PERSONAL VOICES

LIGHT AND DARK THOUGHTS ON DEATH

CLAUDIA L. BUSHMAN

IN THE MIDST OF LIFE we are in the midst of death, so the old church fathers tell us, and so we realize every day as a baby dies in childbirth or a friend succumbs from a traffic accident or some foreign potentate is assassinated. *Memento mori,* remember that you must die, the medieval monks were reminded by the skulls they carried around. Yet despite good evidence we find it hard to believe that death will come to us. Surely we should prepare for the end even as we struggle onward from day to day. The great climactic moment of our lives awaits us as it does every man. We cannot escape the awful, unknown, perhaps painful and certainly inconvenient time at which people must pay attention to us and dispose of our earthly remains.

Yet perhaps no group is as sanguine and cheerful about death as the Mormons. We visualize a simple passage through a veil. We will climb the sky and wander off into the clouds to continue life as we have lived it on earth. Death is not a state, but a threshold we cross to another place to live our lives uninterrupted.

Certainly this is a pleasant notion. The family circle will gradually be reconstituted as others join from the mortal sphere. The undying love pledged on earth will continue, even as the parents, in a refined and perfected state, eternally increase the size of the circle, raising any children who left mortality before reaching adulthood as well as new ones. Just how this process will be managed in particular I have given up attempting to understand. Are we to grow ever older in eternity like so many Sarahs and Methuselahs, or will we be restored to the perfect age? Will our children remain with us or be off with families of their own? Will our time be spent in eternal meeting upon meeting? Will that ideal of patriarchal religion take over allowing us to worship as a family group? Or will our tribes be so arranged that we have large groupings of family giving us whole stakes of blood kin to administer? When all is made easy in a heavenly state, will we have any meaningful work to do? Will

initiative and imagination fade as we are all absorbed into the great body of the elect?

Who knows? and does it matter? Our visions of heaven are generally created to fit the lacks of the present life. The poor man imagines pearly gates and golden streets. The tired man envisions eternal rest. The meek will at last inherit an earth, and the powerful look for new worlds to conquer. Justice will come to the oppressed. Women hope and fear to discover their Heavenly Mother.

While pondering my own hopes and fears about death in the Mormon context, I was interested to come upon a sensitive and rather sympathetic essay by Mary Ann Meyers, an "outsider," whose "Gates Ajar: Death in Mormon Thought and Practice" was published in *Death in America*,[1] a collection of essays edited by David E. Stannard. The title of Meyers' essay comes only indirectly from Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' tremendously popular novel, first published in 1868, which attempted to find some middle ground between the harsh judgements of the old Calvinism and the skepticism of the new scientific age. Phelps' characters were persuaded of the likelihood of a future reunion with lost loved ones in a place very much like their old home. Eliza R. Snow echoed the theme of a heaven close to life in her eulogy of President George A. Smith.

> He is not dead; yet death has done its work;
> It came, but not in ghastliness—it as
> A kindly porter set the Gates Ajar,
> And he stepped forth, leaving the tenement
> A breathless corpse, that slumbers in the tomb; . . .[2]

Death, the "kindly porter," has come as a friend, not an enemy.

Meyers traces the Mormon attitudes on death found in doctrine and practice in the early days of the Church and concludes that "Because the Mormons posited a known and knowable universe in which they could calculate the outcome of events, death, for them, lost its dark and hidden character."[3] All our practices reflect a lack of the significance of death.

Although early Mormons suffered death rather frequently, from persecution, from the exposure and disease of the western migration and from the rigors of early pioneer life, they accepted death as part of "the plan." Despite the grim ravages of disease and despite trails lined with graves, the faith of the Saints sustained survivors with a vision of what Thomas O'Dea has called an "extra-Christian evolutionism." They believed in eternal progression. All tragedy and sorrow were, and are, encompassed within a wider optimistic view.

After Joseph Smith's death, which shifted more interest to the hereafter, Meyers finds an "increasingly detailed scenario for postmortem existence."[4] The departed were more often described in a state of busyness—preaching, doing missionary work—than in a state of rest. Death was not to be a release from striving, but a continuation of earthlife. John Taylor noted that "For a man of God to bid adieu to the things of this world is a matter of comparatively small importance."[5] Of course he said this at a funeral.

The late Fawn Brodie reviewed Stannard's book for the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* and singled out the Mormon article for a characteristically heated comment. She found the Mormon "denial of death . . . virtually total" and considered the "tri-layered celestial, terrestial, and telestial kingdom of the Mormons" the "ultimate in American fantasy heavens." She noted that "Joseph Smith's concept that the living can bring anyone who has died, including royalty, into the Mormon heaven [via temple rituals] is the most audacious of all American contributions to the denial of death."[6]

Is the Mormon position audacious? I don't think so. Rather the position is supremely optimistic. Mormons are dauntless and proud of it. I like to comment that we believe in the resurrection, but not the crucifixion; that we believe in the atonement, but not in original sin. And it seems fair to add that we believe in immortality, but not in death. The concept of the grim reaper cutting men down, of death as a punishment, a judgement for sin is completely gone. Mormons are, instead, called to new positions on the other side.

Phillipe Aries, the French historian who singlehandedly reinterpreted childhood to the world, also contributed an article to Stannard's book on death. Aries surveys European attitudes and contends that the man who is dying is deprived of his death. In the past a man was aware that the end was near, and he prepared to meet his fate. Now much effort is expended to hide the expectation of death. The solemn moment is approached, often under heavy sedation, even as the loving family and the medical staff insist that the patient will soon be well. Aries contends that family feeling requires deception and illusion to soften the sundering effect of death.

Men who suspect their impending death often pretend not to know of it lest they upset their families and the serenity of the hospital, the dying place. Some are helped to "die well" with "good taste and the courage to be discreet." Emotional scenes and the refusal to cooperate with hospital personnel constitute "embarrassingly graceless dying."[7] While this attitude is challenged by many today, the situation is familiar to all. The survivors are often grateful that the deceased has been spared the awful knowledge of his own death.

Just as man is not to use his death to upset the living, so his mourners are not to use that death to disturb the rest of society. While mankind has traditionally mourned the passing of loved ones with tears, breast beating and hysteria; with black clothing; with seclusion from the world; Aries contends that the situation has been reversed. "It is no longer correct to display one's grief, nor even to appear to feel any." Society approves a cheerful and controlled demeanor from the bereaved. "Death," notes Aries, "has replaced sex as the principal prohibition."[8] This removal of death from everyday life and the prohibition of mourning and the right to weep for one's dead that accompany it, may protect society from embarrassment, but the survivors are left without a suitable way to express their grief and are furthermore left alone for fear they will indulge their emotions.

Aries' conclusions seem to call for some reaction, some confrontation with death's reality. Should we attempt to tap some primal passion and express

our sorrow at bereavement with lamentations and dirges, with woeful keening and the rending of garments? In Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet,* Mrs. Capulet has such a scene after her nephew Tybalt is murdered by Romeo. Her anguished contortions set to the dark and dissonant chords of the ballet portray a sorrow far removed from the well-bred "niceness" we aspire to. Wouldn't the grief and anger we naturally feel at death be partially healed by such a ritual or would an attempt to return death to dramatic importance in our daily life seem only morbid?

Death comes unbidden to our homes. A surprise telephone call from my father told me that my mother, Jean Lauper, had suffered a stroke. I did not go west at once. My more capable sisters were closer at hand, and we thought we had better prepare for a long convalescence. My cheerful sister Paulie came to mother's bedside and got some response to her steady conversation and laughter. But mother did not open her eyes or awaken.

I had not seen my parents for a couple of years. We kept in touch with rare telephone calls and frequent letters. Mother was always at her best in letters, wry, clever, with specific descriptions and cynical comments. My sisters had told me that she was not up to par, but her letters continued as good as ever.

When it finally became clear that mother was slipping away, I made plane reservations and flew from Philadelphia to San Francisco. When the plane landed I called the hospital and found that Mother had died the hour before. I reported the news to my family in Delaware, and my husband said that there had been a letter from my mother just that day. He read it to me, and it was very lively, full of her latest exploits and enthusiasms. The mails have always seemed somewhat lacking since.

Everyone was too busy to pick me up at the airport, so I took the limousine downtown and the familiar commuter bus back to my girlhood home. My father was subdued and grim, but my three sisters were cheerful and busy. We all felt grateful that mother had gone quickly, without pain.

Mother's things were all about. Her genealogy overflowed the back room. The piles of fabric yardage she could never resist poked out from behind the chairs in the TV room. Her books, her souvenirs of recent journeys, her clothes, her pretty things were all around. The girls were hunting for a list of final wishes that they had seen with suggestions for a funeral and a disposition of her treasures. We searched through room after room sorting, throwing out and reminiscing before we finally found the list.

Mother had been very decided about her preferences, and we wanted to please her. The list outlined the musical numbers she wanted—only organ music, please, the name of the speaker she wanted to "say a few nice things about her," her wish for a white coffin and white flowers and the clothes she wanted to be buried in.

She had planned to buy a new temple dress but had not gotten around to it. After considering a few alternatives, we finally decided to make the dress ourselves. We are all accomplished needlewomen, though perhaps none so accomplished as the teacher herself. We all remembered her finishing up three or four little dresses the night before some event. What more fitting

homage than to be the ones to make her last dress. So Paulie bought the fabric and the pattern and set to work. We all sewed on it before it was done. Georgia, with her quick hands, turned a new nightgown into a slip.

Mother was such a skillful seamstress, so fast and so sure that she was scornful of inferior work. She taught us all to recognize a homemade dress at fifty paces. She was never challenged unless she was a yard short or had to cut around some imperfection, and she had an unerring eye for detail. Paulie added some lace to the collar and cuffs of the white dress she was making for a very attractive result. She expressed a little doubt and I saw the problem in a glance. "You know, Paulie, Mother would have centered that lace." Mother would certainly have noticed but been generous under the circumstances.

My sisters Paulie and Georgia were Relief Society presidents. Neither had had any experience in dressing the dead, but knew that that task might well fall to them some day. We discussed whether we should dress mother for her burial and decided we would. I remembered that a friend and her sisters had dressed their mother and been glad for the experience. Our Aunt Jane, the wife of one of my father's brothers, was willing to go with us and help. We thought that readying mother for her grave would be a last opportunity for closeness and service.

When I entered the room I came face to face with reality, for there was my mother, cold and dead. Her naked body had been laid out under a sheet on a high platform. Her face and hair had been nicely done, and she looked as if she were asleep. Although I knew why we had come, the shock of seeing her there, her presence so familiar and so different, distressed me greatly. We wept a few tears, trying to accept and understand the great and alarming mystery before us, and then we set to work.

Action may not always solve problems, but it temporarily removed the need to try. The question of how to confront death was put aside when the practical need became how to put complex garments on an inert and somewhat stiff figure. Aunt Jane taught us some of the necessary techniques as we went along. We worked together turning the body on one side and the other, in easing here and slipping under there. They had brought in an iron and a little board for us to touch up some of the clothes. We bustled about as if this were some regular housekeeping task, as it has been for women over the ages.

We put on the garments and the slip and the new dress. She wanted to wear her own temple robes so we put those on, including the brilliant green apron I had once embroidered for her, easily the brightest in any temple session. I also made some little white velvet and felt shoes for her for temple wear, but she had considered them too fragile to use. She had written that she would like to wear them for the occasion. In working these little shoes over her stiff, cold feet, I overcame any aversion I first felt about touching the dead.

After Mother was all dressed, we stayed around for quite a time discussing arrangements. By then we were more comfortable with her body, and one or another of us held her hand as we talked. She felt just the same, just cold.

We stepped out when the men came to transfer her body to the coffin, a white one as requested with some gold accents. We felt good about the way

she looked. We added a favorite piece of music to the coffin, "Ah, love, but a day, and the world has changed. . . ." and a ring we had found in a drawer dating from my parents' early courtship. I felt that our morning's work had been well done.

It has been several years since my sisters and I and our aunt dressed our mother for her long rest. I think back to that time with happiness. Our time together was not only therapeutic, but blessed, particularly for those of us who could only imagine her illness and death. In performing this final service we felt closer to mother and to each other. Death and nature came together; "dust to dust" seemed natural and good.

Mother had had an aversion to the viewing of dead bodies, and once when I was ten she told me with some heat that if I ever had anything to do with it, her body was not to be displayed in an open casket. We respected this wish, and friends who came to the mortuary found a closed coffin with a recent and flattering photograph on top.

Mother had also disliked the long ride to the cemetery at the end of the funeral service; it seemed anti-climactic. She had recently mentioned with approval the obsequies of a friend who was buried in the morning with only the family present and then had a memorial service in the afternoon. We also adopted this procedure, and I think there is much to recommend it. After the service, the bishop announced that the family would be in the Relief Society room to meet with friends, and we were all able to speak with people we wanted to see and to hear wonderful things about our remarkable mother.

The funeral itself was just as she wished it to be. My sister Bonnie, an accomplished organist, had arranged medleys of favorite music for prelude and postlude. Lucille Blake, the accompanist for many of mother's choruses and choirs, played the chosen music, and George Aaron did, in fact, say many nice things about her. She herself seemed much in evidence. Instead of the usual recital of life events, I had edited an account out of her own history, and so her life story was told in her own words.

After the services and meeting of friends we went back to our childhood home where my father still lives and where the Relief Society had gathered the usual plenteous repast. I used to think the custom barbaric, but I have repented. The house was full of the greater family, talking, remembering and eating. It was a happy time. One of my brothers-in-law who had dropped everything at this crisis time had worked over old family movies to produce a short film with the best bits of all. I have good memories of that evening and of everything else too.

I used to dread cemeteries, but since living in the east, I have learned to enjoy them. I like to look at the varying monuments, the stonecutting. I consider the names and how long the people lived, and whether many died young, and I read the sentimental inscriptions—"Darling, we miss you" on a little stone lamb, or "Mary Jane Haws, Our 'Puddin'", dead at seventeen. One nearby resting family has a portrait etched in stone set in the cross above each sleeper. So much human feeling is concentrated

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap.[9]

Near my house in a quaint little graveyard rest many good people. The graves, planted with clusters of marigolds, azaleas, and plastic flowers are unevenly grouped on the overgrown turf. The fences circling the little area are covered with luxuriant honeysuckle and poison oak. Handsome granite monuments are mixed with carved wooden ones warping and weathering in the sun, and some ingenious mourners have borrowed the initialed footstones of other graves and painted the names and dates of the more recently deceased on them. None of the cold sterility of other cemeteries can be found here. All is overgrown, lively, confused, haphazard, just as in life. I have been told that this is the resting place for members of the old and only recently integrated black community.

I can imagine bodies emerging from those graves. The trumpet, loud and rough on that last day, would bring out those sleeping bodies as bulbs break through the earth in the spring.

Bodies are important, just as death is unimportant. Our long-term theological view is that the body will be reunited with the spirit at the time of resurrection. We have all been through the arguments about what happens to bodies that are buried at sea and eaten by fish or destroyed in explosions, and we feel that somehow all will be restored. But many take seriously enough the scriptural case that we will be restored exactly as we are at death to shun cremation and avoidable surgery close to death. I don't plan to donate any family organs to science. We don't want to make it any harder than necessary to gather our parts together. Even if we are somewhat decayed, worm-eaten, rotten and returned to dust, if all the components remain, we should be able to be recreated more easily.

If the parts should remain together, surely the people should remain together also. Imagined pictures of the resurrection show crowds of people emerging from cemeteries, joyfully reuniting. Surely families should be buried together. Why then do we have no burial grounds around our churches? Where are all the Mormons buried? Believing in a literal resurrection as we do, should we not be buried together in families and congregations to rise together at the sound of the trumpet? Mobility and high funeral costs have virtually destroyed the tradition of family burial plots. My own relatives are buried wherever they died—in many different places. But shouldn't we take pains and make plans to be buried together? Or if we have no families, to be buried with our brothers and sisters in the gospel?

I think that several extra acres for graveyards should be purchased when new chapels are built. Surely they are as important as parking lots. We believe in life before the cradle and beyond the grave and our facilities should reflect our beliefs. The cemeteries could be attractively landscaped and used for other purposes. I don't object to picnics and games among the monuments, and the proximity of those dead, rather than having them at some far distance, would be good for the children. If for some reason I would not rise with my family, I hope I could rise with my friends.

Two major ceremonies are enacted during most of our lives—weddings and funerals. While the legal union of two people is a fairly simple business, the surrounding panoply can turn the preparation of the event into a six-month ordeal for the bride and her family. Yet funerals, often every bit as elaborate with their special clothing, programs, foodstuffs and special effects, are pulled together in two or three days. The funeral, recording the irreversible as it does, can be considered the more important of the two rituals. We should plan things, make arrangements, think ahead and leave our affairs in order to make it easier for our loved ones to deal with our remains in accordance with our own wishes. Mortuaries with their counselors are equipped to make things as simple for us as possible, but their arrangements, of necessity, are similar and stereotyped. If we want our obsequies to reflect our own preferences, we have to make plans in advance.

Of course I have been planning my own funeral. I hope it will be a significant event with lots of ceremony, participation and homemade ritual. One of these days I will write a piece to be read which will somehow reveal the profundity, perception and charm which I did not manage to project during mortality. My husband, who is likely to outlive me because of his temperate habits and steady character, promises to give the eulogy because, as he says, he is the only person who really knows me. And, of course, I want wonderful music, powerful and dramatic, brass or booming organ to accompany the ascent of a soul to the regions beyond. Once at a concert I whispered to my son that I wanted that particular piece played at my funeral. He whipped out a pen and noted the fact on his hand, to be transferred elsewhere later. I've forgotten the piece, but methodical as he is, that music may well sing out at my last rites.

I hope to leave memorials for all my loved ones too. If I could afford it, I would build a university like the one that rose in tribute to Leland Stanford, Jr. A college library like the one that Harry Elkins Widener's family built for him at Harvard seems the most fitting of memorials. I'd like to build a park and endow its upkeep or leave my valuable collections as a public museum. But all of these memorials are far beyond anything most of us can afford.

More possible is a named scholarship for a student with special interests, a fund for books on a specified subject, a fountain in a public place, a grove of trees or even a single one. The most appealing memorial to me right now is a scholastic prize. For $100 a year, some high school senior who had excelled in creative writing or community service could have his name on the graduation program, a nice little article in the school paper, an additional honor to list on his applications, and a very good feeling for years to come.

Even with our knowledge about the hereafter, death remains a great mystery. Yet, as Willie Loman's wife tells us, "Attention must be paid." And more than attention, we need to incorporate that great experience into our own mortal lives. There is no escaping it. Surely we do better to think of death as the climax of life, the door to the next unknown stage, rather than to deny it or to regard it as the worst thing that can happen.

NOTES

[1]Mary Ann Meyers, "Gates Ajar: Death in Mormon Thought and Practice," in David E. Stannard, ed., Death in America. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975).

[2]*Deseret News*, 29 September 1875, quoted in Stannard, p. 124.

[3]Meyers in Stannard, p. 133.

[4]Ibid., p. 119.

[5]From the funeral of Heber C. Kimball, quoted in *Deseret News*, 1 July 1868, quoted in Stannard, p. 133.

[6]Fawn Brodie, review of *Death in America, Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7 (Spring 1977):716.

[7]Phillipe Aries, "The Reversal of Death," in David E. Stannard, ed., *Death in America*, p. 142.

[8]Ibid., pp. 146, 151.

[9]Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."