

# BIG D/little d: The View From the Basement

*Mary L. Bradford*

RECENTLY I FINISHED MY FIRST BOOK, a brief journey on the road to self-definition. I called it *Leaving Home*\* because my life has been a series of comings and goings to and from various homes in my temporal and spiritual life. Or, as William Kitteridge describes the work of poet Richard Hugo: "He has the courage to acknowledge the continual refinding of his own life[.]. . . the art of constructing road maps, *ways home to that ultimate shelter which is the coherent self*" (Kitteridge 1986, 177; italics added). My road map is both linear and cyclical as it progresses toward death and doubles back on life.

In fact, all my dialogues, the big ones and the little ones, aim at the coherent self. *DIALOGUE: A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT* is one of my homes. With understanding arms, it has bracketed my maturing years. When it was founded, I was a young mother, newly transplanted. I had known Gene England at the Institute of Religion at the University of Utah where he first conceived the project. I joined the staff from my home near Washington, D.C., shortly after the first issue. In a way, its growing pains were mine too.

*DIALOGUE* reached its tenth anniversary a few months after it moved into my home. In preparing an anniversary issue and index, I recalled that its miraculous beginnings had filled a need at a time when I was still homesick for the Institute of Religion, the U of U, and BYU, where I was teaching before marriage. *DIALOGUE* put me in touch with the people and ideas I was missing. Because of *DIALOGUE*, I began writing again.

By the time I became the journal's editor in the basement of our home, our children were teenagers, the eldest soon to leave for a mission, and my husband a bishop. We thereupon became both a beehive and a cottage industry, surviving jokes about the celestial kingdom — Chick's office upstairs — and the terrestrial office below ground. Originally ensconced there for eco-

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\* *Leaving Home: Personal Essays* by Mary Lythgoe Bradford (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987).

conomic reasons, it stayed there after it became financially sound. The “homey” atmosphere was good for our volunteers who came mainly at night, and it was good for me to keep an eye on everything upstairs and down.

During my six years as editor, I and associate editor, Lester Bush, dreamed of writing a column called “A View from the Basement” (after the *Smithsonian Magazine*’s “A View from the Castle”) during which we would editorialize on our pet subjects. We believed that “View from the Basement” was suitably humble and would signal to readers that we knew we weren’t exactly in the center of the universe, perhaps not even of the Mormon universe, but that we had something worthwhile to share. It was a good idea whose time never came. We were much too busy to stop and editorialize. But now that DIALOGUE and I are celebrating twenty years together, I can reminisce about the dialogues of my stewardship.

Our executive group of five stayed together for six and a half years, and our weekly volunteer staff turned over only slightly. They were married, single, male, female, and from different professions. They came because they believed in the possibility of dialogue, both little and big, and were interested in sharing ideas and skills in a sociable environment. One of our number described our group as “a safe place to be.”

The staff and others who supported us in the Washington, D.C., area were a lively and gifted group, proud of the exciting history of Mormonism there. Ever since Joseph Smith visited Washington, Mormons have migrated there with a desire to better themselves and their government. They are usually creative and courageous, reverse-trekking from their shelters in the West. (Our tenth anniversary issue published a drawing by Carolyn Person depicting “The Great Ten-Year, West-East Dialogue Trek.”) We looked forward to the time when DIALOGUE would operate above ground, in a real office, with updated equipment and paid editors. We talked of ourselves as “transitions” because we believed we were the bridge to a more easily recognized professionalism. I still believe that, but when I look at our issues lined up with the others, I know that we were an important part of the DIALOGUE family line or, to mix metaphors, part of an ever-expanding circle. The editors and staff that preceded and succeeded us upheld the same standards, worked toward the same goals. We have created a shelf of books that cannot easily be dislodged, and we added to a tradition that looks forward to future distinction.

Though our staff was never completely satisfied with the issues we published, being sensitive to typos, tardiness, errors of fact, and possible hurt feelings, we knew that we were publishing on many of the central concerns of our time. During our era, the blacks received the priesthood, the Church became, more than ever, international, women spoke more clearly about their rights and their responsibilities, and important segments of intellectual history came to light. Although “Camelot” at the Church Historical Department closed down at the end of our term, much good history was already out, and many historians and writers had already attuned their voices that they might be heard.

Along with the Mormon History Association, we celebrated the Church’s sesquicentennial by recreating in print MHA’s devotional service at the Sacred

Grove. *DIALOGUE* had published MHA's first papers and had worked closely with a jolly group of historians that included those from the RLDS Church. We also helped to establish the Association for Mormon Letters by publishing a special issue of its first papers, edited by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher.

Over the years, some critics have faulted *DIALOGUE* for failing to enter into dialogue with all levels of Church authorities and with scholars from other Christian faiths. The journal has struggled to engage thinkers in both areas. As Gene England pointed out in his anniversary article (Spring 1987), he kept in touch with General Authorities. Apart from rumors and monetary contributions from one or two General Authorities, I was never called by a G.A. nor was I called on the carpet. The closest we came to engaging with the upper levels of the Church was an interview with Edward Kimball, President Kimball's son.

I would have welcomed the chance to discuss my work with authorities, high or low. Living in Washington sometimes fools us into thinking we are in the center of Zion; but though Washington has its own problems, it has the distinct advantage of being away from the rumor mills of Salt Lake. That insulation was healthy for our new venture. Before I began my work as editor, I met with my stake president, Julian Lowe, to inform him of my action. His response was "I think we are mature enough to handle a magazine in this stake, don't you?" Would that all leaders could adopt his position!

The other dialogue, the one with "the larger stream of Judeo-Christian thought" (as the logo-frontispiece puts it) has been slow but progressing. I have been especially grateful to scholars from other religious backgrounds who have taken the trouble to train their expertise on Mormonism. Mario de Pillis was an early supporter who published in *DIALOGUE*. Lawrence Foster and Mark Leone have done in-depth studies of Mormonism, reviews, and scrutiny of manuscripts for years. Jan Shipps, the star of the "Insider-Outsider" group, is beloved of Mormon historians. She was MHA president during the sesquicentennial year and has published an influential study *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). I was proud to be able to publish her "disciplined reflection" in my last issue of *DIALOGUE*. It added new dimension to the personal essay.

Not many Mormons are able to prepare themselves for dialogue with other religions. As in every professional field, a scholar engaging in cross-disciplinary dialogue must learn a new vocabulary, one that sounds strange in Mormon country. Young scholars who worked with us, usually under Lester Bush's careful scrutiny, made a real contribution to understanding the "larger stream of Christian thought."

Another dialogue I enjoyed was the interview. Interviews lend an immediacy that scholarly journals often lack. It was rewarding to highlight the contributions of living Mormons. I indulged myself by interviewing my friend and thesis subject, Virginia Sorensen, published with a story of hers and a fine critical article by Bruce Jorgenson. My interview with Sonia Johnson was somewhat controversial but enlightening to me. Publishing an oral history interview with Fawn Brodie in the same issue prompted a few accusatory

letters, but we stood firm on the ground that an understanding of those who leave the Church is vital.

I interviewed the sometimes inscrutable but lovable Hugh Nibley, and Maida Withers, dancer, who represents *DIALOGUE*'s devotion to art. I am very fond of the interview with President The of the Saigon Branch, who described his experiences as a prisoner and a boat person to Bill and Marjorie Bradshaw. I think these interviews, along with excellent personal essays, support Lowell Bennion's teaching that personality is God's greatest creation.

I am proud that we were able to participate in ongoing dialogues on scientific issues, especially medicine and health, literature, on art and architecture. We also followed the media and its influence on the Church.

I love to reread the literary issues. When Wes Johnson visited us in the days when the back issues were still in our basement, he waved his hand toward the literature issues and said, "Don't publish any more of these. They don't sell." It is true that they don't always sell out immediately, but they *do* sell as we are discovered by new readers. The fiction, poetry, and personal essays have defined us in a timeless way that stays on the shelf and in the mind.

We worked with a well-grounded board of editors and a staff to whom nothing was too small or too large a task. We weathered an important era. During those years, I felt that I was repaying my family, friends, and mentors who had taught me in church and in school during my formative years. The strong Christian examples of my parents and teachers, and the individual attention they paid me and my ambitions, led me to believe that it was possible to be both a "good Mormon" and a professional person. It was possible to be a mother, a wife, an editor, a writer, and a friend. All of these roles came together in my basement in the arms of *DIALOGUE*.

## II

In reviewing the dialogues that engaged me during my term as editor, I realized that they dovetail nicely with the ongoing dialogues in my life. They include the principles of my daily life and those I include in my prayers, meditations, and studies. This has led me to a compilation I call my "Dialogue Quote Book," from which I will excerpt a few samples. The keynote quote for this collection is expressed by Leonard Arrington in a passage from an early *DIALOGUE* included in our tenth anniversary issue: "[Dialogue supporters] believe that the Mormon religion and its history are subject to discussion, if not to argument, and that any particular feature of Mormon life is fair game for detailed examination and clarification. They believe that the details of Mormon history and culture can be studied in human or naturalistic terms — indeed, must be so studied — and without thus rejecting the divinity of the Church's origin and work" (1966, 28).

### OF FREE DISCUSSION

"The moral is that everything goes in a free discussion as long as the discussion is going on — give it time and everything will come out in the wash" (Nibley 1977, 123).

This refreshing attitude fits my belief system. I don't know what I think until I hear what I have to say. *DIALOGUE* has not published in the spirit of "anything goes," of course. We were careful — some think too careful, some not careful enough — but I think we performed a remarkable balancing act.

#### OF SCRIPTURAL STUDY

"There appears good evidence that the Book of Mormon contains elements which are congruent with what scholars of the Old Testament distinguish as the E or Elohist source. To biblical scholars this should invite serious attention to the Book of Mormon for what it may reveal to them about Old Testament sources. To Latter-day Saints, the presence of E materials in the Book of Mormon should serve as a challenge and stimulus to examine more carefully the scriptures entrusted to them and to participate actively in elucidating both the texts and their interpretations" (Sorenson 1977, 37–38).

This quote sounded the cry for thoughtful scriptural studies that have since burgeoned. We encouraged such studies as one way to "dialogue" with non-Mormon scholars. In-depth articles by Anthony Hutchinson and others followed. Studying the scriptures and dealing honestly with controversies surrounding them only deepened their meaning for me.

#### OF WOMEN

"In the winter of 1978, stereotypes of Mormon women were being given an inordinate amount of media attention because of Sonia Johnson's excommunication and the Church's opposition to ERA. It was depressing enough to grow up with Patty Perfect, that ever-cheerful, well-organized, bread-baking embodiment of Mormon Sisterhood. . . . Now she was being joined by Patty Programmed, the oppressed non-thinking, ultra-orthodox tool of sexist church leaders. It was too much. I felt a fierce desire to show the world Mormon women as I know them: liberal, conservative, confident, fearful, happy, depressed, sometimes all of the above in one person. Our differences may be masked by our shared convictions, but they certainly exist. Beneath our Mormon facades we differ and agree in a multitude of ways" (Hammond 1981, 187).

During my term, the subject of women in the Church was compelling. By dealing as honestly as we could with different aspects of women's lives, including the history of women in the Church, scriptural positions of women, and the activities of contemporary women in politics, in community service, and the arts, I felt I was adding to the understanding of issues. We tried to present several sides of the ERA debate, representing the honest range of convictions by sincere thinkers.

I decided to show the diversity of Mormon women by highlighting their contributions to the visual arts, including photography, dance, poetry, fiction, satire, personal essay, and scholarly research and writing — all engaged in good causes for righteousness' sake.

## OF PSYCHOLOGY

“Mormonism has retained, and no doubt will continue to retain the tension of opposition as the only way open to making truly moral decisions. Jung would find that this is also psychologically sound because it accommodates within the religious symbol system the unconscious content of the psyche which can then be reintegrated into consciousness” (McCollum 1978, 41).

This quotation from the “Freud/Jung issue” — represents my increasing search for my coherent self. I find most aspects of the gospel sound as it relates to my personal life. And the truth found in the work of great scholars outside the Church can only enhance the truths of the gospel.

## ON THE MEDIA

“It is sometimes suggested that the pulpit has actually been replaced by the media, and this observation has some merit, although the media are by no means all-powerful. They have become indispensable in “setting the agenda” — deciding what topics society will discuss (with the pulpit often taking its cue from media reports). Information on television and radio and in the papers makes it possible for people to find a way of sharing values and moving toward goals. . . . The Church benefits not only as a user but also as an *owner* of community newspapers and broadcasting outlets. Through them it can express a viewpoint in a calm and continuing way without directly committing its leaders. Through them it gains direct access to the community without having to become either supplicant or purchaser” (Hollstein 1977, 21).

The “media issue” was our staff’s first publication. In it appeared the first of a series of articles by Dennis Lythgoe and bibliographer Stephen Stathis that would follow the state of the Church’s public image. We noted that the media was learning more about the Church and was reporting more accurately than it had in the Church’s early years. As the Church grew more adept in presenting a favorable public image, the world grew better at recording it. We noted the damage to the Church’s image after Sonia Johnson’s excommunication.

The dialogue the Church carries on with the media is a fascinating and revealing one. A hopeful sign in recent years is the increasing involvement of Church public communications specialists with outside interfaith councils.

## ON BLACKS AND THE PRIESTHOOD

“Let us not look back to hang our heads. If we look back at all, let us do so only to remember the lessons suggested by our struggle with the race issue. . . . and let us consider too, with deepest appreciation, the example of sacrifice and subtle efficacy provided all these years by our black brethren and sisters in the gospel” (Mauss 1981, 35).

I feel honored to have been part of the DIALOGUE team that first published Lester Bush’s article on the blacks, reprinted it, and followed up with a special

issue honoring “our black brethren and sisters” (Summer 1979) and subsequent articles like Mauss’s.

#### ON SCIENCE AND MEDICAL ETHICS

“Exegetes as willing and capable as Orson Pratt to combine empirical and theological insights have all but disappeared from the Mormon scene. His successors have retained the enthusiastic optimism of early Mormonism, but have not replaced the empirical beliefs of the nineteenth century with the more correct information which is available to us now. One can only wish that the discoveries of modern science had been available to Orson Pratt, some of the recent discoveries to open up possibilities for theological discussion. The new biology has given us insights into the nature of life that bring into question many of the easy assumptions that Mormons often make about the nature of the soul (body and spirit). In this essay we hope to point to developments which raise interesting ethical or theological questions. Unfortunately, we cannot provide the answers to those questions” (Farmer, Bradshaw, and Johnson 1979, 72–73).

This quote was a warning to theologians to catch up to the latest in science before it left them floundering. In 1979, we published a theme issue on “medicine and the Mormons,” which undertook to look at the history of medicine among the Mormons, the effects of herbal medicine in Mormon life, and the complex world of medical ethics. Medical ethics covers a wide range of important policies relating to abortion, intersexes, text-tube babies, artificial insemination, and other potentially incendiary subjects. I realized in publishing this and subsequent articles on the Word of Wisdom that health and medicine are vitally important subjects in Mormon life, which deserve the most thoughtful presentation.

#### ON ARCHITECTURE

“The issue of genetic cloning is an explosive one today. In the same way, meddling in the creative process, forcing out diversity and character, is a formidable danger. The vision of a world filled with thousands of identical ward meetinghouse buildings is alarming. The standard plan program must go in an alternate direction. It must look for changes, varieties, different themes and standards, not to encourage conformity, but to allow the more efficient celebration of the unique, the ambitious and the divine” (Bradley 1981, 30).

I have always been sensitive to architecture as an art form and as an expression of worship, especially to Mormon chapels as a home for the ward family. Cookie-cutter homogeneity does not befit the combined diversity and unity of our people. As in other aspects of life in an international church, local and stake congregations should be trusted to work out the best in efficiency, cost, and beauty on a suitable site according to the area where the saints live.

In “Battling the Bureaucracy” (Winter 1982), Dennis Lythgoe showed how frustrating and expensive was the addition to his building as overseen by



the church bureaucracy in Salt Lake City. There were competent architects, building supervisors, and suppliers in the Hingham, Massachusetts, area who were capable of creating a good building, more fitting to the site and less expensive for the Church.

#### ON INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

"Like those who preceded us, we have found there is much still to be learned about what defines Mormonism both historically and theologically. One might suppose after sixteen years, especially with the added contribution of several other journals of similar bent, that all the obvious 'first-level' questions would have been thoroughly examined. Our non-Mormon colleagues certainly (almost impatiently) encourage us to move on from specialized descriptive histories to a more definitive treatment of the Mormon faith, a comprehensive synthesis akin to that possible in their secular disciplines. Yet . . . [Mormon] scholars are still delineating, for the first time, important aspects of our faith, aspects which must be clearly understood before essential elements of Mormon history and theology can be accurately described. Mormon studies are just now arriving at a point where we can begin the broader analytical works that will place descriptive history into a meaningful historical or theological context. A truly comprehensive synthesis is yet another step beyond" (Bush 1982, 29).

History is probably our most published subject. Further on in his essay, Lester points out that he believes that the "true substance of Mormon doctrine has proved to be surprisingly elusive." He calls for an "inspired, scripturally attuned, well-read and articulate dialogue with all levels of the Church."

We felt, however, that during our time we made good contributions to the cause of intellectual and doctrinal history. Articles by Anthony Hutchinson, Melodie Moench Charles, Richard Sherlock, Gary Bergera, and David Buerger, to name a few, contributed insightful research. Tony as a graduate student in scriptural studies, wrote two articles, one on the attitude of New Testament writers toward the possible ordination of women to the priesthood, (Winter 1981), and the other a synthesis: "LDS Approaches to the Holy Bible" (Spring 1982). Charles examined how nineteenth-century Mormons used the Old Testament (Spring 1979). Sherlock's "Faith and History: The Snell Controversy" broke ground for much-needed studies on problems of doctrine within the Church Education System (Spring 1979), while he provided a solid footing for understanding the Church's troubled relationship with the concept of evolution in "'We can See No Advantage to a Continuation of the Discussion:' The Roberts/Smith/Talmage Affair" (Fall 1980).

Gary Bergera's "The Orson Pratt-Brigham Young Controversies: Conflict Within the Quorums, 1853 to 1868" won the Mormon History Association's Article Award and provided an enlightening look at the methods used to hammer out agreements about theology in the early church. It made an important contribution to our understanding of doctrines of today. Even though Pratt was soundly reprimanded by Young, it is Pratt's interpretations that are



more widely espoused in today's church. Noted Bergera: "Several of Pratt's unpopular ideas have now found acceptance among such influential twentieth-century church exegetes as Joseph Fielding Smith. . . . Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* shows a kindred dept to Pratt's theories in his sections on 'God,' the 'Godhead,' and 'Eternal Progression' " (p. 42).

Articles discussing the Word of Wisdom's path to canonization are part of this ongoing interest. Thomas G. Alexander's "The Word of Wisdom: From Principle to Requirement" and Lester Bush's "The Word of Wisdom in Early Nineteenth-Century Perspective," both in the fall 1981 issue, come to mind.

The editors who succeeded us have kept up the search for synthesis, and many of the essays first published in *DIALOGUE* have seen their grandchildren in important books by Jan Shipps, Richard Bushman, Leonard Arrington, and Thomas Alexander. If dialogue on basic doctrines and social issues could openly engage leaders and lay scholars on all levels of the Church, our religious and community life might become so healthy as to preclude a tragedy like the Hofmann case.

#### OF POETRY

There's a marginal complexity  
in having two centers, to stretch  
both north and south, but the stories

of the earliest works attest  
to such a collective rise  
and flowering. One does not soon

forget the laminated  
history of brine and wonder  
at this junction of time and space,

where each concentric posture of the self  
or other is its own harmonic, chimes;  
a realm of possibilities.

(Graves 1980)

Poems like this one represent the high quality of poetry and fiction that have graced *DIALOGUE*'s pages since its inception. We are constantly searching the "realm of possibilities," and Graves's poem gives us a devotional setting for the search. To us, spiritual and intellectual concerns were synthesized in *DIALOGUE*, often in its literary contributions. Poetry is one of the highest forms of expression and, I believe, a divine form. It shows us how it *feels* to be a thinking Mormon, a believing Mormon, even a skeptical and searching Mormon. Through symbols and inspired language, it can reach the heart of the matter. Any Mormon who doubts this can refer to scripture — poetry of the highest order.

## III

"The habit of freedom and the courage to write." This phrase from Virginia Woolf (1984, 117) applies more than ever to DIALOGUE's staff, contributors, and loyal readers. Many of us, men and women alike, have been afraid. But we are beginning to find the courage to tell the truth and tell it straight.

My experience with writers and artists and craftsmen has convinced me that through the mere act of writing and publishing, we can gain courage; and when we gain courage, we write better books, articles, essays, and poems. In fact, I have discovered that quality and courage are twins.

As we hone our tools and learn our craft, we gain the courage to use the tools with greater honesty and clarity. As more people learn the craft of the short story, the personal essay, the poem, the historical article, more of us will want to use these tools. If we have them, we will use them. And the desire to reach out to others grows.

Women and men will become more courageous in the pursuit of excellence. It is an ever-widening circle, open to new ideas, new frontiers, yet conservative of the traditions and the values of home, church, and community. In this way are "little d" and "Big D" fused as one.

Some people think the DIALOGUE family is at least slightly demented for continuing to publish year after year in the face of what some think are daunting barriers. When I first agreed to become editor, I received a call from a long-time DIALOGUE supporter who raised the idea that since Church magazines had improved, DIALOGUE could quietly fold its tents and leave, that its numbers were too small to compete anyway.

I asked him, "Would you think it worth your while to speak at a conference of some 3,000 people and their families and friends, or conducting a quarterly conference for them?"

"Of course I would welcome the chance," he replied.

"Well," I retorted, "I think it worthwhile to continue to publish for that number of DIALOGUE readers."

That number has since widened, and so has its considerable "shadow" readers. I have never regretted that decision.

One night I watched Lech Walensa on television, filmed as he was released from prison. He was speaking in the same style that sent him there. It would seem logical, and a whole lot safer for him just to keep quiet. One can almost hear his family urging him to retire, to settle down and rest on his considerable accomplishments. But I think I know why Walensa doesn't shut up. He *has* to speak. And some of us have to write and publish. We can't help it. Not doing it would be too much like dying.

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