

A Member of the Tribe

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WHEN I WAS A RESTLESS TEENAGER growing up Mormon in a small southern California ward, it seemed that the only topic to which our unruly Sunday school class responded was the fate of the lost ten tribes of Israel. The old gardener who was our teacher had some radical theories about where they might be hiding and, along with warning us about cataclysmic events even now foretelling “the last days,” he enjoyed speculating about how the lost tribes would then reappear. The enthusiasm my classmates showed for the topic was one of many differences rising between me and the members of my home ward. I found the whole subject weird and irrelevant, another peculiar facet of my inherited religion.

It’s ironic that I have since found in the concept of “tribe” a way to come to terms with my feelings about the Church. A sense of being inextricably linked to tribal membership has been steadily growing in me, chipping away at the barriers of alienation erected in my youth. A sense of belonging, which I lacked as a miserable adolescent and as a lonely young housewife, has finally come to me in middle age. It’s a feeling not just of belonging to the Church, but also of belonging in society, in this world, as a human being relating to other humans. I

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know now that I *am* a Mormon: it is not only my religion, but also my tribal culture, giving me both an individual and a group identity. Although I still occasionally chafe against my culture's stereotypes, I know now that membership in my tribe is not the horrible fate I imagined when I was twenty.

My attitudes have changed very gradually and are partly the result of mellowing as I grow older. But the wide-angle perspective I needed to truly value my inheritance began to come into focus after I saw two quite different films. The first was a public television documentary about an isolated Stone Age tribe native to the rain forests of the Amazon headwaters. A small, quiet people, they are monogamous, semi-nomadic, and extraordinarily skilled at hunting with bows and arrows and poisoned darts. Two sequences from the film particularly affected me: the first showed an older woman weaving while humming or chanting to a small child seated beside her, and the second followed an accomplished hunter as he patiently demonstrated his prowess to a half-grown boy who traveled with him for days through dense forest as an apprentice. Although these primitive people lacked every object we associate with civilization, they seemed complete and content in one of the original meanings of the word *civil*: observing accepted social usages; proper; polite.

A similar tribal culture was portrayed in a more simplistic way in John Boorman's 1985 theatrical film *The Emerald Forest*, based on an actual incident. A small Anglo boy, the son of an engineer working in the Brazilian interior, wanders into the rain forest and is kidnapped by a tribe of the "invisible people" who raise him as their own. After years of desperate search, the boy's natural father finds his son, now a young man, and tries to convince him to return to the "civilized" world. The son, however, chooses to stay with his adopted people. The film depicts tribal rituals for coming of age, courtship, marriage, healing, and death—glamorized by Hollywood, no doubt, but thought-provoking nonetheless.

These two films began a train of thought that has permanently affected my attitudes. Observing values and traditions at work in other cultures helped me step back and view my own cultural setting with new eyes. Like the boy in *The Emerald Forest*, I, as well as many other Latter-day Saints—for reasons ranging from conversion to geography to rebellion to intellectual skepticism—are pulled between two cultures, attracted and connected to both. Unlike the boy, most of us are not required to sever completely our connections with one or the other, although many of our ancestors who joined the Church and left all that was familiar in the Old World did precisely that.

For those of us born in the Church, however, the time comes when we as adults must face the reality that active membership in the Church demands a full social as well as spiritual commitment. Our tribal culture touches and defines nearly every aspect of our lives, from what we eat and wear to how we spend our free time. It determines who and how we marry and raise our children, occupies much of our social life, and heavily affects how we spend our money. While our neighbors may sleep in and then go out to cycle and eat brunch on Sunday, we spend our day of rest getting up early to prepare programs, lessons, or music, donning uncomfortable dress clothes, and then planning, participating in, and attending a series of church meetings—sometimes eating no food at all. One wonders why any of us choose this lifestyle! But, perhaps for related reasons, the boy who chose to stay with his Stone Age tribe gave up window screening for mosquitoes, central heating for a leaky leaf hut, McDonalds for roots and monkey meat, and modern medicine for a harder, shorter life span. Obviously comfort factors do not tell the whole story.

Why, then, choose membership in a tribe? Perhaps the boy of the emerald forest sensed that he would always feel an outsider in the modern world, conscious as he was of a more coherent way of life that he had left behind. In my case, tribal membership came with birth, and though I later wished to ignore that part of myself, I found that I could not. Those who are raised in the Church and immersed in its heritage may choose to turn away from the religion, but they can never completely lose their Mormonness. Few of us go on to become good Catholics or active Protestants. My extended family, typical of so many large Latter-day Saint clans, has its share of “jack Mormons”—not “ex” or “former,” just inactive. They are often highly critical of the Church in ways that betray their continuing identification with it. In this we resemble the Jews: orthodox, reform, or nonreligious, they still consider themselves Jews. I eventually saw that my personal choice was whether to be a “good Mormon” (active) or a “bad Mormon” (inactive), but in either case being a Mormon seemed to be as much a part of me as my Romney blue-gray eyes.

Recognizing my inextricable link to my uncomfortable religion led me next to look at others who find themselves in limbo between cultures. Some members of my family, long separated from their small-town western roots and scattered far from extended family and Church association, struggle with the same problems of loneliness and family disintegration that afflict so many other victims of urban alienation. Their plight is not unlike that of some rural southern black families who have migrated North to find economic opportunity, only to see their cultural support system of family, neighborhood, and church

replaced by welfare, gangs, and drugs. In both cases, the tribal society that provided values and support was left behind, but not replaced with a viable alternative culture. Many of these people's choices were forced upon them by economic necessity, however; was I making a similar choice voluntarily?

With new understanding, I looked honestly at my wishy-washy attitude about my own Mormon culture. If I was going to identify myself with the tribe at all—and be identified as a part of it by others—then I wanted to do it wholeheartedly, without reservation. Although I had once interpreted my semi-active status as intellectual independence, I now realized that I was instead a weak fringe member of my own tribe. Good tribe members do not apologize for their customs and traditions; they are loyal and closely bound to one another. I found that I deeply desired to be a good member of my tribe.

I can't label the insight that came to me as "revelation"; perhaps "rationalization" would be closer to the truth. In any case, it was enough to pull me closer to the center of the Church, and as the Book of Mormon prophet Alma predicted, the more I acted as though I believed, the more I believed. I felt as though recognizing my tribal affiliation had somehow given me permission to participate in the full life of the tribe without feeling hypocritical or apologetic for my less-than-perfect faith. I had always feared that full Church participation would mean a loss of the individuality and intellectual freedom so dear to me, but while tribes all seem to require conformity in some clearly defined areas of behavior, they also need and value individual strengths and differences. Even as a feminist in a patriarchal system, I found my contributions accepted and encouraged when I made a sincere effort to participate in the life of the group.

With the iconoclast's typical intolerance for ritual, coming to grips with the rites of my tribe has taken me many years. I still haven't completely overcome my inclination to wisecrack at solemn moments, but my tribal analogy has given me some understanding of the significance and universality of rituals. When a Hopi tribesman dons a mask and chants the familiar phrases of a rain dance, he neither feels foolish nor loses faith in his traditions if clouds do not immediately appear. Indeed, he might pay even closer attention to the nightly weather report. However, invoking the blessing of the gods through the rain dance follows the custom of his tribe and gives him a satisfaction that is part of his self-identity—something outsiders may not understand. Responding to drought in this time-honored way is undoubtedly reassuring and psychologically more sound than just worrying.

We Latter-day Saints also have ritualized responses to many of life's stressful, as well as festive, occasions. By the time I was introduced to the temple ceremony, I had become more comfortable with ritual and was able to accept it as a significant symbolic interpretation of our culture. We may not always find in the temple the closeness to God we seek, but just as ritual dances provide solace to the Hopi, going to the order and peace of the temple is intrinsically valuable to Church members. Other Latter-day Saint blessings and ordinances also help us find inner peace and make us more receptive to guidance. Myths, rites, and symbolic behavior help us accept and explain our world and are as old as humankind. Did not the same Greek culture that examined the entrails of birds for omens also produce the Aristotelian theory of tragedy? The coexistence of ritual and intellectual analysis seems to be a unique and consistent trait of *Homo sapiens*.

Recognizing human need to imbue life's events with significance and ceremony adds to my appreciation of my tribal culture. As an urban high school teacher, I work with many troubled young people, adrift between childhood and adult life with few role models or societal guides to help them. Many are the product of fragmented families, or of no family. Some, born to mothers who were children themselves when they gave birth, give more care than they receive. Other immigrant youngsters are caught between cultures, expected to make the best of the new world while their parents, resisting the process of assimilation, want them to cling to old-country ways. Many rise above their problems, but others respond to stress with premature sex, drug abuse, violence, failing grades, abortion, or teenage parenthood. The milestones of life slip by in a haze of apathy and hangover, and instead of excitement there is anticlimax. Where are their great celebrations, their cultural taboos and guidelines, the rites of passage for these lost children?

How society would benefit if all babies experienced a naming ritual like the African infant described in Alex Haley's *Roots*. Such a babe is valued, is wanted, is *somebody*—like a Mormon infant who receives a name and a priesthood blessing and is then shown off to the admiring congregation and extended family. Once I resented the time-consuming, endless baby and bridal showers, wedding receptions, and especially funerals that ward members are expected to attend; but those very events have now become most precious to me as ways to celebrate our common humanity and individual significance. I feel fortunate to *have* a tribe that gives me and my family a defined place in society.

Because I care a great deal about the culture we transmit to our young people, I lobby quietly from within for modifications in the ways we raise our young women. Like so many other cultures, we celebrate

more rites of passage for our males than for our females—Scout courts of honor and priesthood ordinations, for example—with their hidden message of higher expectations for males. Changes do come, albeit slowly: my daughter and many of her young women friends have had the same experiences of missionary farewells, plaques on chapel walls, letters read in meetings, and homecoming speeches that their brothers had. By serving missions, young women voluntarily participate in one of the world's most rigorous and transforming coming-of-age rituals. Increased access to the temple for single women and those with nonmember or inactive husbands is another significant change. While we may protest the very real discrimination against women within the Church, we too easily forget how many of our sisters in the world, left by circumstances or choice outside any tribal structure, go through all life's significant events with virtually no celebration or assistance. The fellowship we share within the tribe is powerful and nurturing—and even an occasional home teaching visit is better than *no* societal support.

As I work to become a better member of the tribe, I see two more important reasons for the effort: the tribe needs me, and I need it. Although I sometimes describe myself as being antisocial, I am convinced that the only way for me to grow toward God is to serve him by serving his children. Like the elders of the Stone Age tribe, I am moving into the role of mentor and skill-imparter and teller-of-tales to the young in my culture. My beginning efforts as a teacher and leader inside the tribe gave me the confidence to reach beyond it into the wider community. My “natural woman” would probably retreat into a small safe cave with a lot of books for company; instead, my tribal responsibilities push me into continual interaction with humanity, as I both serve and am served.

I hope that the boy who chose to stay in the forest with his tribe never regretted his choice. I know that returning to my tribe has been right, if not restful, for me. It has given me a continuing impetus to grow, both as an individual and as a group member. Now, when speculations begin about the “lost ten tribes” emerging one of these days from Siberia or Mars, I am amused and interested in new bits of folk legend. The lost tribes still appear to be lost, but I have found mine.