

The Mormon Woman as Writer

Phyllis Barber

Once while I was wandering through my life, I had a need to say something. I'm not sure where this something came from, but opinions and observations grew on the interior walls of my mind like lichen, growing into some kind of personal vision that wanted out.

— Phyllis Barber

As a Mormon child, I listened when my parents and teachers said, "Thou shalt not bear false witness." I wanted to obey, keep the commandments, and speak the truth in every situation.

But there were times. Once I told Aunt Martha she had a moustache. My mother whispered crossly, "You don't say things like that." "It's the truth," I insisted.

"Sometimes you can't tell the truth," she said. "People's feelings . . ."

This currying of the truth seemed strange. In my mind, the truth was a clearly seen star. But wispy clouds had drifted across its face. A complicated duality was seeded in my heart and mind.

As I grew older, I started hedging in other situations. I didn't ask the Mutual Improvement Association dance director to stop shouting like a Nazi general even though he was turning us teenagers sour on the All-Church Dance Festival. I said I had a testimony of the gospel when I wanted, more than had, one. I said things were all right when they weren't. After all, I was a brave child of God. And after I married, I overlooked irresponsible behavior in my family to present a pretty picture for everyone to see. Little things. Simple things. Small bricks in a building of self-deception. Small masks and small lies smothering the child who once believed in pure truth.

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Then, one day, I realized I'd created a sculpture of myself outside myself, a clone who was my personal representative to the world. She had groomed hair, was nice, kind, responsible, well-loved, obedient, and she tended home fires. The other me, inside, seemed quite different—sometimes loving, yet sometimes spiteful, sometimes slapping a child, hating the drudgery of the iron/skillet/broom, and dreaming of a more exotic life in a Medusa hairstyle. When this split came to my consciousness, it suddenly seemed bizarre. Why must I walk down the street in tandem when it would be easier just to be myself?

Subterraneously, like a blind reptile in a tunnel, I decided to dismantle the idealized sculpture, gather the disparate parts of myself together again, and find my voice—not an imitation or an echo. Against my better judgment, I began to write, a dangerous thing to do. Words are unreliable. People can pick words apart and throw them back with fingerprints on them. I felt nervous. Maybe I should dance, sing, play the piano, or write innocent children's stories. Maybe I could speak most eloquently by not speaking at all. But the pen was in my hand.

In the act of holding it, I decided I wanted to look at questions from every angle, not from a single point of view. I wanted to consider the value of opposites: bitter/sweet, shadow/light, good/evil. I wanted to reevaluate the belief that “this-could-never-happen-to-me-because-I'm-a-good-Mormon,” an idea that had come to feel arrogant and uncomfortable. I wanted to face, rather than avoid, the difficult emotions of hatred, pride, insecurity, fear, loss, desire, self-righteousness—all of which I've known, all of which I've seen outside of me. And finally, I wanted to confess that my experience of connecting with the divine was closer to poet Anne Sexton's book title, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, than the one I'd heard proposed in church meetings—The Glory of the Gospel, the United Family who sinks to bended knee in common prayer.

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't support what I perceived to be an emotionally idealistic, therefore partially dishonest, view of the world. But on the other side of the coin, I didn't want to don the mantle of *artiste* either—someone who considers herself above reproach in the rarified stratosphere of art. I'm a scribbler, scratching down the events in my line of vision. I see partials. I excel in glances. I paint glimpses of nature in finite detail, not the cosmos. I don't claim to expound the capital T Truth, but rather my capital P Point of View about the range of truth I think I see. Writing is only a way I've chosen, my pick and shovel as I dig out my life and make shapes of it.

In this process, I want to speak what I speak, not what someone else tells me I should speak. Otherwise, I'm no more than parrot and plagiarist. I want to stand where I stand despite all the voices around

me, despite my parents, teachers, Church authorities, or literary critics poised with the canons of tradition and righteousness on their side. I want to be brave enough to stand naked in the snow, to live on if someone laughs, ridicules, or says I know nothing. Only I can bear witness to what I feel and think. I'm the author of my insides as well as the interpreter of external reality.

When, as an artist, I am advised by Church leaders to give my talent to build God's kingdom and spread the truth of the gospel, what am I being asked? Am I a salesperson, a public relations tool to be edited for the masses? Do I have to paint a rosy picture of all things Mormon? Of all things Christian? Am I expected to believe the rosy picture to be the real picture? What about the blues, grays, and blacks in the palette?

Must I maintain a blissful optimism and trust that the hand of God is everywhere gentle to the righteous? If so, then what of the inevitable questions: What is Hitler, what is Stalin, Jim Jones, or Jimmy Swaggart? Is God always good? What is good? What is evil? What is day/light? What is night/dark? Yin? Yang? Two sides of the same coin? And what about "opposition in all things"? This truth-finding is like walking through scraps of pig iron and balancing on uneven surfaces.

In his excellent work, *The Perpetual Orgy: Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, Mario Vargas Llosa compares Bertolt Brecht with Gustave Flaubert. Brecht's plays were written to teach life lessons to his audience. Vargas Llosa describes him as

the author [who] goes over a lesson with his pupils, one that includes a certain number of stories and their morals, a few fables and the exclusive truths that they illustrate. The reader . . . has the message forced upon him (with genius sometimes), along with a story and some characters, and is allowed no escape and no choice: literature becomes something that . . . demands of the reader the acceptance of a single truth that exists prior to the work of art.

In Flaubert's work, Vargas Llosa finds that

. . . the truth (one or several) is hidden, woven into the very pattern of the elements constituting the fiction, and it is up to the reader to discover it, to draw, by and for himself and at his own risk, the ethical, social and philosophical conclusions of the story. Flaubert's art respects . . . the reader's initiative. His technique of objectivity is aimed at reducing to an absolute minimum the "imposition" of a particular view that every work of art inevitably entails. (1986, 231)

Obviously, both approaches have validity in the world of literature, but I tend to favor Flaubert's approach of truth weaving itself into the pattern—the truth that is discovered in the creative process, not mandated beforehand. As I create, I am searching, exploring, letting my creation guide me. If I already know everything, I close my

ears to new voices or ideas that may want to exercise themselves; there is no place for creativity to breathe. I cannot examine or expand if there is no fluidity, if all is concretized.

So I pose this question: Is everything finished for us to observe and comment upon, or does God want us to make additions and corrections to the text? "Is reality made or in the process of making?" as Descartes asks.

Our main connection to God may be our imagination. Isn't a leap of faith—a blessed imagination—required to believe in golden plates, the celestial kingdom, and, ultimately, the notion of God? If Mormons are, as Lorenzo Snow said, "as God once was" beings and hope to be gods and goddesses, priests and priestesses, we have the imperative to use our intelligence and creativity to make this world and future worlds the best of places to live. How many times have you said to yourself, "If I owned the world, I'd do things differently"?

When Czeslaw Milosz, the Nobel prize-winning poet, gave his acceptance speech, he said many of his friends had seen their friends die unjustly in World War II and had given in to despair. He concluded by saying artists must keep their vision and not yield to catastrophe or prevailing opinion contrary to their own. "Like all my contemporaries, I have felt the pull of despair, of impending doom, and reproached myself for succumbing to a nihilistic temptation. Yet on a deeper level, I believe, my poetry remained sane and in a dark age expressed a longing for the Kingdom of Peace and Justice" (1981, 409).

If any of us think we know all the answers in our despair or in our certainty, there is nothing left to explore. If the process is limited to A, B, C, D, there is no reason to create anything. Creativity implies freshness, new life, new possibilities. Artists need their wildest imagination to explore this world and worlds beyond.

In the attempt to speak with imagination, a challenge for Mormon writers is the Latter-day Saint lexicon. What repertoire of language is available to me if I operate from the stance of active Mormonism? Should a down-and-out character sulking in a western bar be expected to speak Mormon slang because I am a Mormon writer? If my word processing screen displays words that a good Mormon woman shouldn't use, do I delete them, blast them off the screen, and flagellate myself—"I said that?" Maybe I can blame my word processor—that evil thing. Demonic. Saying things I'd never say.

In a recent discussion, I mentioned to a friend that a character in my first novel took the Lord's name in vain. She answered that she would draw the line when it came to that. "What if," I asked, "there are people in the world who speak that way and who would sound foolish if I used 'Gol darn'?" "I'd draw the line," she maintained.

Whatever the solution to that dispute, the conversation started me thinking about words that might offend some people in the LDS culture. I took adjectives first. Which adjectives are comfortable?

nice sweet gentle tender kind reliable responsible marvelous spiritual
generous loving soothing intelligent cheerful appropriate warm

And which adjectives might cause discomfort when applied to a Mormon woman?

angry mouthy despairing grasping materialistic controversial sexy seductive
feminist bitchy intellectual probing Socratic heroic sleazy

Discomfort for a Mormon man?

power-hungry adulterous greedy lying seedy fascist communist socialist
hippy flippant irrelevant pig money-grubbing abusive

If I create a character who is a bishop or a Relief Society sister and use the uncomfortable adjectives, am I betraying my religion and my community? Need I censor myself continually to avoid offending someone? If so, do I have only a parcel of the language available to me as I write?

Many Mormon writers feel pressured to maintain a worshipful attitude toward culturally respected objects and maxims because they don't want their worthiness canceled. If they walk the tightrope of staying in good graces with the Church community versus dealing with very human quirks of character in an objective, even irreverent manner, then they run the risk of being labeled unfair, slanderous, heretic, firebrand, smug intellectual. This problem is universal in religious organizations: the Ayotollah ordered Salman Rushdie's death for a similar offense.

There is often a literalness in fundamental religion that grounds a wild imagination and flights of language. It is connected to truth-telling, integrity, and telling it straight from the hip: honorable qualities. But the life of the imagination needs to be one of soaring, high altitude, daring; it can't be choked and silenced and grounded every step of the way.

Therefore, Mormon writers often worry about readers who don't go on the same metaphorical flights and who choose to travel on B52s. Many worry about readers who don't differentiate between author and narrative persona. Admittedly, the author is responsible for every word and action that issues forth from his or her characters. The author wrote those words, after all. But for a reader to take a personal moral inventory of an author is another matter. The reader has some responsibility as the interpreter of the text. Much of the burden of interpretation lies with the reader who will make out of words what he or she

wishes. Words are living things, ubiquitous, shifting. Words can be shaped like liquid plastic by both author and reader.

Ronald Sukenick, an experimental American writer, describes the creation of character: "You open an awareness into multiple possibilities and multiple levels of personality, and you can be an infinite number of beings: at one point a mature businessman and at another point a vulnerable infant" (in Bellamy 1974, 65).

Maybe this all happens in the DNA molecule where humans are connected to every one of their ancestors in the long chain back to the beginning—the honorable, the dishonorable, the indifferent. In my opinion, a good writer must assume that people, fictional and real, are subject to the entire spectrum of possibility. Human beings are fluid. They are amorphous. They are mortal. They have idiosyncracies. Should a writer be expected to pretend otherwise?

How can I write about the whole range of emotion if I am inhibited by decorum? Can my characters scream and rage and commit sin? Must they sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam or have only faith-promoting experiences? Am I obligated to make things work out happily ever after, everyone saved and glowing with gospel light? Or is my imagination free to range through the jungles, forests, mountaintops, and deserts of the human experience?

A Mormon writer can break through these barriers, as Levi Peterson has done in *The Backslider* and some of his short stories, but can't expect to stand in a hallowed circle of light surrounded by benevolent faces. These writers need to remember that making any choice includes the price of admission: there's a price/prize for belonging and remaining safe; there's a price/prize for living at the edge.

Thus, the challenge of the language. How plastic is it? How available are some words? How much danger is there of a writer losing credibility in the community by venturing too far out of bounds? Is the kingdom of God more important than one individual's imagination? Am I freer, therefore, to speak how I speak if I don't call myself a Mormon writer but rather a woman who writes?

But what happens to the Mormon writer who decides to stride out in the world at large, bypassing his or her heritage and saying, "Forget that can of worms. I'll just write for people outside of the culture"?

Writing for the world at large presents an unusual challenge to someone who has been raised on Mormon language/sensibility and who believes subconsciously that the most important value on earth is the upbuilding of the kingdom of God. If storytelling is rendered through this particular lens, many readers outside of the language and sensibility have no contextual awareness to inform them of the subtlety and nuance, even the high stakes being played out in the story.

“Stake center, bishop, Relief Society, testimony, temple garments, missionary, sacrament meeting”—foreign words. A character’s struggle between obedience to LDS principles and obedience to self, or the struggle with emotions of fear/anger because of a bishop’s interview—these are tempests in a teapot to the outside observer.

An observer can say, “What about Chaim Potok, Philip Roth, Mary Gordon, Graham Greene—Jewish and Catholic writers? People are interested in them.” As I understand it, Judaism and Catholicism are much more universal, much more ancient and puzzling to the public mind than is Mormonism, which many consider a quaint, odd, right-wing cult, mainly known by its oddities, its yellow headlines—the stories of modern-day polygamy (which is all many people “know” of the religion), Mark Hofmann, and the Singer/Swapp clan.

Then some questions need to be asked: Is a writer who happens to be Mormon better off addressing a Mormon audience who understands the language and the gallant efforts of members trying to lead a principled life? Are Mormon writers trying to write for a larger audience only fooling themselves? Will they just be caught in a crack somewhere, neither in one world or the other? Oddities to both?

Reticence and good taste are excellent things, but unscrewing the doors from their jambs is a good thing too. Our original sin . . . is a tendency to forget that nothing human is alien to any of us. This means that the crazy suicidal lady is not to be condescended to by me. It also means that she is one of the inhabitants of my own proper attic, whom I deny at my peril.

— Alicia Ostriker

As for the challenges of writing for the Mormon woman specifically, I begin with a remembrance of my father who always told me to be kind. He wouldn’t allow me to say anything bad about anyone in authority or anyone else for that matter unless I could say three nice things. He told me, “Love one another,” and he cried easily when babies were blessed and children confirmed. He was a bishop. But I also remember my father’s hair-trigger temper, remember him slapping me in the face and saying, “Don’t you dare cross me, you smart ass.”

I don’t remember what I said. I may have plied the knife and salted the wound, but maybe I didn’t. Maybe I was caught in the invisible web of his frustration about earning a living, feeding four children, and being a saint. Nevertheless, somewhere I learned that saying what I thought was a dangerous occupation.

I remember the early attempts at writing, being afraid of my own feelings leaking out on the paper. They might be embarrassing. They might prove my unworthiness. They might disgrace me before God. I

had to keep reminding myself that I could always throw the paper away. No one had to see what I wrote. But still, I could feel the points of tension in my neck, like talons of an eagle. "Don't you dare say anything wrong. Be kind. Be compassionate. An example. Give everyone the benefit of the doubt. Do unto others . . ."

And then I remembered the MIA slogan of the late fifties, "Dare to be different." But that meant different from everyone else who wasn't Mormon, not different from my Mormon counterparts. I felt the tight girdle of goodness around me. Was there any room to move around on the inside of Mormonism? I reminded myself to say my say, even if it wasn't picture perfect. If I didn't, all the words in my head would suffocate me. Some of them had to get out. They were crowding me. I could still tear or burn or crumple the paper on which I wrote.

Looking at this dilemma directly is painful. I want to be loved by everyone. And if I say something offensive to someone, then I might lose some of the love I need. But I need love from myself too. I want to be unafraid of my reflection in the mirror.

So what specific challenges do I face as a Mormon woman writer, even if I now stand at some distance from activity?

Both the Mormon male and female are raised on the ethic of service, but I believe the woman is the more publicly obligated social servant when the LDS cultural ideal is operative (the female being married and staying at home to raise children). This is not to say men don't serve. They do, but ordinarily by furthering their careers and operating in an administrative capacity. In everyday practice, the women are the main caretakers.

Because I am not the major wage-earner, whenever I sit down to write, I feel spider webs of guilt being woven in the corners of my study. I should be upstairs in my kitchen baking bread, preparing a meal for a sick neighbor, planning an outing for my children, finding dead relatives on microfilm. I shouldn't sit in my study observing people from a distance and writing insignificant stories. I should be making beauty with someone who needs me—art in the real, not the abstract.

Then the spider spins its web furiously around my head. Am I involved in a sufficiently elevated task? Am I furthering the kingdom of God, my main function as a Mormon and a good person?

Sitting in my study, typing, thinking for five hours a day seems an unnatural act. I should close down my computer and answer the needs outside my sealed-off, quiet study. The notion of service, that "other," is my responsibility as well as my salvation, makes it hard to believe in my work. Everything else is more important.

Even if I am providing a service with my writing, it's an indirect and solitary one. And if it's service I'm considering most important, am I not obligated to write something uplifting rather than depressing (which is often the direction of my stories)?

Another challenge to a female writer is the cultural impulse to be a jack-of-all-trades. In my experience, the LDS woman is not encouraged to excel in one area alone. Balance is the more important quality. Excelling in one area is somehow anti-balance.

Knowing how to do many things adequately seems to be the sanctioned criteria because, after all, a mother (the most praised role of the LDS woman) needs to be able to perform in all situations—nurse, comforter, baker, canner, secretary, cook, scriptorian, manager. So, to me, devoting a good percentage of my day to writing, while I could be learning wok cookery, taking an Institute class, learning how to teach my children to manage money or how to make a quiet book for my baby for sacrament meeting is a selfish act. Continually, I have to brush little winged creatures off my shoulders who hoot at me while I write and tell me I am wrong and I'll never amount to anything and I'm silly to think I have something to say when it's all outlined for me if I'd only listen to people who are wiser than myself.

And if, by some monumental good fortune, I succeed at writing, I mustn't be too visible. I mustn't step out where everyone can see me. It's dangerous there. This is a common dilemma for females, not just those who are LDS. Traditionally, the majority of all women are perceived as being better at networking and holding things together than at outdistancing others and standing in a singular ray of spotlight.

That brings up the subject of husbands. If my husband is not successful at his business, I can't be successful at mine. I must not overshadow him. Pull back. Stay in the background, being the woman behind the man. Hold him up when he's in the breach, be mindful of his interests, never surge ahead of him, as that might make him look inadequate. I suspect that if I have a best-selling novel, people around me may scrutinize my family size before they congratulate me on my work. They'll look to see if my children are well fed and my husband satisfied with our marriage. And if they or he are not, I may be criticized as an ambitious woman who pursues what she wants regardless. And, of course, it's wrong to be an ambitious woman in the kingdom of God.

Can't there be another mentality open to me? That my success is my husband's success? My failure his failure? After all, his success has been my success and vice versa for years. Are my talents to be subdued and kept at bay so I will offend no one? Must women keep their

power subterranean so as not to frighten? Hide their brains so they won't scare off the men? Operate at the lowest common denominator of their ability so as to maintain an equilibrium with everything around them?

Or can I, as a woman, give the most back to my culture and society when I accept my ability and stop looking around to see if I've stepped over a wrong line somewhere? Isn't there room for everyone to support everyone else in being the best they can be? By being myself and stepping forward, even if it frightens me, don't I create more room for others?

And then I ask myself what this means. Who am I asking to give me more room? Is it the Church? Or is it me? Could it be a little of both?

There are two ways to victory—to strive bravely, or to yield. How much pain the last will save we have not yet learned.

— Henry David Thoreau

Now, as a grown woman, I have a complicated history that makes me what I am: membership in the LDS church; knowledge of other cultures and religions who do things differently; more than a smattering of humanistic psychology, political science, archaeology, and sociology. I've read about religious wars (i.e., people who kill each other for the truth); I've studied literature, writing, music, teenagers, heart-break, and disillusionment; I grew up in Las Vegas where the ideal woman (the one most appreciated by the culture at large) seemed to be the one with the most beautiful statuesque body decorated with sequins, feathers, and chiffon. This is my life, and I can't sort out how much of me is culturally programmed, educated, or spontaneously mine.

As a woman, I have my feminine perception of the world because I've surrendered to procreation. I've menstruated, I've watched my stomach stretch to monstrous proportions, I've given birth to four sons, I've nursed, I've worn skirts, I've flirted, I've kissed and been kissed. And in truth, I can't claim to be more wounded, more special, or more suppressed than any other person—man, woman, authority, despot, bag lady, immigrant. The human condition is a large enough challenge for each of us without individuals claiming themselves victim.

Therefore, I don't wish to blame the men, even though they've laughed me off the baseball field, listened to me politely and then gone about their more important male business; even though some have told me I can't have the final say about things because there are those with greater access to the truth. Blame feels unfair, even though I've deferred to the males around me, convinced they did know more because they

had authority from God and what I've unconsciously decided are more obvious privileges. But doesn't God speak to me too? Don't I have a mind and a bodily manifestation like males, even if I have slightly different equipment? Just because I have breasts and a vagina am I less spiritual or intelligent than my male counterparts? Does mammary fat drain the brain cells?

Is God as he a convenient pronoun usage created by linguistics or is God a he with a wife we rarely hear about? If so, why don't we hear more about her? What if men and women are really two sides of the same coin? Daughters and sons—mirror image manifestations of God. Is God the embodiment of all things—male and female, not just male? Is God a god of duality or of oneness?

Theological questions aside, what can I do as a Mormon woman who writes? How can I use my creativity to find balance for myself and others? Am I caught up in trying to please too much? Trying to adapt, smooth ruffles, keep the peace at all costs? Is my notion of connecting people and keeping them together blind to the independence that I and others need at times? Do I always back off my position when challenged by an "authority" (whether ecclesiastical or literary)? Am I brave enough to stand my ground when hail as big as golf balls pelts my hide? I might be brave enough to stand up for my husband and children in troubled waters, but am I brave enough to serve my personal integrity? And that means I must stand behind my conviction that all of us are co-partners with God as creator. Therefore, we must expand our awareness, practice our individuation, and steer clear of mass consciousness.

And females just might have a different purpose and a different method of telling. Their stories and observations have often remained in obscurity because they've been making great art in the kitchen, on the table, in hospitals, wherever they might be—art that is useful, caring, giving to the living rather than to society's notion of greatness. They've learned to make art on small stages, part of the beauty of their art.

My particular approach to writing does not always suit my critics, teachers, friends, or husband who wishes I were more practical/commercial. I like to explore time warps, the edges of sanity, impressionism, experimental language, oblique approaches to the subject of humanity. I like subtlety more than dramatic intensity. I believe that truth is found in small places, not always in heroic epics. I'm attracted to stories with barely discernible plot lines. Maybe this is because I, as a woman, have learned to survive by not being obvious. It threatens me to be seen too clearly. Sometimes I adopt bizarre imagery and situations in my fiction, maybe hiding behind a veil of obfuscation.

Maybe this could be considered a female ploy—an invitation to “Come in and find me. If you love me, you’ll do anything for me!” It may also be that fear of censorship is intense and that conventional use of the language seems too trite, boring, or shallow to carry the expression of my feelings.

If I had my way, I’d rather speak with my hands, dance wildly, sing the things for which there are no words—probably more honest ways of telling. But, for some unknown reason, I’ve accepted the role of writer.

Therefore, I need to accept some of the profession’s demands. I need to accept the task before me—to read, study, think, learn traditional logic even though it opposes the way I know and understand things, learn the rules of the craft just as I would with a musical instrument. I need to have these tools, much as I’d like to do without them and do everything my way (which is much more fun). So I refine, refine, and then refine again, observe the rules of character, plot, and setting until I can’t stand them anymore; and then, a little flash of inspiration comes and I remember why I’m writing. It’s all about that personal vision, all about speaking how I speak. I’m the only one who can do that. Then I cross my fingers and hope I can speak clearly enough for someone to hear, for someone to be moved by my words as I have been moved by others who’ve chosen to write.

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