Famous Last Words, or Through the Correspondence Files

For the past six years, I have been engaged in various dialogues best understood by a quick trip through the editorial correspondence files, a sort of diary (or dia-log) of my term as editor. In that fragmentary record I grope for a synthesis that eludes me. Whenever someone politely asks me what kind of journal DIALOGUE is, I usually fall back on words like quarterly, intellectual, and scholarly.

But I am never satisfied with that description. What I would really like to do is put together a paradox, beginning with this year's Memorial Day family home evening when my husband, two sons, my daughter, and I reminisced about certain family members who had passed on. Chick and I went from there to outlining our own funeral and burial plans. (He wants the whole Tab Choir at his funeral; I want to be cremated and deposited in one of my handthrown pots.) At one point I picked up the red issue of DIALOGUE and began reading aloud from Claudia Bushman's "Light and Dark Thoughts on Death." She describes in loving detail the preparation she and her sisters made for their mother's funeral—the sewing of the clothes, the dressing of the body. I found that I was crying as I read, for all the world as if I had not been the one to shepherd the article through its several stages of publication process. Claudia herself had once chided me for what she felt was undue emphasis on the personal voice, announcing her own intention to avoid such unworthy selfdisclosure. Yet here was Claudia writing in this scholarly intellectual journal about one of the most intimate of all experiences, and here was I weeping as I read it.

Idon't like to think of myself as the kind of critic who pronounces something good if it makes her laugh or cry, but I can't help getting personal about the experience of taking Dialogue into my home and nurturing it for six years. When I think of Claudia and the countless others who wrote for it or worked on it (sometimes against their better judgment), I feel such a combination of pain, guilt, elation, joy, regret, and fatigue that to describe Dialogue as an intellectual scholarly journal is just not good enough. And when I consider the passion and the energy that went into the founding of it and its continuance for fifteen years, I can only think of another friend of mine who once cried out in frustration, "I must worship in my mind!" Worship is emotional, spiritual, passionate—and yes—intellectual. So is this enterprise called Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought.

As I look back through the years by reading back through the files, I hear a whole collection of dialogues, perhaps beginning with my father's rather puzzled question, intoned when he first heard of my ascendancy to the editorship: "Why did they pick you?"

This question has never been answered to anyone's satisfaction—certainly not mine. When Bob Rees and the other two members of his executive committee called me from L.A. one summer midnight in 1976, and I put the question to them, Bob said, "Because you have so many friends there who will help you."

This didn't seem a good enough reason to shoulder such a momentous burden, so I took him up on his offer to fly to L.A., to be entertained at the homes of the executive committee. I met with the volunteers; visited the office; I even sat in Fran and Tom Anderson's jacuzzi. When I returned home, I received a follow-up call from Tom, the business manager. "Mary, you didn't ask any of the right questions." How could I? I didn't know enough to ask questions. I was dazzled, I knew that—dazzled by the Southern California sun and the heady notion that the journal on which I had served for so many years might be entrusted to me. It seemed like a call—it was a call—a conference call in the middle of the night from three men. How could I resist? But it was also an opportunity to reach beyond myself, and an opportunity to work with some of the most gifted people in the Church. When I later asked Bob Rees what he had enjoyed most during his term as editor, he replied, "The people."

But I was not ready. I would have to talk to some of these people—especially to my own family.

"I like thinking about you and what you're doing and Chick and what he is doing—that unified ambivalence." (Letter from Vivien Olsen, December 1976)

After the call from L.A., panic set in. I just assumed that my husband would save me. He was after all my bishop; we still had three children very much at home; I was working practically fulltime teaching for the government, and I was traveling quite a bit. I told Chick what an impossible thing it would be for us, describing in detail the pros and cons as I only dimly understood them. He listened politely and said nothing. After my investigative trip to L.A., we went to dinner at our favorite French restaurant—on me. He let me tell him all about the trip. I lamented that I was already filling several impossible roles—wife of a bishop, mother of teenagers, government gobbledygook eradicator. Why not take on the possible for a change? He listened sympathetically and said nothing.

A bit miffed, I went on to interview possible volunteers. Lester Bush and Alice Pottmyer seemed to appear magically without being recruited. I had worked with Lester on his black article and was close to his family. Alice was the editor of our ward newsletter, and I knew of her considerable experience in publishing magazines and newsletters before her marriage. Royal Shipp took me to lunch, presented several persuasive arguments why Dialogue needed me, and volunteered as business manager. (Later when I asked my mentor Lowell Bennion for advice, he said, "Take it only if you can turn over the business part to somebody else.")

After calling forty or fifty other close friends and relatives, I again approached Chick. "I think we would have to move the office into our home. What do you think of that?" He said, "Well, the bishop's office upstairs—the Dialogue office downstairs—celestial, telestial." I went off muttering to myself. What was I doing—setting up a cottage industry?

Later Chick admitted that he had hoped I would finally refuse, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to exercise such unrighteous dominion by presuming to advise me on such an important matter. He was to be repaid for this remarkable act of forbearance by becoming really attached to the Thursday night DIALOGUE crowd and the product they helped create.

As for the children, they grew up during the DIALOGUE years. Some of their more difficult teenage dramas were enacted around the DIALOGUE schedule. In a rebellious mood, Lorraine once cried out, "I will never be an editor as long as I live. I think it's stupid." But she became a good summer secretary-editorial assistant. Scott was an excellent proofreader, and Stephen our eldest, introduced himself to classes at BYU as "Son of DIALOGUE." (I think it only fitting that the Son of DIALOGUE was chosen to present the BYU Honors Professor of the Year Award to Eugene England, Father of DIALOGUE.)

DIALOGUE now seems more like a beehive than a marathon." (Letter from George D. Smith, April 1978)

"The main reason we are solvent is not the number of subscriptions but the willingness of our volunteers to kill themselves off saving us money. With DIALOGUE in my house, a couple of paid part-timers (paid very little, I might add) and me working night and day, we can safely say that DIALOGUE comes out of our hides." (Letter to Jill Mulvay Derr, April 1981.)

Comprised of as many as forty or as few as two, our volunteer organization was always open to anyone professing the slightest interest in our enterprise. Readers from afar could look us up for an evening; newly married couples moving into the area could call on us for an instant support group, single men and women could stop worrying about marriage for awhile and devote themselves to our nonsexist activities; people from all professions-doctors, lawyers, housewives, accountants, chemists, computer freaks-anybody was welcome to stuff envelopes or proofread copy. In fact the stuffing parties were some of our more memorable evenings. We could sit around and chew on M&M's and church gossip. One night Gene Kovalenko flew in from California and serenaded us with Russian folk songs while we readied the renewals for mailing. We sponsored several "firesides" too-Mark Leone with the inside story of his book, Roots of Modern Mormonism; William Collins, writer and librarian from the B'Hai faith in Haifa; Leonard Arrington and other historians on eastern tours; editors from other publications—Roy Branson and crew of the Seventh Day Adventist quarterly Spectrum, past editors of DIALOGUE like Gene England, Wes Johnson, Bob Rees, and Gordon Thomasson; and present editors of Sunstone, Exponent II, and Utah Holiday. There was such a variety of meetings with such a variety of people that we became known as the DIALOGUE salon.

A real bonus was the opportunity to know our supporters in the Reorganization or RLDS Church. Some of them served on our board. Others wrote for us: Paul Edwards, Bill Russell, Alma Blair, Claire Vlahos, Howard Booth, and others. Our relationship with them was cemented by our trips to the Mormon History Association annual meetings in Kirtland, Lamoni, and Palmyra, delightful excursions that opened our eyes to a shared heritage outside our own circle.

"Working with an all-volunteer group is really challenging, especially when you have a professional-looking product to put out. The other day two other women and I went to visit a printer's establishment—Alice Pottmyer, our publications specialist, and Judy McConkie, our art editor. The man got almost through his tour of the plant before he told us how important it would be to bring our bosses to see it too. He turned and said, "You do have bosses, don't you?" We looked at each other a minute, then pulled ourselves up to our full height and said, "We are the bosses!" (Letter to Carolyn Person, July 1976)

Not only was it difficult to convince ourselves that we were really in charge, it was difficult to know how to manage so much good help. After one particularly grueling evening in which about thirty of us sat around and debated policy and procedure, Royal took me aside for a bit of advice. "Mary, this many people can't make decisions. You can listen to all their ideas, but only a few can actually decide." From then we tried to organize around some division of labor. Though our group seldom disagreed on anything of importance, we did decide that since the work was being done out of my home with my name on the masthead as editor and on the legal papers as president of the corporation, the buck would have to stop with me. But it was also decided that anybody willing to work could speak up about anything. Volunteers read manuscripts, copyedited, proofread, typed, stuffed envelopes, and gradually sorted themselves into various specialties. Our group turned over several times, but several stayed on the board after moving away, and other learned enough from the experience to better their careers because of it.

I always knew, however, that the volunteers were vastly overqualified for the work and that I would never really be able to take full advantage of their skills. This was especially true of our paid workers—the managing editor, the administrative secretaries, the artists, the BYU interns. We expected them to do something of everything with precious little direction from anybody. When I think of Benita Brown and Sandra Strahbhaar working on advanced degrees (Sandy finished her Ph.D. while working for us), I can't help but feel a bit guilty. Betty Balcom performed such a variety of professional duties that we finally gave her the title "Renaissance Woman."

Our group also thrived because of the persistence of our five-member executive committee—which we grew to think of as the perfect team. Lester and I created a planning and editing approach that I can only describe as a superlative friendship. Our talents and interests contrasted but blended.

Alice's photographic memory, her delight in the daily flow of life, and her ability to recognize the importance of certain tasks that others deemed unimportant kept the office going. Royal's good sense and Dave Stewart's legal mind kept us out of many a scrape. During our quarterly meetings after dealing with the latest monetary crisis and reporting on the next issue, we liked to fantasize about the future. After several of these sessions we came to think of ourelves as a 'transitional' group—or to paraphrase the Bradford of Plymouth Colony "even as stepping stones unto others for the performing of so great a work." We often marveled that we were having to run so hard just to stay in one place, but we reasoned that we were making it possible for the next group to lift Dialogue to a truly professional level with a real office and real money.

"Bob Rees' response to the media issue was luke to say the least. He marked the errors in his copy and sent it back with the words, 'You must have learned a lot.' . . . An artist friend says it looks as if it had been designed by a committee. Well, it was!" (Letter to Bill Loftus, September 1977)

Even though the first issue to be completed by our group (Vol. 10, No. 3) looked tacky, there was something heady about the fact that it was our very own issue with articles we had planned, solicited, even written ourselves. We had actually sat around a table and designed and pasted it up. Karen Maloney, our first BYU intern was to describe the "curious pleasure of seeing ideas turned into print." Although the issue was embarrassing in many ways, it helped turn our fledging group into a cohesive family, and we even today feel affection for our deformed child.

"We believe that the main thing is to bring out the magazine regularly, boo-boos and all." (Letter to Bill Loftus, September 1977)

As we struggled to learn our craft, we sometimes cursed the standards DIALOGUE had set for itself. "Why," we exclaimed, "did Gene and Wes and the others have to start so high on the hog?" Why hadn't they patterned DIALOGUE after the Reader's Digest instead of the American Scholar? Why the perfect binding, the high-quality paper, the glossy covers and the fine art? It went against nature to be producing such a silk purse on such a shoestring. We spent hours studying the work of previous editors lined up on the family room shelves. We envied Rees his knack with art; we envied Gene and Wes their chance to be first in so many ways. We talked into the night about articles that had made a difference in our lives, and finally we began to realize that we too could set standards and build on them. They weren't too different from past standards, but we gradually learned to forgive ourselves for our growing pains—even for the typos that cropped up like buzzing insects no matter how many times we proofread.

Our ability to do increased as our numbers diminished, and we were able to enjoy what we were doing. We found that our main obsession was to work with those writers who were willing to make the sacrifices necessary to publish in the "unsponsored sector."

It is too bad you are so averse to editorial suggestions. It may be news to you that the best novelists—as well as the popular authors on the newstands—have all been edited sometimes drastically, though presumably with the author's permission. . . . Sometimes an editor can help you tell your story better." (Letter to hopeful writer, September 1981.)

"At your request, we are returning your manuscript. You were right: it is not DIALOGUE material." (Letter to another hopeful writer, June 1979.)

Writing rejection letters was the most painful part of my job. I was so doubtful of my own abilities as a critic and yet so anxious to develop writers that combined fear and anxiety led me to write letters that were not only curt but cruel. In reading these letters, I find that I also sounded deceptively confident and aggressive. And of course, I was always apologizing: "It is really embarrassing to have to write and tell you that we seem to have lost your poems," or "I apologize for the editorial wheels. They grind exceedingly fine, but they grind exceedingly slow." I found that some of the worst moments came when I found myself rejecting work I had actually solicited. Most of the rejected took it in good part, but the following response from one writer whose solicited review was rejected probably expresses the feelings of many others: "You have put me to a good deal of trouble and effort for nothing and you wasted a good deal of my time. My time is not yours to play games with, and I'm afraid I do resent your having decided that it was." Fortunately, for every letter like that one branded on my conscience with a hot iron—there were two or three others like this from Robert Egbert: "When an editor writes a letter of rejection, I'm sure she must assume that receipt of that letter will bring distress and at least mild depression to the author. For me, the opposite was true. Though I was disappointed that you did not accept my story, I was so pleased with your other comments and with your useful analysis that I have been on a day-long high."

Various staff members kept trying to help me with the task of writing rejection letters and some of them were very good at it—Lester, for instance, and Sandy Straubhaar. One night Greg Prince appeared, took a look at the manuscripts sitting in the bin by my desk and said, "I suppose you think if you leave these here long enough, they will ripen into something wonderful?" He then proceded to compose a few pithy paragraphs which he assured me I could use in form letters of rejection. Somehow I could never bring myself to do it. It now seems to me that it might have been a good deal kinder to have sent a well-written, good-natured rejection letter than to agonize and struggle with custom-designed letters sent too little and too late.

I suppose it was natural that I would agonize most over fiction and poetry. I think that in some cases we may have succeeded in actually causing a work to disappear by requiring too many revisions. Better to publish an imperfect story in the cause of keeping the creative process alive than require the author to do so much revision that his work goes up in a cloud of blue smoke. Former board member Kevin Barnhurst assures me that I shouldn't worry—that words are written on paper, not carved in stone and that the author can always go back

and retrieve an earlier draft. But I am unconvinced. Won't the author lose heart?

"I was surprised at the number of reactions to my piece in DIALOGUE. For a magazine with limited and specialized circulation, DIALOGUE certainly seems to be getting around." (Letter from Merlo Pusey, March 1977)

Merlo Pusey's comment expresses the reality that DIALOGUE is read by a far larger number than those who actually pay for it. I have come to call these "shadow readers." These are they who check it out at the library (sometimes failing to return it), borrow it from friends, or otherwise "see" it and remark on it. To them reading is a godgiven right, like breathing, so they fail to make the connection between reading and money. Because of the generosity in the lay Church mentality, because of the fact that many Church publications are subsidized, and because Dialogue is expensive by Church standards, many readers simply will never make the connection. I understand and sympathize with that mentality myself. I have to be physically restrained by my staff from giving Dialogue away as I have gradually given away my personal library over the years. But I have finally overcome my shyness at asking for money for Dialogue. I am no longer shy about mentioning it at Church. If we can raise food at the stake farm, why can't we raise food for the mind?

"Don't give up on me, honeybun. I haven't given up on you, even though I feel you are a hostage of the establishment." (Letter from Sam Taylor, 3 March 1981)

"Well, I should keep my big mouf shut. I'd no sooner mailed off my churlish note to you than the latest DIALOGUE arrived—and it was exactly what I'd been screaming for. Once again the mag was a journal of Mormon thought. As such, long may it wave." (Letter from Sam Taylor, 17 March 1981)

Vivien Olsen's characterization of my relationship with my husband as "unified ambivalence" seems to apply to readers' perceptions of Dialogue. We never knew whether we were being perceived as Iron Rodders or Liahonas. After writing to a lapsed subscriber to ask why he had departed the fold, I received this reply: "I cancelled because you have been avoiding controversy." Another reader penned this note on his renewal notice: "Please save yourselves some money and send no more notes. Your publication lately is so similar to official Church publications that I can't tell the difference." Of course the minute we published material that could be called "controversial"—as in the Sonia Johnson articles—we were pronounced "sounding board for apostates." One letter, published in Sunstone, inducted us into the "unholy triad" along with Sunstone and Exponent II. In my response I stated, and I still believe, that "we are dedicated to free inquiry within the boundaries of decency and documentation. In fact, we believe so profoundly in the gospel of Jesus Christ that we trust it to withstand inquiry from such as we."

This constant juggling act, this keeping the faith while keeping on, was always difficult and we were not always adept at it. On the whole, though, we held our own.

Many in the Church publishing world seem unable to make distinctions among the various publications. Some actually think of us as competition for the *Descret News* and other profit-making periodicals.

Our journal is difficult to summarize, as I have already said. When a prospective reader asks for a sample copy, we are often at a loss to know what to choose. Should we send them the one with the First Vision on the cover and the Sacred Grove inside or the Sonia Johnson issue? DIALOGUE needs to be read over a period of time. It should be seen in the aggregate before a judgment can be made. Many times our readers spoke from their own emotional needs when they wrote of our objectivity or lack of it. I am always comforted, however, by the many thinking Mormons who are unafraid to face diversity of opinion and are not taken in by labels. I am fond of the Arrington-Bitton analysis of the Liahona-Iron Rod dichotomy in The Mormon Experience: "Conservative Mormons include many highly educated individuals who emphasize strong reliance on the wording of scripture, the authoritative structure of church government, and a church-centered social system. Liberals emphasize the boldness and innovative character of the Restoration, faith in the essential goodness of man and his possibilities of eternal progression, and the church's commitment to education and the resulting emphasis on rationality. The checks and balances give Mormonism both stability and progressivism."

"We all know what happened in June 1978. I like to think some of us 'heretics' helped bring the announcement about. . . . God must love heretics. His Son was the greatest." (Letter from John Fitzgerald, July 1978)

The question of whether or not we should publish the work of "heretics" and other apostates was always being debated among us and our readers. Though we have no intention of becoming a sounding board for apostates or anyone else with an ax to grind, we think active Church members might have something to learn from those who leave, if only the reason for their leaving. Is it worthwhile to engage in dialogue with only those with whom we already agree?

But of course balance is important—and one person's balance may be another person's heresy. Believing that objectivity is the hobgoblin of weak minds, we nonetheless tried to be fair to various thinkers within the Liahona-Iron Rod dichotomy. The most controversial issue published during my tenure was the one carrying interviews with both Sonia Johnson and Fawn Brodie. Although it was almost accidental and coincidental that the two appeared together, we did think it instructive to run them. I prefaced this issue with a very carefully written page outlining the difficulties and the logistics of our decision to publish, which as far as I can tell, went unread. Although the issue is very popular, I am still asked the question, "Why did you have to deal with the Sonia Johnson case at all? Why not let it die?" As if we could in good conscience ignore the most sensational excommunication in recent history with its attendant effect on the Church's public image and the questions it raised about Church trials and women's rights.

'I think this is an exciting time to be the editor of DIALOGUE, knowing as I do how the previous editors suffered over the black problem. Surely this [revelation] will release much

energy in the church, creative and otherwise." (Letter to Stanton Hall, June 1978)

If this life is indeed a testing ground, certainly my life with DIALOGUE has been an impressive test for me. I have had to marshall every resource of mind and heart in order to do my job, and certainly working on DIALOGUE has released energies I didn't know I had. But it has also led to the suppression of certain talents I thought I had. For instance, I have not written a poem worth showing to anybody since I first took the helm. It seems that I can't write poetry and edit too. A letter from one of my pen pals, Mary Jane Heatherington, expresses the problem:

I've got this desk that used to be a teacher's desk. . . . It's got one of those liftup drawers where you have your typewriter down inside and the desk is flat on top. When you pull up on the handle, the typewriter comes rising out of the bowels of the desk all ready for action. Everytime I raise up the door and get my typewriter out, it reminds me of the Green Hornet—bar—ooo—mmm! But mostly I get depressed and put her back when I can't get her to do right. I've been in a snit for months, not writing anything."

I replied that "my typewriter is always sitting out—a silent reproach as I glide by. I can't even get it to disappear. It simply reminds me of my lost dreams, my sleeping ambitions."

I suppose that I realized I was putting certain ambitions on the back burner, but I also realized the possibility of becoming a creative editor as well as a creative writer. I soon discovered the same satisfaction when a new issue comes off the press as I would have felt if I had written the whole thing myself; more so, in fact, because the issue represents the work of so many other good minds I have helped into print. So, although I never did live up to all my own ambitions for myself, I revel in the satisfaction I used to feel in the classroom with its feedback from inquiring minds. I also took delight in that gift of friendship Bob Rees had mentioned. I call it a gift because I believe it is just that—an undeserved gift bestowed by a kindly God. No matter how difficult the tasks, how cross and irritable I became, no matter how inefficient and uncommunicative, how downright cantankerous I was, my friends always came forward whenever there was work to be done and even when I just needed moral support or a touch of therapy. If certain talents of mine have gone underground, I do not mourn them.

"I am sorry that you are thinking of giving DIALOGUE up. The healthy thing which DIALOGUE has always stood for-an independent, intelligent, cultivated but ultimately faithful study of Mormonism-is at stake. The editor of DIALOGUE should be neither too orthodox nor too liberal. A precise mixture of both qualities is essential." (Letter from Levi Peterson, August 1981)

During the last two years or so, I began noticing certain alarming traits in myself. Not only was I fatigued and restless, but I had taken to referring to DIALOGUE as "my journal" and its board as "my board." The fact that Stephen could introduce himself as "son of DIALOGUE" was probably only a harbinger of things to come. Soon I would lose all touch with reality and grow into one of

those obnoxious characters who can't tell the difference between herself and her job. It was time to quit.

But how? One of the weaknesses in our system seemed to be that retiring editors must go out and seek their own replacements. So I called the executive committee together and asked if any of them wished to take it over. They assured me that they were as ready as I to pass on the torch. Thus began the research that would lead us to decide it was time to move DIALOGUE to Utah.

This was heresy to some. Several of our staff and many readers were adamantly opposed to settling in the center stake. I myself had been one of those who felt I could do a better job at a comfortable distance away from the rumor mills of Utah. We were dedicated also to the ideal of dispersing ourselves enough so that we could more effectively "examine the relevance of religion to secular life." Washington, D.C., had been a good vantage point for "point" men and women to stand, being a crossroads and a network for Mormons and those interested in studying Mormons. But continuing financial problems kept reminding us that we would need to publish where publishing was less expensive and where there might be a chance to move it out of our homes and more nearly into the professional market place. Since most of our subscribers and many of our writers are still in Utah and neighboring California, we reasoned that perhaps the time had come to try it in Utah. When I asked Bob Rees's opinion, he said, "Is it time for DIALOGUE to go home?"

Of course, the primary consideration was and always would be the calibre of volunteers who would agree to take it over. Since we are unable to advertise for paid professional labor, we would have to count on the belief that the spirit of DIALOGUE still lives, a spirit of unstinting dedication to an ideal.

I thought. I made lists. I prayed. And one morning I felt inspired to call Fred Esplin, one of Dialogue's faithful board members. I asked him if he would agree to head up a search committee composed of other faithful board members in Utah. I felt that Fred's low-key friendly personality, his wide contacts, and his excellent organizing skills were just what we needed. So with the aid of attorney Randy Mackey and other long-time supporters, he formed a research committee and finance committee to find candidates and make recommendations. When I arrived in Utah three months later, we had a good list of prospective editors and some reasonable printing and office bids. The work that went into these lists convinced me that Dialogue's spirit was still alive and well in Utah.

"After we checked into the Ramada Inn in Ogden, we were greeted by Paul Edwards and Doug Alder. Doug said, 'Mary, you really pulled off a coup—getting the Newells—they're wonderful!" " (Letter to Carole Lansdowne describing the MHA meeting, May 1982)

In the age of the family, the choice of a husband-wife team as DIALOGUE'S co-editors seems inspired. When I interviewed the Newells, they had only one stipulation—that Lavina Fielding Anderson come with them. When Fred and Randy agreed to stay on, joined by Allen Roberts, Sunstone's former co-editor, and Julie Randall, our efficient BYU intern, the new group was ready to set up an

accessible office in downtown Salt Lake City. All that remained was a ritual farewell dinner to convince me that I could say goodbye without fear or anxiety. In another letter I wrote, "There is real activity and electricity being generated by the next group. I no longer worry about giving it up."

