

My Mother's House

Levi S. Peterson

I SPENT THE THIRTEENTH of December 1985 traveling by automobile from Ogden, Utah, to Snowflake, Arizona, to attend my mother's funeral. It was my fifty-second birthday. My wife, daughter, and I commandeered a bedroom in my mother's old house. It was the last time we would ever sleep in that house. The funeral was held the next morning in Snowflake's yellow rock church, in which I had attended meetings during most of my childhood. At the viewing that preceded the funeral, I merely glanced at my mother in her coffin. It seemed if I did more I would never regain my composure.

After the burial and the meal served by the Relief Society, I returned with my siblings to the old house. In a brief council we agreed that, rather than see this structure, incommensurate at its best and now very deteriorated, fall into the hands of strangers, we would donate the land on which it stood to the local school district on the condition that it raze the house. This seemed appropriate since our father had been the founding principal of the high school and our mother, following his death in 1943, had become a teacher in the grade school. Before I left Snowflake that evening, I gave the house a final scrutiny. When I returned for a family reunion the next summer, the lot had been cleared of all but a little rubble. It was then that, suddenly confronted by the absence of the house, I allowed myself for the first time to acknowledge how truly devastated I had been by the death of my mother. More than I had ever before appreciated, the house had always seemed an essential incarnation of her spirit.

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My mother frequently spoke of the house as having a sacred character. It was, in fact, from her casual comments of this sort that I learned to define the word "sacred." She referred often to the births and deaths, the growings up, the departures and reunions, that had occurred in the house. Two of my brothers, a niece, and I were born there. My father and grandmother died there. And how could I even begin to count the instances of communion between parents and children, brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, uncles and aunts, that went on at the dining table of that house for over fifty years? All of these made the house sacred, for nothing on the face of the earth sanctifies more surely than human love.

I remember a supper on a summer evening before my father's death. I was perhaps six years old. At the table were my father and mother, my brothers Charles, Roald, and Leon, and I. The supper was simple: bread, butter, milk, and tiny green onions from our garden at the field. There was the nonsensical talk, the suppressed ribaldry, of rowdy boys, who slathered their bread thick with butter and gulped milk and avidly devoured the little onions. The door between the dining room and the bedroom where I had been born was open, as was an outside door to the bedroom. A low summer sun slanted through to the dining table where we sat. Motes hung suspended in the swath of gold the sun traced through the shadowy room. In thinking of this supper, I recall that Jesus chose to make a supper the nexus of commemoration of his redeeming sacrifice. The supper I remember from my childhood was a moment of holy communion, a sacrament celebrated by a family whose circle of love for the moment remained unbroken.

I remember an evening during the fall of my junior year in high school. By then my father had been dead for six years. The brother just older than I had gone to college, and my mother and I were the sole occupants of the house. By an arrangement my mother had made with the high school principal, I left school an hour early each day to go to our field and finish the harvest and feed the beef cattle and horses. I often put my .22 rifle in the pickup and, after my chores were done, drove into the junipers and shot a mess of cottontails. I remember an evening when I gutted a rabbit outside the house in the light cast by the dining room window. I took the skinned carcass inside and went out to the corral to milk the cows. When I returned with a foaming pail, I saw my mother at the woodburning range frying the rabbit. That image stays vividly with me: smoke rising from the frying pan, my mother with an apron over her dress, a fork in one hand, a salt shaker in the other. The moment that created the image lies impossibly lost in the past. That is another reason the spot on which it occurred now seems sacred.

A couple of years later I too left home. I returned often to visit my mother, and she and I exchanged letters every week. As I have said elsewhere, I chose to live my religion in a way less than pleasing to her. My mother was meticulously devoted to Mormonism. Had it been possible, she would have transported her children, juvenile or adult, toward salvation upon her own willing shoulders. During the last few years of her life, my mother became partially senile. In some ways it was a blessing to me to have her so, for, during the periods when my wife and I took our turn in having her in our home in Ogden, she no longer remonstrated with me for my neglect of the commandments. She simply forgot to ask when I intended to start paying a tithe and have my wife baptized, and my relationship with her became less stressful than it had been for many years. During the extended visits my mother paid us in this last period of her life, I frequently went into her room to say goodnight. She was always asleep, having dozed off on her bed as she read or crocheted. She did not mind being awakened, since she went off again easily. I clasped her hands, and she murmured that she loved me with a fervor that left no doubt. This ritual assuaged my guilt and brought a sense of reparation of my old crime of having grown up and left her.

While she stayed at our house, she and I were usually alone at breakfast and lunch. She was quite deaf and couldn't enter the table conversation at night when we joined my wife, daughter, and mother-in-law for dinner. But at breakfast and lunch she could talk because I asked her questions on topics she loved to speak about, and I listened attentively to whatever she wanted to say.

She had had a momentous life. She married a man who refused to hold a steady job. She had two daughters by him, and then she did the unthinkable: she divorced him. Her marriage to this man remained a haunting guilt all her life, and she could talk endlessly about the circumstances attending it. She of course liked to talk about her marriage to my father, a widower nineteen years her senior, and about the accommodations she and he had been forced to make regarding the children each had brought into their marriage. Sometimes very remarkable things emerged in her talk. Forgetful of old inhibitions, she confided intimate matters. I was, I confess, a little shocked when she informed me that she could precisely date the conception of her second daughter. It had occurred on the night the dam washed out at Woodruff, Arizona. She had been staying there with her parents, and her first husband, freighting by team and wagon between Holbrook and St. Johns, had made one of his infrequent overnight stops in Woodruff, which lay between those two larger towns.

On another occasion she confided something that I came to realize was far more intimate. Early in their marriage, she informed me, she and my father had had their second temple blessings performed. I was startled, not so much that she and he had engaged in this rare (and now entirely discontinued) ritual, but that she had concealed the fact from me during almost fifty years of association. She had concealed it because she had been instructed to keep it a secret, and, as I knew from long experience, she was unusually conscientious in refraining from idle talk and gossip.

The matter came up in a strange, roundabout way at the breakfast table in my house. She said to me something like this: "You know, there is nothing in the temple ceremonies that has to do with sexual union." She paused just a moment and then added: "When your father and I came back to Snowflake from the Salt Lake temple after getting our second blessing, there was a part of the ceremony we had to complete at home." Instantly curious, I asked questions. But she, guilt-stricken over what she had confided, would say nothing more. Because of the juxtaposition of the two sentences quoted above, I of course decided that the finishing ceremony performed in a couple's home must have somehow indeed had a sexual character. For some time I went about sniffing for information among my friends, but I could find no one who knew what the finishing ceremony for the second temple blessing might be. The doctrine of the second blessing was simply too esoteric, too deeply buried in the minds of old people who had long ago promised not to talk about it.

I could not refrain from subtly offering my mother the opportunity of elaborating on this subject in later conversations, and to some degree she gratified my curiosity. She was willing to inform me that the part of the second blessing performed in the temple was very much like the ceremony of the ordinary endowment with which all Latter-day Saints who presently attend the temple will be familiar. She refused still to divulge the nature of the portion of the ceremony completed at home, but did add a very important personal fact. She and my father had engaged in the temple portion of the ceremony while attending general conference in April 1929. They delayed the portion performed at home from April until June because it was in June when they moved into the house they had just purchased. They had expressly waited to complete the ceremony because they intended it to serve as a dedication of the house. They intended that it prepare the house to shelter births and deaths, to propagate hope and affection, and to assist in sealing up themselves and all whom they loved in unbreakable, immortal bonds.

For a while following their wedding in 1924, my parents rented their living quarters, and when at last my father agreed to buy a

house, he insisted it be one that they could buy outright with the \$600 they had in savings. Even in those days, \$600 wouldn't buy much of a house. It stood on a barren lot on a hill so high that no irrigation ditch could reach it. A square frame structure with an overhanging shingled roof, the house contained four rooms. It had been built conveniently close to the town schools by a rancher whose children had lived in it while attending high school. I'm sure it had never been painted. A couple of years before my birth, my father and his older sons added a large living room and a bathroom. They covered its exterior with beaded molding and painted it a light orange. That is how I remember it best, though my mother had it again remodeled and covered with yellow stucco after I became an adult. Neither of these remodelings alleviated the unsquared windows through which the fierce spring winds sifted entire dunes of red sand.

My mother maintained certain amenities in the house. She kept curtains at all the windows and waxed the hardwood floor in the living room and covered it with Navajo rugs. In general, however, the house was a marvel of sparse inconvenience. The woodburning stoves were dirty and tedious. My mother was the first to rise in the morning, and she always kindled the fires. Pipes leading to a hot water tank ran through the kitchen range, but only on Saturday, when she baked bread, was there ever hot water in the tank. For dishes and paltry midweek baths she had to heat water on top of the range. The bathroom faucets invariably froze at least once each winter. An open bucket of swill for the pig sat beneath the kitchen sink; the water in which she washed the dishes, innocent of soap, went into that bucket. With a coarse white cloth she strained hair and straw from the milk which her not overly hygienic sons brought in from the corral. She had no refrigerator until I was nearly grown. She stored pans of milk in a cupboard where in the summer it quickly soured. Sometimes the mice which domiciled in the interior of the walls got into the pans of milk and drowned. Coats hung on nails behind the kitchen door. She set her table with a motley assortment of cutlery and dishes. She wasn't insensitive to the rigors the house imposed on us. There simply weren't means for doing better.

I recall my mother's scorn for the plank floor with which the original part of the house was equipped when she and my father moved into it. I became aware of this because, during summers when my wife, daughter, and I visited my mother in her home, I undertook repairs of various kinds. It seemed when I was working on the house my mother was most contented with me, and forgot, even before her dotage, to plead with me over my recalcitrance toward the commandments. It was as if the family bond had been restored to its primal

condition when I mended screens, painted window sashes, and once, even, helped reshingle the massive roof. One summer I replaced a worn kitchen linoleum with bright blue vinyl tile. I had decided the tile required a smooth underlayment of plywood. This meant that I had to cut away the uneven boards that for many years had served as an underlayment to various linoleums. I borrowed a large chisel and mallet from a nephew and severed each board where it met the wall. Then I ripped it up with a wrecking bar. At one point while this was going on my mother stood in the door leading to the dining room and said with great vehemence, "Give it a good lick! That does my soul so much good to see you tear out those boards. You don't know what it took to persuade your father to let me have a linoleum. He wanted to pour every spare penny into that ranch at Lakeside. What did he care about scrubbing boards? He wasn't the one who had to do it!"

This simple incident revealed much about my parents. I saw in my mother an anger toward my father that most of the time was checked by her enormous respect for him. He had been, after all, her teacher in Snowflake Stake Academy and was esteemed by the citizenry of Navajo County as one of their most accomplished members. Even today, almost fifty years following his death, I meet people who still call him Professor Peterson, though he never held the equivalent of a modern bachelor's degree. And I saw that my father, though undoubtedly possessed of a Victorian gravity and eloquence, was in many ways a mere frontiersman. He really didn't mind that his wife was forced to scrub wood floors.

But I mustn't overdo my mother's resentment of the house. It was her *only* house, and she cherished it next to the people whose presence had made it sacred. Except for a few winters which she spent doing genealogical research in Salt Lake after her retirement from teaching, she lived in the house until, over eighty years old, she became incapable of staying there alone. I will point out that even during the many years when she lived alone, the house was not devoid of loved ones. Sons and daughters lived nearby, and there were parties, dinners, and reunions, to say nothing of successive generations of grandchildren who stayed nights with their affectionate grandmother.

Even in her senility my mother did not forget her house. I think the very frequency with which she moved among the homes of her children reminded her that, removed from her own house, she was an exile. It became her greatest pleasure to have someone take her to her own house and stay with her there for a time. While there, she often revived from the lassitude of her senility, and she cooked, cleaned, and arranged with something like the vigor of her early years. So it

was in September of 1985, three months before my mother died, that my wife, daughter, and I spent a week with her in the house.

When she had stayed with us in Ogden for six weeks during the preceding spring, she had spoken of this promised stay with great anticipation. However, our arrival in the old house in September proved disappointing. The house was terribly dusty, the toilet drained constantly, bedding was soiled by mice, insects possessed the kitchen. Within a day or two, I realized a part of the disappointment we all felt derived from my mother's failing energy. She had looked about the house, had seen how deteriorated it was, and recognized that now, nearing ninety-three, she could not even pretend to attack it with the vigor it had always required. She spent most of the week sitting on the sofa in the dining room, a little morose, I think, and certainly nostalgic. She puttered a little with crocheting an afghan, stirred certain old papers, and sometimes simply sat with her hands in her lap. My wife and I fixed meals, washed dishes, vacuumed, and ran bedding through the washer.

On perhaps the second morning, when I was in the dining room with her, my mother said something that riveted my attention. She sat, as I said, on the sofa. She looked across the room to the door entering the kitchen. "Right there," she said, "was where your father and I completed the ceremony for our second blessing."

"Right where?"

"There. In the doorway to the kitchen. He sat in a chair. I cried. He thought it was because I was humiliated. It wasn't that at all. I cried because it was so sacred."

I was frantic to know more. I dug, I pried, I pleaded. Embarrassed, perhaps feeling derelict in her duty, she would say no more. I was, I admitted to myself, perhaps inordinately consumed by the mystery and had attached more significance to it than it was worth. Nonetheless, as I went about my chores, as I took walks and went grocery shopping, I concentrated intently upon the facts at my command. The ceremony had gone forward in the doorway. My father had sat in a chair; my mother therefore had not been in a chair. But she had not been inert. She had done something which made her weep, and my father had reason to believe she wept from humiliation.

And then, on the next to the last day of our stay, it came to me: she had washed his feet! Christ washed the feet of the ancient apostles. Sometimes the president of the Church, it is said, washes the feet of modern apostles. So my mother had washed my father's feet. I didn't know whether he had also washed hers. Nothing she said indicated that he had.

I see them now, I do not know in what manner of dress. Perhaps it is Sunday morning. Perhaps it is late at night when their children are asleep. She is seven and a half months pregnant with their third child, my brother Roald. My father's bare feet rest on a towel. My mother kneels before him with a basin of water. She tugs at a leg; he lifts it, places a foot in the water; she caresses it with her hands, splashing water. She tugs at the other leg; he places his foot in the water; she washes it too. My mother and father are intensely, almost preternaturally, aware of one another's presence. She is overawed by the feel of his feet; he is overawed by the feel of her hands. Neither can describe the sensation. She sets aside the basin. She takes a towel from around her shoulders and wipes his moist feet. Her tears flow quickly down her cheeks. Never a man for ostentation, he is appalled. He can tolerate her scrubbing wood floors; that is how he conceives a woman's duty, just as he conceives it a man's duty to earn a living. But he cannot accept how submissive this ceremony makes a woman, how exalted it makes a man. He takes her face in his hands and tells her he is sorry. She can't reply, but she knows she has been neither abased nor affronted. Something has descended upon the house. It comes from far away and has no end.

Early on the morning of our last full day at the house, I loaded garbage cans in the back of my station wagon and took my mother for a drive to the county landfill. Junipers stood thick upon the hills, and the sky was immense. I don't know why the sky in northern Arizona is so wide, so blue, so fixed with clouds of silvery white. As we left the landfill, I launched a deceit. I pretended that I knew from other sources the full ritual of the second blessing. I said to my mother, "It's a lovely ceremony, the washing of the feet that follows the second blessing in the temple." My ruse worked. Disarmed by this evidence that I knew, she confirmed my surmise. She spoke of kneeling, of laving, of weeping. She had indeed washed my father's feet.

The next morning, we said goodbye. My sister Mary came to take my mother to her house. My wife, daughter, and I departed for California where I would spend a week at research before returning to Utah. We hugged and kissed my mother and sister, and while they stood in the doorway of the old house we drove away. I never saw my mother alive again. She never spent another night in that old house, and I, as I have said, would spend only one more, the night before her funeral. That night I lay awake a long time thinking about my birth in the house fifty-two years before. It still seems very important to know the precise spot of my birth. On my last visit to Snowflake, I tried to rediscover that precise spot. My wife and I walked here and there on the parking lot that the school district has made of the lot on which the

house stood. "Right about here," I said to my wife, "must be where the bedroom was." I was frustrated when I realized I might have been off four or five feet in my estimate as to where the bed had stood.

My mother collapsed in the house of my sister Lenora in Mesa, Arizona. From the moment she fell to the floor, it was evident she was dead. My brother-in-law Marion knelt beside her and dedicated her to God. Shortly the paramedics arrived and performed their grisly rite of resuscitation. Luckily my mother was beyond them. Perhaps my brother-in-law's prayer had put her there. The dedication of the dying to God is a folk ritual among the Mormons. It is often practiced but not officially defined. Probably the prayer of dedication is more important to the healthy than to the dying. A fervent ritual can domesticate even death, the ultimate terror. I for one took comfort in the fact my brother-in-law had sent forth this emigrant from mortality, our mother, with a heartfelt wish to do her good.

This comfort led me to understand more clearly my satisfaction over having deceived my mother into admitting that she had performed the ritual of washing my father's feet. At first, I hadn't known why I felt so justified in my deceit, why it had seemed so right and essential that she admit to me what the ceremony had consisted of. After her death and burial, I believed I understood. My insistent inquiry, my mother's gradual revelation of the facts, the sudden insight that came to me as my mother prepared to depart the old house forever had taken on a private meaning for me—private in the sense that I'm not sure anyone else will construe it as I do. In my eyes, my mother and I had performed the sacred rite of abandoning the house, and by preparing the house for its demise, we had also performed a ritual of formal farewell to one another.

Authorized rituals are very important among the Mormons, who are generally an obedient people. They want the legitimacy given by protocol and authority. I have a card in my wallet which prescribes the procedures for baptism, confirmation, ordination, and healing. I am instructed by this card that I must invariably declare that I act by the authority of the priesthood and in the name of Jesus Christ. I have no quarrel with authorized rituals. But I believe especially in unauthorized rituals. I am afraid that in authorized rituals more attention is paid to protocol than to emotion.

I admit the ritual which my mother and I performed had, on its surface, no protocol. I can understand those who will say it was no ritual at all because it was performed only once. I think it did have a protocol, though neither my mother nor I understood that fact at the moment of its transpiring. It had a protocol, I now see, because it was so inevitable and so proper. There is a deep cosmic propriety about

any gesture which sanctifies. God loves especially those sanctifying gestures created spontaneously from the exigency of a desperate, loving moment.

Goodbyes are a sanctifying ritual. People shake hands, they give hugs, they kiss. They say, "So long," "See you later," "God be with you till we meet again." Their affection lingers to sanctify the place of goodbye long after they have gone their separate ways. For thirty-five years I frequently exchanged goodbyes with my mother. As she became elderly, I wondered on every occasion whether we were saying our last goodbye. I wondered that again as we pulled away from the old house on that September morning in 1985. It was indeed the last goodbye, and, as I realized later, we had solemnized it by the disclosure of how my mother and father had first lit the flame of holiness in that house. It was a true ritual in which we had engaged. It was a ritual that came so fortuitously as to almost persuade me, a doubter, of a special providence given expressly to me. I will believe God's grace grows abundantly in unexpected places, and the rituals by which human beings avail themselves of that grace are as diverse and irregular as silvery clouds in an Arizona sky.

