

PERSONAL VOICES

A Mighty Change of Heart

EDWARD R. HOGAN

I WAS BORN in the Church and have always been active in it—more or less. My conviction in the validity of its claims has vacillated over the years. Until recently there always had been in the back of my mind a suspicion that the supernatural experiences of Joseph Smith were a lot of bunk. Even during times of relatively good feelings toward the Church, I felt that it perpetuated archaic notions, some of which were dangerous to society, and that it was guided by men of no particular distinction. Despite this I have always attended Church, and have usually had a calling in the Church.

My principal reasons for activity in the Church were social and intellectual. I liked many Mormons—especially thinking Mormons, and I liked to discuss moral and ethical problems. But after sacrament meeting or stake conference, I would always wonder at least a little bit why I went. Occasionally some of the talks would be interesting, but when people raved about how wonderful the meeting was, I always felt that they were lying, if not consciously to me, to themselves. I saw nothing to get so excited about.

During a Deseret Club meeting in graduate school, one of the brothers complained about the tone of the meetings. I can't remember exactly what he said except that many of us, myself likely the worst offender, had been critical of the Church much too frequently. I recall his saying that he came to the Deseret Club meetings in hopes of getting a spiritual lift during the middle of the week, and that he just wasn't getting it. This statement struck me with complete incredulity. I had no idea of what a spiritual lift was.

At Syracuse University, another of my fellow graduate students possessed exceptional insight and unusually sincere devotion to the Church. One

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summer he needed to drive to Boston to use the Harvard library, and I went along with him for the ride. We talked a lot about the Church and my problems with it. After trying to analyze them for a short time, he made the simple observation, "Oh, you don't have a testimony." He was right. In retrospect, it seems odd that someone hadn't pointed it out to me long before.

My first two years out of graduate school were spent in the Boston metropolitan area where I had little trouble finding congenial saints. Then came a job teaching at a small rural college. The ward there reflected the conservativeness of the area, and these years were hard ones. I still attended Church, but I'm quite sure that many of the members of that ward regarded me as the anti-Christ.

Then I went back to Syracuse for a year of post-doctoral study. During that year, and to some extent the one before, there was a big change in me. I became a fierce defender of the faith. Now I go to Church meetings and, like my friend from graduate school, receive a spiritual lift. I get to stake conference early in order to find a good seat close to the speakers. I've even bought myself a white shirt.

When I come to the question of why, I find no easy answers. In one sense the solution is simple and complete: the spirit touched me. But why hadn't this happened years earlier? Although none of my family, including me, observed a change until well after we had moved back to Syracuse, perhaps my being in a ward where there were few artificial inducements forced me to come to grips with the spiritual aspects of the gospel. I hadn't been particularly popular in that previous ward, but just before we left, the Bishop asked us to give talks. It surprised me a little, but I figured it was because of my wife. When the Bishop introduced me, he said that the Hogans had made a number of friends while they were in the ward, that he was pleased to count himself among them. He then added, in so many words, that Brother Hogan really wasn't as bad as he seemed to be. That incident helped to bring about my "mighty change of heart." It's nice to get compliments, especially unexpected ones; and in this case I was just a little concerned for the Bishop's safety—for saying such things in that crowd.

On the other hand, perhaps being back in a congenial ward made it easier for me to gain a testimony. But I have lived in many such wards before and grew up in a ward whose members are among the most outstanding and intellectually elite in the Church. And many of the people who helped me the most to gain a testimony—people whom I now most admire—are of comparatively limited education.

Other specific things that have happened or that I have done have undoubtedly been factors, but they haven't been particularly different from things done many times before. They started out being no different at all. And no one of these things or even all of them together add up to a satisfactory explanation.

As I've thought about what has caused this metamorphosis in myself, I keep thinking of a little article that Samuel Taylor published in *Dialogue* when

I was a graduate student.¹ I remember liking it very much. The article is a tongue-in-cheek guide for would-be Mormon writers. He called it "Little Did She Realize—Writing for the Mormon Market." And he gave a prototype example of a "little did she realize" story. A story that he observed was at once very popular among the Saints and very poor literature.

Janice is a beautiful and talented girl, see, who takes drama at BYU and yearns to be a great actress. But her boy friend, Claude, wants her to stay home, marry him and have babies. Claude, however, runs a dairy farm, and Janice wants fame and glamour, not manure on her shoes. Well, Janice is in an MIA play and by an astounding coincidence a great Hollywood producer is in the audience (how he got there is *your* problem). Anyhow, the producer flips over Janice's talent and beauty. He's got to have her for the starring role in his new \$50-million movie. So Janice's fondest dreams have come true. Everybody thinks it's a wonderful thing, and she's packing her bags when in comes Claude with hay in his hair and manure on his shoes (he heard the news while milking), and he says he's just come to say goodbye and gosh, honey, I'm going to miss you something terrible because, gee-whiz, I love you. At this moment Janice comes to realize that she doesn't want the tinsel and glitter of Hollywood; what she really wants is to be with Claude and have manure on her shoes, bear his babies and use her great talent as ward drama director of MIA. Fadeout.

There are infinite variations to the come-to-realize story: Janice is an orphan girl whose foster parents don't love her; so she's going to run away, but then she comes to realize that they *do* love her. Fadeout. Janice is a little old lady who rebels at going into an old folks' home; but she comes to realize that that's what such homes are *for*, old folks like her. Fadeout. Janice is a housewife who can't have babies, so she takes in a foster child; but the child doesn't love her and she's going to take it back, when she comes to realize. . . .¹

Well, I came to realize! It's very hard to say more, or less.

In college I took a course in painting from a professor who was, in retrospect, one of the best, perhaps the best, I ever had. This wasn't apparent at the time; he stuttered terribly when he lectured, so much so that it was embarrassing to all of us. When we started the course, he told us that he didn't expect to make many of us into artists, but he did hope that the course would make us appreciate what we saw. I *thought* he meant that we would learn to appreciate things that we saw in *museums* more. When we would have trouble with our painting, which was often, he would keep telling us that we couldn't see what we were trying to paint. None of us believed him. We would all say to each other, "I know what an apple looks like; what I don't know is how to paint an apple."

The course lasted for a full year. About the middle of the second semester I had finished all my assigned work and started a small painting of a green bottle. He came over and looked at what I was doing and obviously didn't like it much. He started to try to say something, but gave it up and took the paint brush from me and started painting yellow, red and whatever all over my respectable green bottle. I looked at the painting and wondered what on earth he was doing. Then I looked at the bottle again, and saw that it was also

red and yellow. Many times in my life I have had similar experiences when I was blind and then given sight. But none that were quite so dramatic or literal as that one.

Dramatic changes in outlook are also a fundamental part of the development of scientific knowledge. Thomas Kuhn gives the following scenario for scientific change in his *Structures of Scientific Revolutions*. Scientists in a particular discipline will have a set of theories and viewpoints, and they will adhere to these viewpoints with a strictness that Kuhn likens to orthodox religion. After a while some scientists will point out problems with the existing theories. Then quite suddenly the scientists will “come to realize” that the old theories were “wrong” and develop new theories which are “right”. The surprising thing is that often the new evidence is not sufficient to explain the change in outlook, and the new theories leave unanswered many of the questions that the old theories explained. That is, a sudden change or shift of viewpoint in science has been common.

Even though Samuel Taylor doesn’t like “little did she realize” stories very much, a largely inexplicable change of heart, or change in outlook is a type of experience that accompanies many of the periods of significant growth in our lives. And such a phenomenon is especially fundamental to experiences with the gospel. That may be one reason why we in the Church are so fond of that type of story: We can identify with it.

Religious experiences are extremely hard to share with those who have not had similar ones. And the person who attempts to do so will often appear ridiculous. But once the spirit has become a part of one’s life, one’s life changes and one’s attitude towards the Church as an organization changes. To those who have had them, manifestations of the spirit are very real.

I have many friends who are still in a situation similar to the one I was in a short time ago. They have strong cultural and social ties to the Church but lack testimonies and feel disaffected with the Church. Theirs is a rough spot to be in, and my heart goes out to them. They are fine brothers and sisters, but I know of no sure-fire way of sharing with them what I have, and what they, in most cases, seek.

The role of either a learner or a teacher is difficult if one is attempting to learn or teach anything beyond the mundane. If you can’t “see” the bottle or if you’ve never had a spiritual experience in sacrament meeting, there is no routine thing you can do to achieve your goal. Others can give you insights and general outlines, but if and when you finally do make a significant achievement, you may find it extremely hard to tell how you got there.

When Christ talks to the Samaritan woman at the well, He offers her a new well, an inexhaustible source of strength. What I now know is this: that such a source of strength does exist. It is a source that is available to all of us and it can make your lives far richer and more abundant than we ever dreamed possible.

NOTE

¹Samuel W. Taylor, “Little Did She Realize: Writing for the Mormon Market.” *Dialogue*, 4 Autumn 1969, pp. 33–39.