feel very little connection to the Ed Deckers of the world—the Dawkinses and Hitchenses with their dismissive snideness toward faith.

Thus, I was left to cobble together my own story: the story of an atheist trying to fit in with the Mormons. How does that work?

The answer came as I was listening to National Public Radio—the secular version of general conference.

I had recently been elected to the Democratic National Convention as an Obama delegate for Wyoming, and I was struggling to decide whether to publicly identify as a queer. I was in a hetero-

sexual marriage, so the question of being queer had never really come up. But the DNC form wanted to know.

How much diversity would they claim, I wondered? If I did out myself, I would face an awkward reception at best and open hostility at worst. But would it kill me to get a little gay schweg, rub elbows with Gavin Newsom, and receive that bittersweet applause—the affection people give when



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they know someone is queer and from Wyoming—the home of that sweet-faced boy whose crucified body was found propped against some of that ubiquitous Wyoming barbed wire?

I finally decided to openly identify as a queer delegate and immediately had to begin fielding questions from fellow delegates, reporters, and friends. I spoke as honestly as I could. Yes, I was married to a man; yes, I'd had previous relationships with women; no, I didn't plan to leave my husband now that I had identified as a queer delegate. But I was still conflicted about what that title meant and the extent to which I could claim it if I was not *living* it.

Then on a mild spring day, I was parked in my car, baby sleeping in the back seat, my brain half-engaged with an NPR interview with a Palestinian woman who had written a book about her childhood. Soon the tone of her voice—her rich, deep tenor and thick rolling r's—began to make an impression on me. And of all things, I found myself thinking, "Huh. That woman's voice gives me a real testimony of my queerness."

In that moment, I realized two things: one, I was perfectly at peace with the fluidity of my sexuality. And two, I had used the word "testimony." Apparently, I had spent so much time around Mormons that I'd incorporated not just their jargon, but the worldview that came with it. I, Sara Burlingame, had unconsciously claimed the Mormon right to ask for and receive revelation. And if that revelation happened to come from NPR—well, *alleluia!*

More important, I realized that just as my sexuality is fluid, so is my spirituality. I'm an atheist immersed in, and in love with, Mormon people. If I can be a queer/hetero-married/Obama delegate from the great state of Wyoming, why not an atheist who loves Mormons? It was possibly the least bizarre part of my identity. (I'm kidding about that last part. If I sprouted horns, bowed three times a day to Hong Kong, and declared the divinity of Lady Gaga, my secular friends would find that far more palatable than my love for and contact with the Latter-day Saints.)

Being an inhabitant of this fluid spiritual state, I find myself translating stories from the world into Mormonese and vice versa. For instance, I often hear secular feminists ask, "Why don't Mormon feminists just withhold their membership—rob the Church of their participation, their money, and certainly and perhaps most critically, their children until the Church changes?"

As a narrative, their demand could look like this:

Christ died. The Church he'd formed fell into apostasy. Joseph Smith received a vision and subsequently restored the gospel. But it was incomplete. Due to men's fallen nature, they'd neglected to fully include women in this restoration. Whispering into the prophet's ear, Satan had urged him to consider the needs of only half of God's marvelous creation. The prophet complied. Finally, through prayer and fasting, a band of

valiant Mormon women decided to fight the Church, publishing polemics against it, and withdrawing their "favors," *a la* Lysistrata, from their priesthood-holding husbands. The prophet finally relented, recognizing the divine nature of the women's protests. Men and women now jointly hold the priesthood in the LDS faith.

I couldn't imagine a less Mormon story if I tried.

But I've felt the presence of another story inching its way into my consciousness, asserting itself so persistently that I have to remind myself that it isn't real.



Christ died. His church fell into apostasy. Joseph Smith received a vision and restored the gospel. But because the world wasn't ready to hear of the divine nature of women that mirrored their Heavenly Mother, the Church was incomplete. When the kingdom had been built on earth by a righteous people, Heavenly Mother began to reveal herself to ordinary men and women. Her appearances came to be expected in nightly dreams and even during tedious sacrament meetings.

At first, those brushes with the female divine

were subtle: the image of a swollen womb, a motherly caress on your temple when you were alone in the car worrying about where this month's mortgage payment would come from. But the whisper crescendoed until God's people could no longer deny that, yes, they had a Heavenly Mother and she was aching to connect with them. The prophet heard so unceasingly from members of the Church who wanted to make sense of these dreams that he began to pray daily, and finally hourly, for direction. Then the prophet received a revelation that Mother in Heaven had been trapped in a prison of her people's making. Because she allowed for free agency, she would not be released until those same people grew and ached enough to know her in return. And so it came to pass that men and women jointly hold the priesthood in the LDS faith and pray openly to their Heavenly Parents.

Now *that's* a Mormon Story. And it's a story in which I want to play a minor role. If there is a place for someone like me, who loves your stories and your valiant hearts, I want to claim that role. Messy, dissonant, and hard to explain. Practically Mormon.

I'll close with a poem I wrote:

PRAYER TO A GOD  
IN WHOM I DO  
NOT BELIEVE

I didn't have my own words  
So I had to borrow yours  
My people never hied to Kolob  
We didn't feel the need  
We knew what it was like to be  
Hungry  
But bread stayed bread  
And wine was more than enough  
Without becoming blood  
I never cared for your confining spaces  
Sterile baptism pools  
Or your creed that concludes  
"meetings without end"  
But I need your people, Lord  
More than desire them  
If this is a battle  
Must I acknowledge that you've won?  
This world may be a testing ground

And the men and women I want  
Beside me  
Belong to you  
I say this in my own name  
Amen.

