

Why Am I Here?

Gay Taylor

*I wonder why clouds aren't on
the ground. Why do things grow?
If the sun has eyes? Why does
everything start with a letter?
Why is the moon there and not
down here? I wonder
why people don't float, and why
they don't fly, and why
am I here?*

I found this philosophical bit by Chip Janis in *In the New World* (1988), a little book of poems put together by young Indian students at the Pretty Eagle School and St. Charles Mission in Ashland, Montana. Why am I here? It is a question most of us come face to face with. I have heard that Leo Tolstoy, after he had fathered thirteen children, helped Tsar Alexander II free the serfs, and written dozens of articles and books, still tortured himself with the question: "Why am I living?" During one period this question so haunted him that he refused to keep a rope in the house for fear he might throw it over a rafter and hang himself. Yet by his late sixties, he did have an inkling of what life is all about. "The only meaning of man's life," he wrote in his book *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, "consists in serving the world by cooperating in the establishment of the kingdom of God; but this service can be rendered only through the recognition of the truth, and the profession of it, by every separate individual. 'The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, Lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you' " ([Luke 17:20-21] Boston: L. C. Page, 1951, p. 380).

Mormons, of course, hold fast to the idea that we came from God, that we are here on earth to gain virtue by resisting temptation, and that we will return to God to whatever degree of glory we have earned.

GAY TAYLOR was born and grew up in Idaho, a state with sensible names for their towns like Bliss, Chili, Fish Haven, Potlatch, Lava Hot Springs. Traveling around she knew immediately what to expect. Then she worked one summer, in her student days at BYU, in the registrar's office mailing out catalogues to towns in Utah called Tooele—pronounced Two Will Uh—or Panguich, and only the Panguiches know how to say that. It was unsettling. Being married—is it only fifty-six years?— to S. W. Taylor hasn't helped.

The Tibetans, the Buddhists, and others also believe that human destiny is decided on earth. All the early Christian world believed along those lines: do good, go to heaven; be bad, go to everlasting, burning hell. We are here to prove ourselves.

At Brigham Young University, my junior year, I won a \$10 prize for writing the best Christmas story for the *Y News*; then in the spring I was awarded the Elsie C. Carrol medal for best short story. The next fall I got acquainted—on the strength of these triumphs—with writers, the first of my experience, some members of the faculty, some classmates. Three are still part of my life: Jean Paulson, who was editor of the *Y News*, Samuel W. Taylor, who was assistant editor, and Virginia Eggertson (later Sorenson, finally Waugh). That year Virginia and I both had pieces in the student magazine, *Scratch*, she a poem and I a story best forgotten. Sam had just sold his first article, a piece written for Professor M. Wilfred Poulson's psychology class, to a psychology magazine. A few months later the *Writer's Digest* bought his article entitled "How to Write Articles to Sell." That's Sam, never lacking in chutzpah.

I finished my degree and moved to California, hoping to become a newspaper reporter. After a depressing interview at the *Oakland Tribune*, where they said they had only one woman on the staff and had no intention of hiring another one (an uninspired prophecy if there ever was one!), I changed course and settled for a secretarial job at the Russian Institute located in the Hoover Library on the Stanford University campus. The Institute's agenda was to collect and publish ephemeral documents and journals concerning World War I and the Russian Revolution. My reporting ambitions shrank to letters to Sam still in Provo and to a redheaded BYU friend serving a mission in France. Eventually I had to write the redhead a "Dear John," and to this day he has not answered that letter.

Sam eventually decided he could write in one place as well as another, so he moved to Palo Alto where we were married and in no time at all bought a three-room house on a 50 x 150-foot gently sloping lot joining the Stanford campus, the part where cows grazed and oaks grew. We paid about \$3000 for the house—furnished—and the land recently sold for \$500,000. It was a good location for us. I could walk to work—about a mile—and Sam could walk to the nearest post office—about a mile—an important focus in his life from whence came the "we regrets" and also the checks. At that time he was selling about two or three stories a month (for one-half to three cents a word) to such periodicals as *Argosy*, *Western Stories*, *Blue Book*, *Short Stories*, and *Adventure*.

Sam joined the Author's Guild, and thirty or forty members met once a month in San Francisco, in North Beach where an Italian

dinner—complete with a help-yourself tureen of soup and bottles of red *vino de casa* marching down the table—could be had for fifty cents.

However, the writers we became best acquainted with were those who lived up and down the Peninsula, those who would drop in for lunch with Sam while I was at work or, as a group, would meet at our place of an evening. They all knew they were here to write—to inform, scold, inspire, amuse, or excite, to interpret the human condition. They also were sure they had something outside their conscious selves that took over when they were at their creative best. They were not church-going people but had a keen understanding of a divine spark within that was surely immortal. All that creative energy and excitement must go someplace! Our Jewish writer friends were an exception. One evening I talked with *Saturday Evening Post* writer Jaclund Maramur about his beliefs. He said a faction of Jews, of which he was one, held that a person's good works and their children were what remained after death, that the spirit went into a common energy pool. I disagreed. By now he knows who is right.

Let me tell about some of those good friends. On one side of us lived Winston and Dorothy Norman. Winston wrote funny stories for the *Post*, the coveted market for a short story writer. A believer in the notion that the earth is part of God's divine creation, Winston died recently of a heart attack while picking up litter on the Bodega Bay beach.

To the left of us lived a young widow, Virginia Nielsen, who wrote books for girls and is still, at a goodly age, writing books, mostly romances. Born in Idaho in the home of a bishop and with a parcel of brothers and sisters, she knew she was here to write in between helping her siblings go to school and get along in life.

Virginia Sorensen lived a block or so away while her husband, Fred, was getting his Ph.D. at Stanford. She kept a list of things to do posted above her sink: "6:30 to 7:00—feed babies; 7:30 to 8:00—breakfast for Fred" and so on till 10:30 to 10:45—"write poetry." She also managed to write "A Little Lower Than the Angels" during these years. As an arty gesture, she disregarded Sam's advice and wrote the whole book without punctuation. She later had to go to New York and put in all those little commas and periods by hand before Knopf would publish it.

Anne Morse, another *Post* writer, whose work is now in anthologies, lived a few blocks away. Her interesting experiences living for some years with the resident ghosts in a haunted English house gave her a knowledge of the wonder and mystery of the fourth dimension which she felt she had to share. She snatched writing time between

taking care of an exacting husband and two children and used to say what she really needed was a wife.

Albert Richard Wetjen used to come down from San Francisco. An alcoholic who needed thirty cans of beer during a day, he would tell Sam not to use so much mustard, it was bad for the stomach. Born to an English pub keeper, he spoke almost unintelligible cockney, was educated, he said, in the public library, and went to sea at age fourteen. His first beautifully written sea story made the *Post* when he was twenty-one. He said he hadn't a clue where his great stories came from, but they were meant to be written to teach such values as courage, hope, and loyalty.

Rutherford Montgomery, a long-time friend and writer of animal stories, some of which he turned into Disney movies, said that his 140 books seemed to come from outside himself; he needed to communicate to people the wonderful world of animals.

There was always a lot of gossip at these gatherings at our house about who sold what, troubles or triumphs with agents, adventures with New York editors or with Hollywood. One night Ralph Moody breezed in after a trip to Hollywood to discuss making a movie of his book *Little Britches* and stuck out his hand with this electrifying information: "This is the hand that shook the hand of the voice of Donald Duck."

At one of our meetings, Montgomery told about a neighbor who ordered something or other from Sears and got two dozen baby chicks. Everyone cried, "Don't tell that good stuff around Sam, he'll have it in *Colliers* next month." He was known to take notes on the palm of his hand. The story, as he finally wrote it, was about a budding author who ordered an unabridged dictionary and received one thousand baby chicks. It appeared in the 24 July 1948 *Saturday Evening Post*. By this time Sam had joined that magic circle of slick paper writers—those published in *Post*, *Colliers*, *Liberty*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Esquire*—and was earning \$500 a story—rather than the \$25-\$50 the pulps paid. (Of course, he didn't sell as many.)

All the writers I've mentioned and dozens more came to talk shop, get advice, or just bask in the glow of a slick paper writer. Then came the war. We moved from Palo Alto to an abandoned apricot orchard on the outskirts of Redwood City, where we built an adobe and redwood house. A small steel manufacturing company with a war contract put Sam in charge of building a net across the piers of the Golden Gate Bridge to keep the Japanese Mosquito submarines from entering the harbor. Sam's only qualification for the job was that he could read a blueprint. Soon afterward, Uncle Sam sent "Greetings" (the missive asking a man to report for induction), and Sam was off to England,

first as a G.I. in ordnance handing out shoes, trucks, and other supplies, then as a correspondent with the Public Relations Office of the Strategic Air Force—Magazine Section.

The purpose of this group was to give to the towns back home news of their warriors in the European theater—good news if possible—to build up morale, sell bonds, and encourage the folks to accept rationing of gasoline, clothes, shoes, sugar, meat, cheese, beer, and fat, including butter and margarine. Uniforms were popular and a healthy-looking male in civvies walked the streets in peril of having his manhood questioned—rudely.

It was a time when more of our people knew why they were here than probably any other time in our history. The destruction of our fleet at Pearl Harbor with the attendant killing of sailors (the Battleship Arizona still lies in the bottom of the harbor with its fifteen hundred men entombed there) engendered such a sense of violation that no sacrifice was too much to revenge this outrage.

Sam's first assignment with the PRO to further the war effort was to write, with co-author Eric Friedheim, a book about the American fighter-plane pilots, those men whose job it was to destroy the German Luftwaffe and to escort the Allied bombers on their deadly missions over Germany. The book, *Fighters Up*, was published in England in 1944 where it became a best seller. Next he wrote the annual *Report of the Commanding General of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces in Europe to the Secretary of War*. He never saw the general, who was at that time back in the Pentagon, but the General was so pleased with the quality of the report that he recommended Sam for the Medal of Honor.

About this time, to make it easier for Sam to interview officers in their mess and clubs (off-limits to GIs), he got a field commission, adding another gold bar to his shoulder. Next he wangled a trip to New York to talk to editors about projected articles and stories. He sat down in a restaurant, his coat loaded with insignia and medals including the Bronze Star, Medal of Honor, and especially the one saying this guy has served overseas. The waitress came up immediately, set down a plate of bread and said, out of the corner of her mouth, "Butter under the slice."

She wasn't the only one who looked after him. During his two years in London, while the flying buzz bombs fell every night, Sam remained reasonably serene, though houses fell around him and the window of his room was blown out twice. (He also escaped from a bomber when it crashed and burst into flames.) A fey charlady, taking a moment from her dusting to observe him with some interest, had this to say: "Yank, I see you are protected. You have a bright aura. Besides there are two guardians standing behind you." Not to be irrev-

erent, but could these be the father and the son—President John Taylor and Apostle John W. Taylor, who wanted their stories told?

While he was a corporal in Ordnance, Sam got \$50 a month to send home and something less to keep. He was not gifted with the divine fire for nothing and spent his spare time playing winning poker (the two guardians behind him?) and writing stories to sell. *Liberty* published his endearing series, “Letters to the President,” in which a small town newspaper editor advised the president how to win the war. Sam wrote under difficult conditions. He started one story on a “casual” typewriter, which cost a dime for thirty minutes, while a line of men waited to use the machine, then ran out of dimes and no one would sell him one even for a dollar. He moved to his bunk and continued to write with a pencil. At lights out he again moved to the only room with a light on all night and finished the story—“Wing Man,” published in *Liberty* 21 October 1944.

Sam was mustered out in the fall of 1945, and the Disney folks were waiting at the airport to say Walt had a job for him. Sam wrote a screenplay, using two of the “Letters to the President” stories, one about magic rubber and the other about a flying Ford. These were filmed years later as “The Absent-Minded Professor” and “Flubber.”

Television killed off most of the magazines that had devoured all those great stories but not before *Colliers* serialized Sam’s humorous Mormon story, “The Mysterious Way,” later published as *Heaven Knows Why* (1948). And not before *Liberty* serialized, from February to July 1948, “The Man with My Face,” which with Sam’s collaboration was made into a movie and has gone through several editions.

Deprived of the markets for his short stories, Sam turned to articles and books, many concerning Utah and Mormonism. *Holliday* published “In Our Lovely Deseret” (Sept. 1948), “Utah” (Aug. 1953), and “My Mormon Family” (March 1959). (The State Department requested permission to send this article worldwide as Americana.)

“Time and the Dream Mine” appeared in *Esquire* (May 1944) and “What Moronism Isn’t” in *American Weekly* (April 1955). *Family Kingdom* (1951—still in print) chronicled the story of Sam’s father, Apostle John W. Taylor, his six wives, and thirty-six children, and his excommunication for marrying the last wife after the Manifesto of 1890. (In 1965 pleas from Sam and his brother Raymond brought David O. McKay to remark to his counselor, Joseph Fielding Smith, “John was a good man. I suggest we reinstate him in his priesthood and office.”)

Sam continued to publish a variety of newspaper and magazine articles as well as more on Mormon themes: in 1953 *True* published “I Have Six Wives,” the story of a modern polygamist, which was expanded into a book in 1956. The protagonist, identified in the arti-

cle by a pseudonym, can now be identified as Rulon Allred, the fundamentalist leader who was shot and killed in 1979.

Sam's "Impossible Journey" story of the Hole-in-the-Rock experience was published by *True West* (June 1960). *Nightfall at Nauvoo* (1971) is Sam's story of a village founded on a swamp, which boomed into the largest city in Illinois before being deserted by the Saints as they made the trek to the Salt Lake Valley. *Rocky Mountain Empire* (1978) brings us up to that date.

With the publications of these books, the character of our visitors changed. Inquiring Mormons descended upon us, much to our edification, amazement, and delight. Mind you, they knew from whence they came, why they were here, and where they were going; but they needed to find out if Sam had indications of a more direct route. We met the literary types who liked to discuss history and changes in history. Then there were the troubled Mormons, the ex-Mormons, the ex-Mormons for Jesus, the closet doubters, the out-of-the-closet doubters, the "how can you stay a faithful member and know what you know?" inquirers, the returned missionaries who have just learned there have been almost four thousand changes in the Book of Mormon, as well as students worried about evolution or the Equal Rights Amendment.

One delightful young couple (he was a returned missionary) came in to say they were leaving the Church because they just couldn't deal with all the discrepancies they found in it. Sam tried to persuade them to stick around, since after all, Joseph Smith himself said he sometimes spoke as a man. Notwithstanding, leave they did. However, they kept dropping in for more talks and finally invited us to their rebaptism party. They had found their habits, friends, and social life were all Mormon, so they might as well be too. Then there was the professional man, a contributor to *DIALOGUE* and *Sunstone*, who though immersed in Church history and doctrine, had no true belief in the soul's immortality until his son was miraculously healed. Now he knows.

A young Silicon Valley scientist who had spent two years researching the innovations made in the garments came around to ask, "If the Lord meant the garments to be a certain style, did we have a right to change them?" Sam pointed out that as far as he had been able to determine, the garments were initially robes worn by the men during priesthood meetings. Someone decided that it would be better to have those protective and identifying insignia on the undergarments where they could be worn at all times. The date of this change is lost in the mists of time, but Joseph, Hyrum, Willard Richards, and John Taylor did not have garments on in Carthage Jail. I told him my grandmothers and other pioneer women made garments from flour sacks, carefully embroidering the marks in.

I was fifteen when it was announced in sacrament meeting that the sleeves and legs of garments would be shortened. A little lady with a lot of young stair-step children stood up and wept, calling on the faithful not to use the scissors. A few years later, in a true Edgar Lee Masters' ending, her husband hanged himself in the barn, whether to stop the little stair-steps or because of frustration over the little woman's ideas of how to get to heaven, who knows?

Another striver for salvation was the old musician who repaired clocks and violins. He was detoured from the path to heaven because he taught reincarnation in Sunday School. Since we believe in eternal progression, the idea seemed perfectly sensible to him. After some years of spirited dialogue, he was ready to die and asked Sam if he ought to be rebaptized. Sam sent the bishop to the hospital, and the musician died baptized and happy.

One zealous type claimed to be already slotted into the celestial kingdom because he was perfect in every way—tithes, offerings, Word of Wisdom, temple, genealogy. He didn't mention the need for wonder, delight, joy in our heavenly parents, or humility. Confucius says tolerance is the greatest virtue. Humility comes next. And he who lays up his alms in public lays up no treasures in heaven; he has his reward on earth.

Then there was the bishop's wife who also served as Young Women's president, organist, and Primary teacher. To my inquiry she responded, "You don't think I would do all this if I were not expecting to make the celestial kingdom, do you?" Was it Dostoevsky who said, "There is no virtue in making the right choice, if you know for certain it is the right one"?

Jeri, a long-time resident of Palo Alto, was, to use her term, a "gung ho" Mormon until along in her fifties she read *Thinking and Destiny*, a book by Harold W. Percival touting reincarnation, in print continually since 1946. Once Jeri was converted to this way of thinking, she could not go to church anymore without feeling like a hypocrite, but her life still revolved around it: weddings, funerals, regular Sunday dinner with the family of her bishop's counselor. If her Relief Society visiting teachers did not show up as they should, Jeri was on the phone to complain. She lived the Word of Wisdom right down the line. She delighted in Sam's books and loved to stop by to talk fast and furiously about anyone or anything new—Sonja Johnson, Orson Scott Card, or the Singers. She died not too long ago, it is my opinion of overexuberance, but I am sure she is in a good place.

That delightful and clear-thinking man, Tom Ferguson, came to visit a few times. At first he was still excited about his book, *One Fold and One Shepherd*; later he was upset about the papyri and waiting

anxiously for the report from defender-of-the-faith, Hugh Nibley. Finally, he came in totally disillusioned, he and Sam agreeing that Nibley's long report was "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." However, he said he would remain faithful to what he considered to be a fine organization.

Another group of visitors knew that being polygamists was the only way to qualify for the celestial kingdom. I am married to arguably the world's foremost authority on Mormon polygamy—he grew up in it and has kept in touch—but I am not converted. I am convinced that the most outrageous idea ever thought up is that polygamy is the only road to the highest glory—unless you consider its outrageous opposite, lifelong celibacy. According to the the highest authority, there are only two great commandments: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Your marrying habits are not mentioned.

But my opinions didn't stop polygamists of all shapes and sizes from coming to our door, some of them what I call pitiful cases. A high school girl living as a mother's helper in a bishop's family in a nearby town came to us on a bus wondering if it would be all right to follow his suggestion and marry him as a second wife. We told her the guy should be hung up by his thumbs for approaching her with such a notion and advised her to find another place to live.

Two young women visited us. One, married with two children, wanted her husband to marry her friend. Sam told them no and, whatever influence his veto might have had, the friend moved away and is excelling in her profession, unmarried.

Of course there are non-pitiful cases too. One evening at eight o'clock five young-to-middle-aged men, sleeping bags in tow, came in out of a driving rainstorm, full of excitement. They, polygamists all, had been to Mexico looking for the tribe of Lamanites who were allegedly preparing the stones to build the temple at Independence, Missouri. They had also visited true believers in Los Angeles and Arizona and were bursting with questions and gossip. We got out homemade bread, cheese, nuts, dried figs, apricots, apples and cookies, herb tea, and milk. They ate everything in sight and never stopped talking. One asked if he could use the telephone and explained, as I took him to the phone in another room, that he wanted to make an appointment for the next day to meet his newest father-in-law, number four. It suddenly occurred to me that if a man could get along with four mothers-in-law, he might be earning his Brownie points just as surely as someone who lashes his back and lives on acorns.

One man called one evening from San Francisco, about thirty miles up the Peninsula. On his way to St. George from Canada, he wanted to drop in for a visit. I invited him to breakfast the next morn-

ing. "All right," he said, "but I'll have ten children with me." We had learned that polygamists are insulted if you ask how many wives they have, but we assumed there might be at least two mothers, which turned out to be the case. After his call I made five loaves of bread and mobilized my daughter from next door to supplement my melons, milk, cheese, eggs, and jam. A truck arrived the next morning pulling a camper about the size of a two-bedroom house. Children ages four to fourteen and two mothers (one with a babe in arms) piled out, looking like a scene from a movie. The seven boys, dressed in emaculate Alice blue stretch suits with white stripes running up the legs, the two girls in white shorts and curls, lined up, shook hands, and gave names and ages as they came in. We spread breakfast for the kids on the back porch, and they ate and played on the lawn and swing set for the next three hours while their father and Sam ate breakfast and took pictures. The two women were friends, co-partners with their husband in a family-run, prosperous enterprise.

The idea of polygamy can take other interesting twists. Early in her young womanhood, a Los Angeles friend, descendent of pioneers, fell in love with a married man. He reciprocated her love but had a temple marriage and fine children. Neither of them wanted to disturb the family unit so, with the wife's consent, they agreed to an after-death sealing to each other. He died first, she was sealed to him, and now she too is in a position to know if all that was necessary for a seat on the first row.

Scientists say we are here because the earth evolved in such a way as to create the elements—carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, phosphorus—needed by our type of life. When they are asked how they know these life elements were present, they say, "Because we are here!"

On 17 October 1989, I was lying under a table where I had dived at the first loud boom of our Loma Prieta earthquake. As the floor heaved up and down and sideways for thirty seconds, I had time to meditate on how the earth had survived through onslaughts of ice sheets, volcanoes, hurricanes, droughts, and floods. I had the impression, when the quaking stopped, that Mother Earth was feeling great, just like we would after a satisfying burp following Sunday dinner. Loma Prieta, a relatively minor effort on nature's part, still managed to tear down an elevated highway, crack hills into six-foot crevices, damage or destroy hundreds of homes over a hundred mile area, and splash the water out of a thousand swimming pools. I wondered if humans could do as much one way or another to harm or help this entity, this biosphere.

A group Sam and I have been involved with during the last decade, the New Agers, seems to think we can. Raised since childhood with

pictures of our beautiful blue planet taken from space, they believe that they are here to keep the planet healthy. Though they have a keen sense of their own divinity, they are not here to earn a particular place in heaven, but rather to make this earth a heaven. Could this be the Millennium sneaking in?

A college student in Salt Lake City wrote his grandmother: "My part-time job is becoming monotonous. I've sold so damn many magazines I'm starting to have nightmares of trees seeking revenge. Instead of this I've found a job raising funds for environmental groups. It pays a little less, but what the heck, I'll save my sanity."

In Iowa a transcendental meditator and his wife and family focus their energies and meditate for peace. Looking at the recent encouraging events in Eastern Europe, they say modestly, "If no one else wants to take the credit for this, we meditators will." This family is also restoring a hundred acres of prairie land to the grassy state it was in before the time of the plow, before the dust bowl.

We humans are puny movers and shakers compared to Mother Earth. However, the English scientist James Lovelock perceives our biosphere as a self-regulating entity with the capacity to keep itself healthy by controlling its chemical and physical environment. It will survive no matter what, he insists, and we, indeed all living things, are important to its survival.

A few years ago, my fifteen-year-old nephew lived with us and went to high school in the spare time he snatched from inventing things that blew up, flew, or slid up hills. He made a Rube Goldberg sort of device that covered half of a picnic table. A marble slid down a slot and sprang a lever that shot it up to a platform, where it raced around and down an incline and after a welter of such maneuvers dropped into a cup. Sam asked, "What is it?" Damon said, "I don't know." Sam said, "Put a cracker in the cup and call it a cracker cracker."

Maybe we are here to go through all the ineffable ups and downs and sideways of life, the roadshows, the polygamy, the recycling, the shouts and hurrahs, and in the end smash a cracker. Which may be enough.