

Joseph Smith: Lost and Found

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I met Joseph out of all Mormon context. I met him between Emerson and the Beatles, between the American Revolution and the sixties, between the conservative New England tilt of my education and the ecstatic, destabilizing, boundary-busting, prolonged years of anti-authoritarian protest against the U.S. government. I met Joseph roaming the corridors of American history in Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History*, portrayed as a genius who would be comfortable at the same table with P. T. Barnum, Walt Disney, and Norman Mailer—to name a few of the wildly imaginative national characters I had been pitching for documentaries.

Somehow I had reached my forties without ever having met a single Mormon and knowing almost nothing about our homegrown prophet. I encountered Joseph amid the smoking ruins of Vietnam, Watergate, Nixon's impeachment, and the country's return to our primal dream of avarice. By that time, "my" priests were Martin Luther King and the Berrigan brothers, men who broke the law for a higher good. Fawn Brodie's Joseph was this kind of man. But the social activist priests always seemed more moral than faithful. Amid their good works, their contradictions and ironies somehow suggested that politics was what we had in a world from which God had withdrawn. In Brodie's biography, when Joseph broke the law for a higher good, I felt he did so as a modern man of faith.

Brodie meant to debunk, and some questioning Mormons are rumored to have left the Church because of *No Man Knows My History*. But for me, her Joseph reawakened religious feelings I thought I'd lost forever. As a child in Providence, Rhode Island, I was a believer. My older brother and sister grumbled when my parents sent us off to church and Sunday School. But I loved coloring pictures of the burning bush and thinking hard about the nun's claim that God was always with each and every one

of us. I believed it was true—but how! I was intrigued by the mystery. When we moved to Washington, D.C., and my parents no longer enforced church going, I was still ardent. I was eight.

On Sundays, while the rest of my family read newspapers around the breakfast table, I traveled from Georgetown to St. John's Episcopal Church near the White House by taxi. I soon felt like the odd man out. Daddy had come home from World War II and joined the State Department. I didn't want to miss one of his anti-Communist riffs while I was off at church. How could I save America if I didn't know what challenges the free world faced? I won a Bible for memorizing verses in Sunday School, but I felt it was success for success's sake. God wasn't in my words.

The taxi said it all. I had become an uprooted pilgrim, paying strangers to drive me around in search of a place I might really belong. I'd stepped into the particle accelerator in which new energies are constantly released by our atoms colliding at the speed of light. I've come to realize that this is the perpetual shattering modern people call home. I've often felt it's like living in a huge lost-and-found, of doubling and tripling our lives and even our bodies, of trying incarnations that end up in a heap in "unclaimed baggage" centers. There is no rest, only perpetual disintegration and renewal. As a member of the holy order of disappearing sacred cows, I didn't exactly lose interest in God. I just never heard about a God who didn't take himself very, very seriously. . . . Enter Joseph Smith.

He was born in 1805, on a boundary line between rooted traditions and the age of the particle accelerator. The post-revolutionary world was coming unstuck all around him; and strange, new electrical impulses were flying off in every direction. Smith's family on both sides had already been broken into many kinds of energetic nonconformity. They were religious seekers, adventurers, writers, utopians, large-minded, large-hearted men and women trying to get their hands on the meaning of life. They were just the sort of New Worlders that Emerson believed would inherit the earth. They were ready to cast "off the common motives of humanity" and be "godlike," to ask the great religious questions as if for the first time. Joseph was working, as Kurt Vonnegut said of our class (the class of '66) at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, "to get back to moral zero."

There was also a wild anarchy between the lines of Brodie's book, along with an exquisite streak of comedy—especially as Joseph came into his powers. He seemed like a transcendent cross between Huck Finn and Ahab. Meeting him fresh in my middle age was like drinking from the

fountain of youth. I was smitten by the boastful boy who looked into magic stones to track treasure chests zooming around beneath the earth while he marched his men in circles, chanting and sacrificing roosters in the pursuit of gold. I watched adoringly alongside Joseph as an older magician read aloud from Cicero's "Orations" in Latin. How else would you gain favor with the supernatural powers of the night? My spirits soared as Joseph's story grew in wonder—as he spun the pots of gold upward into a great treasure of the spirit, announced by an angelic messenger, guarded by a toad with a rusty sword, sought by a boy with his nose in a hat.

Not since I had colored religious pictures as a child had I felt so close to a divine presence. Joseph's exuberant arc from boy conjurer into frontier prophet with golden plates gave me the most intense delight of which I was capable. It was as if Mark Twain had written a Gospel. The story gave the delight of reading Twain, but more so—like the delight of human love, but different. We do not normally think of God as tickling us until we break into helpless tears of laughter. But this was the God I felt in the early Joseph, a God with a touchingly, meltingly, divinely irreverent sense of humor. Here was a God who dared to clown around with his own image. He had created a story so comic it defied disbelief.

Helen Whitney, the New York producer/director with whom I'd worked for years, was also fascinated by Fawn Brodie's biography. Her interest in Joseph was different than mine, but we were both baffled by the fact that his life wasn't more widely known. The boy who created the Book of Mormon, most of it in three blazing months, lived for fifteen more years. He became a compelling religious leader, an architect of cities and temples, a scapegoat for frontier angst, a bold theologian, a founder of an extraordinary experiment in polygamy. The self-delighting, optimistic boy pilgrim became a self-dramatizing, conflicted seer who flew in the face of every convention and died in a horrific shoot-out. He was the first, but hardly the last, of a representative American type—the self-proclaimed prophet—and the only one of his kind to found a church that is currently growing at astonishing rates of almost 300,000 converts a year worldwide. There was enough in Joseph's story for twenty movies.

In the eighties, we proposed a film about his life to HBO; in the nineties, we proposed a documentary about Joseph in Nauvoo to American Experience. Both times we were turned down. But by 2003, for a variety of reasons (including the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City), American television was ready for a major cultural assessment of the Mormons. PBS

was interested. Helen's growing list of distinguished films about religion made her the natural choice to produce and direct *The Mormons* for a co-production of American Experience and WGBH Frontline. By then, I'd worked as her co-writer on several documentaries in a past that now seemed like prologue.

We spent a year researching and writing a hundred-page treatment. This would be Helen's preliminary guide as she developed the film. Once the treatment is finished, many writers leave during production (the filming period) and come back when it's time to write narration. I'd stayed on in earlier projects out of interest in the subjects and out of fascination with production: searching for characters and experts, interviewing, going on location, and helping with the shoots themselves.

Working on *The Mormons* was no different except that I was a pilgrim as well as a writer on this project. Maybe "pseudo pilgrim" is a better term. After my first encounter with Joseph, and possibly because of it, I had turned to Zen Buddhism for my religious practice. Zen values—even, in its way, celebrates—irrational personal experience; but over time, I missed the irrational transcendence which I'd been raised with. I missed a personal God, even though I no longer believed in one.

As we began our documentary, I wasn't quite looking for a religious experience. I just wanted to observe Joseph's more intimately. Here was my chance. The film was not about my idiosyncratic relation to the Prophet. It was about the sweep of Mormon religion and history from Joseph's founding revelations through the present. Nonetheless, as I went about the rest of my business, I expected I'd be in closer and closer communion with the Prophet's burning core.

It didn't happen. Joseph Smith was everywhere and nowhere in contemporary Mormonism. He was present, but still unaccounted for among the scholars pouring over "the prophet puzzle." In the wake of Brodie's edgy book, historians had turned up a vast amount of new research about magic and nineteenth-century Christianity, the origins of the Book of Mormon, and Joseph's changing accounts of his visions. In the effort to integrate Joseph's story with the new information, biographies—whether faithful or not—had moved toward the explanatory. Authors went to great lengths to "prove" logically, based on the evidence, that Joseph was an authentic prophet—or not. But I felt that the very act of "making sense" of Joseph undermined what I valued most: his shocking religious vitality and originality.

The Joseph evoked by missionaries and in wards across the country was a ceremonial figure: appropriate for the circumstances, but distancing. When faithful Mormons shared their Josephs with me, the traces of their personal connection were like shining instants of mica on a beach, riveting but not revealing. I began to feel the bulwark of Joseph's church for the first time. I was separated from him by the mighty fortress built around his holy flame. Standing in Temple Square and staring up at the 22-karat gold-leaf Moroni, I felt lost. Here at ground zero of the Mormon faith, my fragile sense of the divine was buried under tons of granite.

Where was the boy with his nose in his hat? How did Joseph's magical mystery tour launch the one true church? I was swamped by questions. How could any institution base itself on Joseph's riotous imagination? How had this Houdini of the spirit—a man who was constantly escaping the handcuffs of orthodoxy—how had he been contained inside a church bureaucracy? Could the wildest story ever told justify the Mormons' use of excommunication? Why was irreverence such a divine quality to me? Why did I so rarely meet faithful Mormons who loved the divine humor in Joseph's early story?

One scholar did pick up his hat as we talked about inspired translation; he paused and put his face in it momentarily, then returned to our discussion without missing a beat or changing his tone. His silent—and playful—gesture showed that he knew how funny Joseph must have looked as he dictated the Book of Mormon. His silence also spoke volumes about the mockery Mormons endured because their prophet pulled his scripture out of a hat. It was one of those interviews where I knew I should leave the unspoken alone. These weren't usually laughing matters.

I found that faithful Mormons did not smile at the peep stones, the madcap appearance of dead Indians and feathers, the stately progress of the gold plates at the bottom of a barrel of beans. But among Mormons I met who were leaving the Church were those few who turned on Joseph and his founding stories as the worst of bad jokes. Raging against the Angel Moroni and Hill Cumorah for being laughable, these apostates had a primal bitterness—as if they were tearing out the first taboo—the one which forbade them to admit that Joseph had an inspired sense of fun.

I don't submit this view disrespectfully. The anarchic Joseph gave me one of my very few adult glimpses of God. As I worked on the film, I fought to keep that Joseph alive. I rebelled against the tendency to compare Joseph to ancient prophets or even to see him as a man of his time.

He felt more like a contemporary. Try this. Under the intense inner pressure we associate with budding artists, improvising recklessly and freely, Joseph parlayed a real, but evolving experience of God into an original act of religious performance art. Starting with peep stones and treasure, playing with toads, rusty swords, and quest narratives, moving to angels and gold plates of ancient history, he mixed and remixed the elements at hand until he had transformed them through fantastical vision, theatricality, and the written word into the Book of Mormon. Maybe he was more like Thelonius Monk in a rapture than Moses on the march.

Maybe, but I felt I was becoming guilty of explanation, too. I was turning Joseph into words. A born-again Christian once told me that trying to understand myself without Christ was like being a car trying to change its own spark plug. Somewhere in 2005, between getting my first speeding ticket in Salt Lake City and my second one in the remote canyons outside St. George, I understood what he meant. I didn't have the learning to be a pilgrim. I didn't have the faith. I was racing faster and faster to prove some eccentric point about Joseph—to myself, by myself—and losing him to abstraction.

To abstraction and *distraction*. As production moves toward editing, everyone is doing fifteen things at once: keeping up with new publications, organizing shoots, going to shoots, shooting, interviewing, getting releases, losing releases, collating to-do lists, going back to the drawing board, becoming expert in fields of one's special incompetence, finding photographs, digitizing, losing photographs, digitizing, screaming, going out for coffee, going over budget, and getting back under it. This dizzying activity builds an extraordinary library of materials for Helen and her editor. Their editing suite becomes an island of focus and calm. But production itself is a cross between the wildest scavenger hunt ever and preparing for a graduate seminar exam from hell.

There are almost no dull moments in Mormon history. From its founding, the Mormon journey has brimmed with nonstop, heart-stopping dramas which are almost entirely unknown to most Americans. As we researched the film, we were often told that the Mormons had lost the culture wars to the cowboys and Indians. This seems like a partial explanation for their absence from popular films and novels. Another part of the explanation has to be that Americans still haven't settled where or how the Mormons fit into our national mythology. Mormon identity is still a

work-in-progress and must remain so as long as so much of the story remains hotly debated.

During editing as we wrote and rewrote lines of narration, we began our work by saying, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here." As the Mormons crossed the country, they were enveloped in swarms of contested facts which moved in overlapping clouds from one hive to the next: Kirtland, Missouri, Nauvoo. We spent hours seeking expert opinion just about whether Nauvoo's population "equaled," "rivalled" or "surpassed" Chicago's. It took Herculean research and distillation to get a clean line of documentary narration. Changing a comma, omitting a word often brought a new challenge and meant starting all over on a redhot frontier where you could lose your bona fides if you called a tree by its wrong name.

Crossing the country with the early Saints gave me a chance to deepen what I knew about the older Joseph, the leader of the Church. The boy Joseph had sparked my first passion; he made wonderful, wild sense to me. I had seen troubling complexity in his later self, but I'd never come to terms with it. I'm still not sure I understand the Joseph who was the center of Mormon controversy until his death. A terrible melancholy hangs over the second half of his life. The Prophet was hurtling toward trouble or clawing his way out of it. He had enemies, but he was first among them. The older he got, the thinner he seemed to spread himself. The larger his church, the noisier the controversy, the more people he was for too many others.

As he moved through Missouri and into Nauvoo, there were countless streams of consciousness pressing their disparate claims on Joseph's revelatory powers. He was working as a lawyer, architect, army general, quartermaster, presidential candidate, mayor, medical healer, hotelier, and prophet. I was moved and fascinated by Joseph's visions of Alvin in the afterlife; I was intrigued by baptism for the dead and progression to godhood. I believed he was profoundly serious about polygamy, that all of these theological developments taken together represented a significant, but unconscious deepening of his religious vision. In the end, though, his powerful urge toward safe passage into death lacked the centripetal force of his earlier drive to write the Book of Mormon. Things were flying apart, not together. During the Nauvoo period, at least ten of his lives weren't speaking to each other. Indeed, his warring parts were shouting back and forth. How could the center hold? Finally, he did not seem to care if it did.

He lied about polygamy from the pulpit and burned a newspaper press to keep his enemies from exposing him. A few days later, he was murdered in his jail cell at Carthage.

We went back to Utah for the last shoot in January of 2006. My job was clear cut, but some joy had gone out of me. My attention had been undermined by watching Joseph self-destruct. I began to lose personal things: hair brush, glasses, cell phone. I couldn't take the time to look for them. Every minute on a shoot costs money. Every second has been scheduled. The producer and the cameraman (and their technical crew) have to focus at peak concentration for twelve to fourteen hours a day—day after day—for weeks. I was a floater with the car. I sat in a cubicle at the Alta Club in Salt Lake City, working on interview questions, doing new research, on call at every minute for anything from scotch tape to an assessment of the twentieth-century tite. There wasn't a free minute to look for lost stuff. Weirdly, things kept turning up. I found my hairbrush, my glasses, my cell phone in my briefcase or pocketbook or some other place I had torn apart to no avail just before I left for work.

I did not think to use the word “miraculous” until one particular snowy morning. As I sat down in my cubicle, I heard a woman's voice in the front lobby, calling out tentatively, “Hello . . . hello? Has anyone lost a little phone book?” Fear and trembling overtook me. I looked, and my little phone book wasn't anywhere. It contained the irreplaceable work of several years: the unlisted numbers, home phone numbers, weekend retreat numbers, email addresses, faxes—all the private information without which you cannot reach important people or anonymous sources or the as-yet-undiscovered champs of your documentary film subject. “Hello, hello . . .” I shouted back, and the angelic stranger followed my quaking voice into my cubby, holding out the little damp phone book. She had been at the red light when I crossed and saw me drop the book; she jumped out of her car, grabbed the thing, parked, and followed me into the club. I was lost without knowing it, and now I was found without having lifted a finger. Miraculous.

A new awareness followed me back home to Virginia where I started organizing a shoot with a noted Mormon professor, his family, and their ward outside Richmond. I needed to “scout” his home and meeting-house church for light, space, availability of different shots, permissions—all the things that need to be determined before the camera comes. I could drive most of the way from Charlottesville on Route 64; but once I

got off into the countryside, I knew the roads were spaghetti. The church house was in the spaghetti. I had spoken to the professor several times and was familiar with his books, brilliant works about the Book of Mormon, the power and importance of Joseph's theology—and about the hysterical resistance to it. When I phoned him for help, his detailed instructions were models of clarity.

Yet as soon as I got off Route 64—though I did my best to follow his map—I got lost. I called him from the road, and he kindly talked me back onto the right path. I was lost again in moments and had to call again; he repeatedly helped me find my way. I was beginning to panic. I felt I might be lost all afternoon. I'd miss the service, be a total inconvenience, give our project a poor introduction. And then I rounded a corner and saw the T at the end of the road ahead, the place, I'd been told, where I could only go right or left. I was back on track. I was *found*. The words "lost and found, lost and found" went through my mind, and they were the last words before something like lightning struck my brain. I had a terrible headache; I was sobbing in darkness; I felt I was dying.

As I wept, waiting for the worst to pass, people began honking their horns behind me. I wiped my eyes, put the car back into gear, started forward. I've always feared death, more than illness, more than incapacity. I'd had intuitions of the darkness before, but never one so profound and black. This dark was not as bleak. It was rich. The richness *was* the dark. I struggled to hear the words, for it was saying something to me. Its voice was like a muscular swirl in a velvet tent. It wasn't human. The richness didn't speak my language. But then suddenly, without a word being spoken, I understood. The richness was the knowledge that everything on earth was a half-finished sentence which would be completed on the other side.

I began driving as if I'd lived in the spaghetti all my life, turning before I'd even read the street signs and racing toward the church in full confidence that I'd be there in time. Yet I was still afraid. I was terrified of life and death, the road ahead, the road behind, but I'd always been afraid of them. Now I had a new fear. I was terrified of walking into the Mormon Church and joining it. I was back-pedaling in a primal panic. I'd been out with the missionaries and knew people converted all the time for much less than what I'd just experienced. But I could not join a church.

It wasn't the Mormon Church in particular. I couldn't join *any* church, but none had ever threatened as the Mormon Church did that

day. I did not believe in beliefs. I believed in intuitions, revelations, even answers, but they were all provisional. I could not pledge allegiance to the great movements of the Spirit. The Spirit may change and enlarge us; we may position ourselves so that we are in the right place at the right time; we may be grateful when it comes, but we can't command, placate, or even serve the muscular swirl in the velvet tent. I talked to myself sternly as I bore down on the LDS meetinghouse on the side of the road ahead of me. By the time I arrived, I was calm enough to perform in my role as a professional media observer. I was saved from being saved.

I've thought about the experience of my near-conversion many times since. Somehow the fear I felt on the road has lifted, and the reassurance has sunk into my aquifer. The edge of my death terror is not so serrated, not so cutting. For this I will be grateful for the rest of my life. My moment on the road also changed my relation to Joseph. I haven't recanted my delight in the stones in the hat, the toad, and the rusty sword. In fact, their heavenly fun has come back to me with new intensity since we finished the film. If I could find a way to express the divine humor in the birth of Joseph's religion, I would consider that achievement to be another personal miracle. It may not be my place to say, but I wonder if Mormons would feel more secure in the world if they allowed themselves to appreciate the redeeming mischief in their founding stories. It's a unique gift; it could be enjoyed so much more than it is.

The reassurance I had on the road ultimately helped me see the older Joseph as a brother to the boy I love. I'd slipped away from him through disillusion with his second act. I still find that Joseph troubling, but the two characters are parts of a whole. Both are experimental, perpetually open, modern in their willingness to use whatever is at hand. Both are constantly pulling in things and ideas which we don't usually associate with religion. Both parts of the life are religious happenings.

If people can appear upside down and backwards in Picasso's paintings, why can't the Garden of Eden be in Independence, Missouri? If our artists rearrange reality, why shouldn't our prophets? Art isn't religion, or vice versa, but they have always been intimately connected. They are gateways to the unseen, gateways that are refigured according to the times. Joseph's approach to religious expression changed radically in his own life. The boy born into the battle of the Bibles wrote his own. And the man wrestling gods to earth saw more than he could say.

"You don't know me," he cried in a famous sermon toward the end.

“You never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it; I shall never undertake it. I don’t blame anyone for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself.”¹

Before I met Joseph, I heard a radio preacher say that God broke men and women the way we broke our horses: so they could learn to do their work. By the time I found Joseph, I’d already been unfitted for church. I was too uprooted. I’d spent too much time in taxis. I’d been broken to the discipline of the atom-smasher—of living in cataclysms of newly discovered (or rediscovered) energy. I was used to doing the work of new relationships, new projects, new ideas—not instant ones, but big bang, understanding and applying it, next big bang, cleaning up after the light fades, starting over again. Until I met Joseph, I did not realize it could be a religious work. Now I do. He showed me that it’s the path of revelation.

Note

1. Joseph Smith quoted in Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 2d ed. rev. and enl. (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1971), vii.