

Alternately, in an effort to decrease areas of conflict, the Mormon spouse may modify his or her beliefs and religious practice, becoming in the process “less active,” and may even be drawn to leave Mormonism behind. But as thorny as these problems can be, Latter-day Saints who may have never intended to do so, continue to fall in love with persons of varying religious persuasions—and find that they must confront these issues for themselves.

The following essays are written by five individuals who have not only chosen to marry spouses who are not Mormon, but who approach their marriages from a rich variety of viewpoints. I applaud their willingness to examine their lives with us in such a public arena. Obviously, their experiences are relevant not only to persons involved in similar situations, but to all of us who struggle with the issue of difference in an intimate partner.

Eternity with a Dry-Land Mormon

Levi S. Peterson

I’VE HEARD THEM CALLED both dry Mormons and dry-land Mormons. They are people who live intimately among the Mormons without becoming members of the Church. They are a puzzling lot because they often behave so much like Mormons that it seems they could have no possible objection to baptism. I have been married to a dry-land Mormon since 1958. Althea came to BYU with a Mormon friend in 1953. The friend left after a quarter, but Althea stayed. She liked living among the Mormons but didn’t want to join the Church. As for our marriage of thirty-one years, I predict it will continue till one of us dies. The question I will address in this essay is whether Althea and I will be together in eternity.

I remember the misalignment between me and a serious-minded Mormon girl I was dating as I left on my mission in 1954. My aspiration ran toward a lifetime of exploring philosophy, art, and literature; hers toward raising a Latter-day Saint family with a man who, as she often said with fervor, honored his priesthood. Some months after I entered the mission field, it became evident I was not destined to be a man who

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honored his priesthood, and this young woman and I had the good sense to break off our correspondence.

Near the end of my mission I was surprised to receive a letter from an utter stranger, Althea Sand. She had heeded the plea of my brother, who had informed the girls of her Heritage Halls apartment that I, an exile in Belgium, would appreciate a letter. Returning to BYU, I found Althea to be attractive, eminently good natured, and interested in philosophy, art, and literature. Born in Stanton, Iowa, a Swedish immigrant community, she had been baptized by the rite of her father's religion, Lutheranism. When she was six, her parents moved to Long Beach, California, where she lived until she came to BYU at eighteen. In Long Beach, she attended the Methodist church, her mother's preference. As for her current stance toward Christianity, I suspect she is, like me, part doubter, part hoper. I'm not certain because she has preferred to keep her faith a private matter, offering me only infrequent and elliptical statements about it. To be truthful, I haven't been very curious. I often feel that my own preoccupation with religion is morbid, and I find it perennially refreshing to live with a woman for whom religion is not an issue. Althea loves nature and happily joins me on hikes and pack-trips into wild places. I think she likes to live among the Mormons—as I do—because she gathers strength from their fundamental decency. She is utterly loyal to her close Mormon friends and is as devoted to my Mormon relatives as if she had been born one of them.

Althea and I were wed by a Mormon bishop in my brother's home on a bright Sunday morning. Looking on were her parents, my mother, two of my brothers and their wives, my sister, and Althea's best friend. After a pleasant luncheon on the back lawn, Althea and I departed on a brief honeymoon. That blissful trip was made memorable by a bout of diarrhea we contracted from a supper we ate at a Grand Canyon lodge. Only a thin plank wall separated the bedroom and bathroom of the rustic cabin we occupied that night. Perhaps we were lucky to be so quickly disabused of the fastidiousness which often characterizes the newly wed.

Althea and I lived in Provo for two years while I completed a master's degree in English and she served as secretary of the Freshman English program at BYU. We lived a year at Berkeley while I attended the University of California and for four years in Salt Lake while I completed a Ph.D. at the University of Utah. Althea worked as a secretary during our Berkeley year and during the first two of our Salt Lake years. During the last two years in Salt Lake she took English courses and taught as a graduate assistant. Since 1965 we have lived in Ogden, where I am a professor of English and Althea an instructor in Spanish at

Weber State College. Obviously she has been entirely supportive of my academic career. She also encourages my literary effort and accepts the occasional invasion of her privacy which it entails. She is a ready conversationalist, a voracious reader, and an inveterate taker of college courses. She holds baccalaureate majors in office administration, French, and Spanish and has taken many graduate hours in Spanish and English.

Althea has demonstrated her tolerance for living among Mormons in many ways. At the birth of our only child, Karrin, Althea suggested that she be raised a Mormon if for no other reason than that she would thereby relate better with her innumerable Mormon cousins. When Karrin was three, Althea and I began to attend meetings in our Ogden ward. When Karrin was eight, our liberal bishop allowed me to baptize her. Of her own volition Karrin attended seminary in high school. She is now twenty-four and a third-year law student at the University of Utah. Thanks more to her Sunday School teachers and seminary friends perhaps than to her parents, she remains an independent yet believing Latter-day Saint. As far as I can tell, her mother approves of this turn of events.

Althea never chides me for my inconsistent practice of Mormon mores. Except for the hottest weeks of the year, I regularly wear one-piece temple garments. The unesthetic vision which I present thus clad has never dampened her affection for me. She accepts, perhaps even desires, that I say grace over our food at every meal. She listens patiently if disinterestedly to my articulations of esoteric Mormon doctrine and to my fulminations against the illiberalities of the General Authorities. She is tactfully silent when I sing hymns while vacuuming or helping her with the dishes. She doesn't murmur over my regular attendance at sacrament meeting, though she herself, now our daughter is grown, no longer attends. She cheerfully accompanies me to church socials, community events, and family reunions, where the uninformed among those with whom she converses do not realize she is not Mormon.

I come now to the question whether I would willingly spend eternity with this affectionate wife, and my answer is of course yes. I come next to the question whether I would therefore hew myself to the entire regimen of the Church in order to be worthy of a temple marriage and whether I would try to persuade Althea to be baptized and make herself similarly worthy, and my answer is no.

During the summer before Althea and I married, I lived with my mother in a Provo apartment. Each afternoon as I returned from work, my mother had a new proposal for delaying the wedding until Althea

could be baptized, which I doggedly refused to consider. My mother, the daughter of a polygamous pioneer bishop, was industrious, compassionate, and intensely religious. She believed with great urgency in the necessity of marrying within the covenant. In her view, I had, by my failure to marry in the temple, spurned that uncompromising Judge who forbids the mingling of the just and the unjust in eternity. She feared of course that, if I persisted in my disobedience, she and I would never see one another again once either of us had died.

I recognize now that my alienation from Mormonism was an assertion of independence from my mother and that my marriage to a gentile was the cornerstone of that assertion of independence. This is a sad thing to say, given the fact that I have always loved and respected my mother. I note with some comfort that I wrote her a weekly letter for almost forty years, and Althea and I visited her on every vacation and took her into our home for months at a time during her old age. Over the years my mother came to trust and respect Althea; and when she lived with us during her old age, she received Althea's daily care and ministrations with gratitude. Yet until senility erased her missionary zeal, my mother never ceased, in person and by letter, to urge Althea's baptism.

If Althea wished to become a Mormon of her own accord, I certainly wouldn't object. I would hope desperately, however, that she would not evolve into a punctilious Latter-day Saint who would fret and mourn over her husband's failure to honor his priesthood. Although I consider myself a Mormon through and through, I remain fixed in a perverse determination not to resume full activity. I do not drink coffee merely because it tastes good; I drink it on principle. So I will make no secret of the fact that I am as pleased today that my wife is a gentile as I was on the day of our wedding.

Would I maintain my perversity if I were convinced that a relentless God had ordained the rite of temple marriage? Probably not. As I have said elsewhere, I am a Christian by yearning; I live by hope, not by faith. Though I doubt God exists, I hope he does. And I find in my hope certain intuitions as to what God's character must be. Among my intuitions are these: that God is a marvelous yeast working upon the human conscience rather than a legalistic judge or a meticulous giver of rules; that he pities humanity and would do more to assuage the afflictions of mortality if he could; and that he forgives sin far beyond the capacity of vengeful human beings to comprehend. I believe God has ordained the rites of baptism, confirmation, healing, and wedding for the comfort, not the condemnation, of human beings. A ritual is not a ticket allowing one to enter a certain door or gate. It is a reminder and a symbol; it

concentrates meaning and rouses emotion.

Though I have never witnessed a temple wedding, I have, I think, a clear picture of one. The bride and groom, dressed in white, kneel on either side of the altar, facing one another and holding hands. Around them are loved ones and friends, similarly clad in white. A temple official delivers a brief sermon of admonition and encouragement, then marries them by a simple recitation that differs from a civil ceremony chiefly by specifying that the bride and groom are wed for both time and eternity. The harmonious atmosphere of the temple, the ardor of the bride and groom, the well-wishing of those looking on combine to make it a holy experience. In a real if mysterious way, God is present and gives his blessing.

Who could gainsay or belittle this splendid expression of the human desire that conjugal love extend beyond death? In and of itself, it is a flawless ritual. But it must be said that certain barbarities attend its peripheral circumstances. When my niece married, her groom's parents could not look on but were required to wait in the foyer of the temple because his father smoked. A good-humored Catholic friend, who sat with them, called it the room of the unworthy. A further barbarity lies in the fact that the Church will not permit civil weddings in the chapel of the ward meetinghouse. If one is to marry in a meetinghouse, it must be in the Relief Society room or cultural hall. Generally speaking, authorities of the Church prefer that civil weddings not be held in a meetinghouse at all. They prefer almost any other setting where bride, groom, witnesses, and magistrate can manage to assemble: a church of a different denomination, a commercial wedding chapel, a home, a mountaintop, a bar, a casino. Unfortunately, this attitude suggests that marriage contracted by a civil ceremony is not sacred.

Several years ago a student invited my wife and me to her wedding in St. Paul Lutheran church in Ogden. I was profoundly moved by this ritual. The minister wore a robe, and candles burned near the altar. The bride marched solemnly into the church on the arm of her father, joining the groom at the altar. The bride wore a gown, the groom a tuxedo, both of white. The minister welcomed the congregation and, like the official at a Mormon temple wedding, preached a brief sermon of admonition and encouragement. He led the bride and groom in an exchange of vows, then administered the Communion of the Lord's Last Supper to them alone. As I watched this sincere young couple kneel to receive the wafer and wine in token of the Lord's promise to resurrect them from the dead, I recognized an utter grace, a complete and unsullied holiness. In light of that experience, I think the Latter-day Saints would do well to remove weddings altogether from the exclusive