

# Making "the Good" Good for Something: A Direction for Mormon Literature

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Ever since the classic triumverate of the good, the true, and the beautiful was set up as the literary ideal, the good — meaning the virtuous or moral — has had less success than either the true or the beautiful. The good has all too often been the didactic, the pious, the sniveling, and the terminally petty. The good has also usually been the excruciatingly boring, even though there is, in my opinion, no subject of such intense inherent interest as that of the human soul in conflict with itself and no questions more urgent than those of values. In our decade, "good" Mormon fiction has usually meant the inoffensive, the mildly heartwarming, and the essentially trivial. Its genealogy goes back to nineteenth-century home literature which aimed at producing uplifting inspiration in a Mormon context. Its modern descendants have successfully resisted the attempts of regionalists in the 1930s and 1940s to shift the subject matter to the culture of Mormonism and the attempts of academicians in the 1960s and 1970s to shift to the technique of literature.

As a result, until recently, fiction with literary aspirations has occupied an uncomfortable no-man's land. Although Peregrine Smith published Emma Lou Thayne's idyllic celebration, *Never Past the Gate* (1975), it was Dolphin Books rather than a Mormon publisher who reprinted in 1961 Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua*, unquestionably the most important novel to emerge from Mormon culture since its publication in 1941 by Houghton Mifflin. Part of that prominence has been its lonely eminence, no doubt, for Douglas H. Thayer could not find a publisher for *Under the Cottonwoods* (1977), but fortunately had the resources to do it himself. Béla Petsco faced the same predicament with his *Nothing Very Important and Other Stories* (1979). (In 1983, and 1984, Signature Books reprinted both.) Marilyn Brown self-published *The Earthkeepers* (1979), and the success of Don Marshall's self-

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published *Rummage Sale* (1979) prompted Peregrine Smith Press to reprint it and BYU Press to publish his second book, *Frost in the Orchard* (1977). It is to be hoped that Levi Peterson's dazzling short story collection, *The Canyons of Grace* (University of Illinois Press, 1982) will make his future works eagerly sought for. At least Thayer's *Cottonwoods* is back in print (Signature Books 1983) along with his new novel *Summer Fire* (Signature Books, 1983) and Marden Clark's evocative collection of autobiographical short stories, *Morgon Triumphs* (Signature Books, 1984).

While many good works go begging, however, Paul French's novel of under two hundred pages entitled *Nauvoo* (fetchingly subtitled "The Saga of a City of Exiles: The Passions that Built and Destroyed It") appeared in 1983 with hype from a publisher in Orem, and Shirley Sealy's two most recent books *I Have Chosen You*, and *Don't Tell Me No!* (they are not a series) not only have been published but seemingly have hordes of readers.

Meanwhile, I have had the following experiences: I read a novel in manuscript dealing with contemporary Mormon issues during the 1950s and 1960s. The author said, "My family doesn't know I'm writing this. Not a soul knows. I don't think I'll ever publish it unless it's under a pseudonym." Another author with a finished manuscript that deals with contemporary Mormon characters admitted, "If Deseret Book would accept this, it would tell my family that it's all right to write." The predictable rejection was bitterly disappointing. Levi Peterson, standing on the street in front of Steven Sondrup's house on a beautiful fall day in 1982, recited for me the little speech of apology that he had composed to accompany the presentation of his own award-winning *Canyons of Grace* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982) to certain members of his family and ward.

These episodes are a litany of uncertainty that fills me with both shame and anger. There is no question that *Canyons of Grace* was the most important Mormon fiction to appear in 1982. Modesty may have been in order. Apology was not. Furthermore, the other manuscripts I mentioned are, without equivocation, as significant in theme and as polished in technique as any other Mormon fiction available in print — worthy to stand beside Herb Harker's *Turn Again Home* (reprinted by Randall Books, 1984), Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* (1941, 1961), or Virginia Sorenson's *The Evening and the Morning* (out of print).

I am concerned that all of these writers seem to have the clear message that they are marginal members of their society because of their writing, that to decide to write is to isolate themselves from the fellowship of the Saints. I have no intention of scolding those who are made uncomfortable by fiction that tries to use good techniques and to be good for something in addition to being good. But I do want to provide some aid and comfort to those whom I perceive to be serious Mormon writers. It is difficult enough to clear a patch in the brambles of daily life or on the kitchen table for the typewriter, agony enough to struggle with plot, theme, image and character, absorbing enough to shape without distorting and to refine without destroying, excruciating enough to look at the final result with the cerebral knowledge that it is done as

well as you can do it and the sickening suspicion in the pit of your stomach that it's lousy — without also having to struggle through the paralysis that can be induced by a uniformly accusatory environment: "Writing wastes time. Why don't you write family histories if you want to write?" "These kinds of stories weaken faith. In fact, what's wrong with your testimony that you could write this junk?" "No one in the family will dare hold their heads up if this gets out." Even in the milder forms, such disapproval can shatter the confidence to try, and it can certainly poison the sheer joy of having written.

I have no magic solutions for the lack of community acceptance that many writers of Mormon fiction must face, but I think that the situation is far from hopeless. Lewis Horne recently published *the seventh day*, a volume of poetry (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Thistledown Press, 1982). Orson Scott Card's *Woman of Destiny* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1984) has appeared, Levi Peterson's new novel is finished and Linda Sillitoe's is through first draft. Emma Lou Thayne, in addition to her peace poetry (DIALOGUE, Winter 1984), is preparing a major book on the tensions of the writing process. These books, like the manuscripts that I mentioned earlier, are full-length works. Their mere existence constitutes a critical mass that is different in quality from the excellent collections of short stories that have been the chef d'oeuvre of Mormon literature to date. They represent the assimilation of the neglected novel form and a commitment to make it accessible to a new generation of writers.

The challenge facing these writers is considerable. The majority of published works in the field of Mormon literature today consists of clichés borrowed from the larger world of bad literature. This cheap and easy fiction, the pretty romances, the cute tales of cute adolescents, and melodramatic historical fiction seems preoccupied with its audience, deals in simple conflicts, simply resolved, flops brokenbacked between preaching and entertaining, and usually ignores the craft of fiction. The new Mormon fiction attempts something more ambitious. It is literature of intelligent affirmation, not of alienation, fiction that takes as its province the hitherto unexplored field of spiritual experience and treats it as realism.

A comparison between Clory in Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* and Levi Peterson's Arabella in the title story of *Canyons of Grace* illustrates this new direction. Whipple's Clory is a Mormon woman doing Mormon things in a Mormon context; however, the spiritual dimension is missing from her fictional world. The relationship between God and his children that qualifies Mormonism to be considered a religion at all is not mentioned. A moment of ultimate reconciliation with the universe concludes the book as Clory dies: "And now there is no more time. Already the radiance is trembling on the horizon, the flushed light leans down from the west, the Great Smile beckons. And suddenly, with the shock of a thousand exploding light-balls, she recognizes the Great Smile at last. That which she had searched for all her life had been right there in her heart all the time. She, Clorinda MacIntyre, had a testimony!" (1961, 517)

The Great Smile has unfortunate echoes of Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat that makes it unsuccessful as an image of affirmation, faith, and benevolence.

However, beyond its problem as an image is its problem as a statement. Throughout the book *Clory* fails to make connections between her religion and her life. She does not find in the brutalities and injustices of her colonizing life in St. George the basis for either loving or rejecting God. She barely notices God. The realities of her life are the drugery of survival, her difficult marriage, the emotional devastation of her children's deaths, and the moments when her naturally lively spirit can escape from her concerned but largely joyless community.

In contrast is Levi Peterson's Arabella who was raised in rigid propriety by her painfully orthodox Mormon parents. In the chaotic landscape near Blanding where she is excavating an Anasazi site, Arabella's "seditious thoughts" lead her from the belief, held five years earlier, that "God loved to bless his children" into an act of rebellion against what she now perceives as God's "subtle purpose" — to "demean them" (p. 102). She plans her rebellion to take the form of a casual affair with her colleague, Franklin, an act of "friendly fornication" that would not only express "her sexuality" but would, most importantly, "be an act of defiance, a thousand-megaton blow against the conformities of previous life" (p. 110). However, before Arabella begins the affair, she is kidnapped by representatives of a self-styled fundamentalist prophet who plans to make her his ninth wife. Paralyzed by conditioned passivity, she begs Reuben Millring, the homespun patriarch, to save her from herself, denies her "perverse freedom," and sobs "passionately: 'I want to cut it out of me, to bury it. I want to be obedient, to follow the commandments, I just want peace'" (pp. 128–29). Arabella submits to the grotesque wedding night in an effort to purchase that peace, seeing in Reuben's face the visage of her wrathful God. In the morning, she cracks his skull with a heavy porcelain basin and spends the day and night on the desert, acknowledging a universe without God. As the sun rises the next morning, she literally and metaphorically "take[s] her bearings," then "an ephemeral predator upon a minor planet, she went forward free and filled with grace" (pp. 131–35).

The differences between the Peterson and the Whipple approaches are obvious. Mormonism provides the social setting for both, just as southern Utah provides the physical settings. But there would be no story at all for Arabella without religion, if her human need for freedom — a need radically affirmed at the foundation of Mormon doctrine in both human and divine nature — did not impell her to kill the "God" who stood between her and that precious right.

In spiritual realism, the conflicts that a character may encounter in his or her social settings are primarily important as they provide information about the spiritual life of that person. The experiences move the person toward a greater understanding of the ambiguous nature of human good and human depravity. They affirm or challenge the reality of God. They illuminate by recording those perplexing moments when prayers are not answered and the equally perplexing moments when they are. They shoulder the burden of a community where a vision of holiness and unity stands in contrast to the inevitable pettiness and cruelties of daily living. They attempt to make sense out

of human interaction that includes both deepest doubts and anger focused on a seemingly uncaring God and swelling rejoicing and gratitude focused on a seemingly loving and watchful God.

The complexities of Susa Young Gates's Mormon heroines standing firm against the temptations and wiles of the gentile world are nothing compared to the complexities of Virginia Sorenson's honest but less-than-perfect individuals struggling against the iron insistence of a community that can preserve its heritage only by refusing to look beyond its borders. And this field of social realism seems simple when contrasted with the fictional possibilities of adding doctrine to culture — salvation, damnation, faith, miracles, revelations, gifts of the Spirit — are all concepts that are part of the Mormon experience, history, and current reality.

I would not want to suggest that Mormons invented faith or have a monopoly on revelation. However, Mormon manuscripts of the 1980s have broken ground into the realm of spiritual realism. As they have moved beyond the range of the short story to make the novel an accessible form, so they have moved beyond the fields of home literature and regional realism to make Mormon spiritual experience accessible to fiction.

Examples of spiritual realism are found in Marilyn M. Brown's new manuscript, alternately named "Shadow of Fire," "Stones of Blood," and "Rage and Mercy," which tells of the events immediately before the Mountain Meadows massacre and of its long aftermath. It focuses on a trio of characters: J.B., a violent, heavy man whose participation in the slaughter is part of the angry pattern of his life — a pattern which leads him to turn against John D. Lee and eventually become one of the federal marshals who hunts him down; his son Arben, a reluctant participant in the massacre, who marries Lee's daughter Anna Jane; and Elizabeth, J.B.'s second wife, who loves Lee and sees in him an image of purity and salvation. When Anna Jane is nearly drowned in an accident after Lee's excommunication, the stage is set for the intersection of personal righteousness and institutional authority.

Lee, Arben, and John David Lee, had laid Anna Jane on the settee, and Lee was rubbing her cheeks.

"Anna Jane, Anna Jane," he begged. He turned her face toward him, and then away, toward him and then away. "Dear one. Wake up. Cough. Breathe."

Arben was leaning over her, listening to her heart. He was pumping her breast; water still poured out of her mouth.

John Lee stood and placed his hands on her head. "Dear God, please." His voice was choked. "If it be thy will." . . . Arben poured the oil on Anna Jane's hair. Bishop Roundy came close to them.

"Can I help you?" Bishop Roundy whispered.

John Lee's eyes were filled with pain. "My priesthood . . ." he began. "My own daughter. Am I deprived of blessing my own daughter?" . . . For a brief moment he stared at Arben and the meaning for his life flooded into him like a salve. "Arben, your own wife." He said the words and they echoed in the room. He turned politely to Bishop Roundy. "You may participate, but I will bless my own child, . . . And he his own wife. If God is willing." (1982, 466-67)

This scene is emotion-charged as we relate to the anguished love of the father for his daughter, but it is complicated by the doctrinal overlay of our

understanding of priesthood. Can such a blessing be given without priesthood? Is the prayer of the excommunicate acceptable in the ears of the Lord? When Lee was cut off from the Church was he, in fact, also cut off from his God? The doctrinal and legalistic implications take their shape and form in the context of a crowded room and a man bent over his daughter. Part of that context is the concern we feel for the characters, having lived with them since they were first enmeshed in the guilty secret of hatred and horror.

Brown's depiction of the massacre itself is also highly charged with emotion. As Arben watches the unarmed Missourians begin to walk forward, we see images that will recur throughout the novel.

As he looked at the man who would stand beside him, his heart twisted with pain. He recognized the large burly cattleman with dark curly hair as the one he had walked with outside of Scoville! . . .

"Do I know you?" the Missourian asked Arben.

. . . From that moment on Arben did not follow what happened very clearly. He heard the shots and the sudden terrifying screams. He saw in his dizziness the men falling about him. Some of the militia ducked as Lee said they should. And then all at once as if from nowhere the Indians were upon them, screaming and shooting everything that moved. . . .

*You are walking now. You are walking through columns of air that hang like pillars on either side of an avenue of light. Voices seem distant, like wind moving through the trees. There is only the light ahead of you and the earth falling away from you, peeling back from you. You have fired. You have fired a shot which could have killed someone you knew. Though you were a coward all the same. . . .*

He had never seen the earth before today. Not as it was, the teeming crust, peeling away from him with dust rising and falling as it was, the wind stirring, pouring among both the living and dying, the dying still stirring, the living walking, walking in and out with shovels, beginning along the trenches, pushing into them bodies not yet cold.

*You are moving through a haze as though the air itself is the only substance that can be real. Nothing else is real. This carnage cannot be real. The reflexes are not real. All that is real is a perception that below you in the dust there is quiet. There is a black quiet reeling through a sudden consciousness that it is all over in the quiet. That a weight, sudden and powerful, settles from the quiet like stones, like stones stained with blood. Stones you will have to carry.*

*You are not listening to all that is happening around you, to the commands, J.B., Lee's voice, you are not seeking what lies below you on the ground. Because tomorrow or the next day you will pull the bread out of your satchel and it will taste all right in the hot sun. Maybe the cheese will seem tart, but it will taste good going down. Or it will be dough boys or scones out of Suky's skillet rolled in sugar and J.B. will walk into the house carrying his shovel. That same shovel on his shoulder — shouting one thing and another about the canal or the ditches, while you watch Elizabeth's white hands pushing and pulling the needle through a sampler that says in the white cloth with threads like drops of blood "God is love."*

*Now it is a miracle to find air. You reach for it, trying to breathe. To find your head above water from under the weight that forms like a cloud and begins to push down on you, press, push, all, floating and circling over you and you want the air and you don't want the weight and you wonder if you can carry it all the rest of your life, and your children and their children after and you pray that you may be able to do enough good in this world to tip back the balance on the scales. Enough that is right. To wrest something out of the soil that is alive and vital and will take away the death taste on your tongue. . . .*

As though in a dream, Arben dug, hearing the sound of the shovels hitting the ground, hearing the clip of metal against stone. The bodies fell into the trenches which the Missourians had already dug. All seemed quiet. Even the Indians made little noise rummaging through the spoil. . . .

"We must promise one another not to speak of what happened."

What had happened?

"Stand in a circle. Raise your right arm to the square."

As in a dream, Arben followed the commands. J.B. stood with him, too. The commands did not always come from Lee. Arben did not always know who they came from. (1982, 152-56)

The Mountain Meadows Massacre will probably challenge the imaginations of this decade's writers in significant ways, for it has not been used successfully as a subject by Mormon fiction writers until our own time, notably in Harker's *Turn Again Home* and, if we broaden fiction to include drama, Tom Roger's play, *Fire in the Bones* (1983). Perhaps it was not accessible to literature until Juanita Brooks had made the episode usable through history. Even though Brown refers to her own work as a "romance," it represents a solid achievement, interpreting a hitherto inaccessible area of Mormon fiction to our people. We can confidently expect high-quality historical fiction to deal with other problematic areas of the Mormon past as well.

The Mormon present is equally full of challenges that are now finding their way into literature. Linda Sillitoe's prize-winning story, "Demons" (*Sunstone*, 6 [May-June 1981]: 40-43) translates the theological possibility of demonic possession into the psychological price paid by a culture that systematically represses its women. I recall several years ago listening to Franklin Fisher read a very funny and totally terrifying episode from his novel-in-progress "Bones" in which the protagonist recalls, as a missionary, helping cast out a devil from a large and obdurate woman. Béla Petsco's protagonist in *Nothing Very Important and Other Stories* uses the power of his priesthood to release unto death his elderly aunt, neglected in the coldly impersonal hospital where she is institutionalized. After she dies, he "prayed that he had done right. . . . Should he have done it? The priesthood is to bless. The priesthood is to bless. He should only have blessed her with life — with life. But he . . . had asked that she be released . . . and she had died." Before dawn, his aunt "walked in — and looking down at him, said, 'I want you to know that I am always going to watch over and protect you, just like I always have.' " The next day at breakfast, his mother reports having had the identical dream (1979, 200, 206-8).

Such experiences have long been part of the reported spiritual repertoire of Mormon life. Handled ineptly, a fictional spiritual experience is a rightly resented piece of sentimentality or a *deus ex machina* to retrieve a faltering plot. The reality is that in literature as in life a spiritual experience is neither wholly a problem nor wholly a solution, although it may be partially either. More often it is simply part of the complex and difficult texture of living when the mysteries of human nature sometimes seem limpid and explicable compared to the mysteries of God.

Such an experience appears in the manuscript of a novel, "The Ragged Circle," by Veda Tebbs Hale of Kamas, Utah. Her protagonist Malena dis-

covers on Mother's Day that she is pregnant with her ninth child. She and her husband Garret had been art students together at BYU, but Malena's dreams and talents had been postponed so that she could care for the children, their huge home — a former Mormon meetinghouse in Heber Valley, a moderate amount of livestock, Church responsibilities, and her husband's career as a western artist about to take off under the adrenalin of some high-powered hype and an elaborately lissome model. Furthermore, although she has obediently if not always cheerfully put her children first, she now discovers that her only apparent reward is the rebellion of their sexually precocious and musically gifted fifteen-year-old daughter. While feeling like a failure as a mother and as a person, Malena is confined to bed with a blood clot. There, she can only watch as Aimee moves through a series of rock-music-and-hard-drug episodes toward a forced marriage. Garret's career slumps again when he is called to be bishop of the ward, a calling that brings no immediate blessings.

Malena is within a few weeks of delivery when her baby's activity suddenly stops and the doctor induces labor.

A contraction caught me midway between the two tables and suddenly a terrifying thing happened. I was up above the tables, up near the ceiling, watching the doctors grab at my slumping body . . . I came back, feeling the last of the contraction, so bewildered I couldn't say anything when Dr. Bradford scolded, "Don't scare us like that, young lady!"

They had just enough time to position me on the delivery table before another contraction came. I braced myself and fought against it because of that strange thing that had happened. It happened again. This time I was someplace else, not up near the ceiling or any place I knew. It was a wonderful, glorious, vividly colored place. Later I would think and think and not be able to sift any appropriate description out of my vocabulary. I wasn't alone there, my mind exploded with knowledge. Whoever was there, and it seemed like more than one, was occupied with me — either responsible for the burst of knowledge, trying to slow something down, or change something that shouldn't have been. I can't be sure. That's the terrible frustration of it all. Now I can't remember. I could when I was first in my body again. . . . I remember thinking how marvelous it was I knew those wonderful things. . . . The magnificent knowledge I was going to tell the world was gone. I was left with a great, burned hole in my mind, a charred, misty place rimmed with dazzling white light but no way to retrieve the fantastic substance. (1982, 195-98)

It is perhaps significant that Malena cannot explain that experience of her spirit. Despite her confusion, however, she stubbornly refuses to let her husband explain it away as her imagination or her doctor explain it as a reaction to medication. And knowing that the experience was real, even if inexplicable, prepares her for other spiritual insights later in the story. I know of one comparable passage in autobiography but not in fiction. Spiritual realism, if successful, can communicate in art what has previously been reserved for nonfiction.

Even though a cultural shorthand about spiritual experience exists in Mormonism ("the Spirit whispered peace," for example), the fictional challenge is not to rely on these clichés, trite in spite of their truth and, ironically, trite because of their truth. The fictional challenge is to find new forms, adequate to the meaning.

Perhaps these new forms are even now in the making. It is possible to point to Mormon humor beyond Sam Taylor's recently and happily republished *Heaven Knows Why*. The delicious solemnities of Calvin Grondahl's books of cartoons for *Sunstone*, *Freeways to Perfection* (1978), *Faith-Promoting Rumors* (1980) and *Sunday's Foyer* (1983) come immediately to mind as do two works by Orson Scott Card. *Saintspeak* is a tongue-in-cheek dictionary of such specialized terms as "*Spaulding theory*: the theory that every boy who touches a basketball one thousand times in the cultural hall will eventually go on a mission" (1981, n.p.). His "Notes from a Guardian Angel" which ran sporadically in *Seventh East Press* gives us the following scene. Saint Watcher Virginia is depressed when the mortal she is guarding "died in 1949 in circumstances that made it pretty plain that I wouldn't be promoted to Master Watcher for quite a while yet." Her tough-talking colleague Hymie Goldblatt responds brusquely: "We're always short-handed, we're always outnumbered, and no matter how hard we try, we all have to live with the fact that even some of the seemingly elect will fail. If you're not tough enough to take it, then say so now and we'll assign you to Genealogy and you can spend the next thousand years guiding little old ladies to forgotten records. It's an important work, but I thought you were made for bigger challenges than that."

Ginny protests, "I never got *discouraged*. I always hoped she'd turn out to be another Alma."

"I know all about what you hoped. Two hundred separate petitions for EIs [exceptional interventions] in only thirty years, Ginny. Even Judas Iscariot's Watcher only filed a hundred and thirty times."

This in-group jargon and hint of bureaucratic procedure among the heavenly beings in the next life parodies some of our all-too-earthly proceedings at the same time that it raises a serious question: although Mormon doctrine does not disallow guardian angels, it hardly gives them a clear assignment or a firm place in a heavenly hierarchy. Is it just possible that Card's Saint Watchers, "the elite of the Celestial Guardian Service," may actually have a parallel in that real but unseen world?

Another author who has tackled a similar question but from a more serious perspective is Alice Morrey Bailey, whose manuscript, "The Stellarians," is a sophisticated generation beyond Nephi Anderson's romance, *Added Upon*. Given the doctrine that all spirits who have ever been or ever will be on earth were present in heaven before the first moral birth, Sister Bailey, an octagenarian whose publishing record stretches over six decades, hypothesizes a complex premortal organization: Paul and Kistin, soon to be born on earth, stop by the "signalling station" where messages are sent to mortals from the other side of the veil.

The attendants of the signalling station were ego-workers, some of them of brighter lustre than others, because of the different degrees of their intelligence, putting in the required time as they waited for their spirit birth on some star. Their function was to relay messages, not to originate them, and they seemed very efficient. . . . "Look!" said Kistin, stopping beside a disc. "A little child, praying for help in finding a penny!" . . .

A message was being relayed from higher up. "Be calm," it went. "Do not move your feet. Now stand up and look carefully around."

The child acted as if he received the message, as he obeyed it perfectly, looked around and recovered his penny. He started to leave the disc at a run, stopped short and returned. He lifted his eyes to direct contact for an instant.

"Thank you, God," he said. . . .

Personal messages to adults did not meet with such success, however. These were chiefly advice concerning one manner or other of conduct, to kin and friends. Some were warnings against forthcoming misfortunes, loss of money, or accidents . . .

"They don't even listen to the storm-warnings issued by their own government radio stations," said a discouraged ego. (1982, 31-33)

Kistin and Paul also visit the timestrip archives where mortals who have "terminated enclayment" must review their lives. There, they observe a woman who had been seduced as a young girl. She reviews the timestrip of her life and must confront Mada, the spirit who had been assigned to the child she aborted. When she comes to the point in the timestrip where she induced the abortion

the woman turned to Mada, recognizing her for the first time.

"You would have been my daughter, wouldn't you?" she said. "Oh, what was I thinking of? . . . The woman broke down completely and sobbed without restraint. "I killed my baby! I killed my baby!" she kept repeating. Mada went to her and tried to soothe her.

Still another part of the heavenly city is given over to hospitals without doctors or nurses

. . . where those returning from enclayment were given a chance to cure themselves of the dreadful opaqueness caused by lying, stealing, false pride, deceit, and the like. This they did in six steps: first they had to find and obtain the forgiveness of every person they had wronged, second, restore treasures to these people, even if it means depleting their own stores totally, third to make a complete study of their maladies until they were able to analyze themselves dispassionately, fourth, to help others afflicted with the same maladies, curing at least one person at the expense of their own precious light. Finally each person had to present a thesis advancing at least one new idea concerning the treatment or understanding of the disease.

As part of the preparation for birth, Paul is immersed in "pools of black light." When he awakens he

. . . had a heavy feeling of depression and confusion as if an actual burden had descended upon his shoulders, draining his strength and muddling his intellect.

"A familiar feeling of earthmen," answered the ego-worker, reading his thoughts. "You have been tinted with the prayers of your parents, with the longings for greater music which have been accumulating in the hearts of music-lovers for many years, with their fears and despairings. If these confuse you it is because some conflict with each other and others overlap. . . .

"What if I don't want to carry out some of these aspirations of others?"

"You must realize that nothing takes precedence over your free choice. That is the first law of the universe. I might as well tell you that many of the ingredients of your commissions are not honorable. . . . Those of your class — artists — are notoriously jealous, for instance, and the jealous, hateful thoughts and intents of your predecessors are now part of your burdensome cargo. Yet you need not obey those impulses; nothing is truly fixed or predetermined and if you can prevail against them, they will be killed forever."

Although some of these works in progress have been cited in greater detail than others, there is an exciting diversity in subject, form, and technique that is very healthy. It is also, no doubt, puzzling to publishers who recognize that nothing like these works has yet appeared in Mormon fiction and consequently find themselves at sea when they try to evaluate them. That is certainly one problem. But more important is the one with which we began this paper — the painfully clear message authors sometimes receive that their experiments and even their best efforts are not wanted or needed, that they may even be considered improper or dangerous.

No doubt it is some comfort to realize that few remember Maurine Whipple's critics while the novel itself remains exactly what it was, a milestone in Mormon literature. However, it is difficult to await the judgment of readers one or two generations away. Possibly the fact that Whipple produced no second work to match her first was the cost exacted for that initial success. If so, it is a price that we cannot afford, even for another landmark.

There is, however, an alternative to the thankless and usually joyless task of attempting to educate society to the point that it approves of one's creative work. Validation is important, but our fellow beings need not be the only source. I would suggest that we clearly separate the voice of the people from the voice of God. Most active Latter-day Saints and all of those whom I have quoted today have at one time made vows of consecration that include committing their talents to the work of building the kingdom of God. Normally, I believe, most Mormons assume that the kingdom is built through Church programs, and they have interpreted their vow as a commitment to respond to requests from the Church. But there is another way to look at it.

In the summer of 1982 at a gathering of women in Nauvoo, I had an experience that has made me think about that particular vow in a new way. Catherine Stokes, a black convert who is now Relief Society president in the Hyde Park (Chicago) Ward, related the experience of going to the temple for the first time. "I took my blackness with me," she said, "and that was part of what I consecrated." She told of the woman who assisted her in the initiatory ordinances, barely able to articulate through her tears, and apologizing at the end because she had not wanted her personal emotions to interfere with Cathy's experience. "But I've never had the privilege of doing this for a black woman before," she explained, "and I'm so grateful." Cathy reassured her, "That's all right. That's one of the things I can do for *you* that no one else in the temple today could do." As she summed up the experience, she added, "My blackness is one of the things that the Lord can use if he wants to." Apparently it has been a most successful collaboration.

Another woman in the same gathering expressed thanks to Cathy for sharing her blackness and to another woman for sharing her shyness. I realized then that I had always assumed that the Lord wanted only my strengths, my abilities, and my competencies. It had not occurred to me that qualities I considered to be unique idiosyncracies or even weaknesses might also be useful to him, and that I, in wrongful humility, was withholding them from consecration.

Although my writing abilities are not in the creative vein, I would like to suggest to those who have apologized for their talent, or wondered if they were damaging the Church by it, that they begin to consider that talent as a major part of what they have to consecrate to the Lord, understanding that perhaps his view of building the kingdom may include but may also go beyond a Mother's Day poem for the ward newsletter or a roadshow script. The altar is his. If we willingly lay our gift upon it, our only concern need be whether he accepts it.

If we were to extrapolate from the creations of our Father, we would note the diversity of the rivers, valleys, mountains, deserts, and seas, the patience with which his works unfold, the seeming wastefulness where individual parts are concerned yet the unity and harmony that characterize the whole. And above all, the creations of our Father are characterized by their productivity, by their fecundity. Truly, they bring forth and, in that bringing forth, have joy and rejoicing.

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