

Wild Blossoms of Faith

Mary B. Johnston

WHY DO I BELIEVE? For many years I did not feel comfortable answering this question. I would explain that my ancestors were among the first members of the Mormon Church and were important religious leaders as pioneers and as missionaries. I said this because my relatives, living and dead, have provided me with admirable models of dedication to God, family, and church. I could not have assembled a group of individuals whose integrity, faith in God, and selflessness had inspired me more about the power of righteousness and the possibility for love and cohesiveness in a family. So when asked why I believe, I would explain that belonging to this tradition was central to my happiness, identity, and sense of security.

I also appealed to reason and would try to explain the logical necessity of Christ's atonement, the Godhead as three separate beings, a modern-day prophet, and baptism for the dead. I tried to convince myself and my audience that I had a foolproof belief system. But on some level, both my audience and I sensed that my efforts to justify my belief, though earnest, did not reflect an authentic faith.

I had little difficulty accepting and living a Mormon lifestyle. I had, for example, seen too much sadness come from drinking, smoking, and taking drugs to be tempted to join many of my peers. I was, however, borrowing a tradition and a set of convictions that were not yet really my own. It is convenient and sensible to stay in a church

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when one knows that breaking a strong and successful legacy will scar family relationships. More to the point, if security is at a premium and the idea of being independent and different is frightening, then borrowing someone else's scaffold to build one's own house feels like a wise thing to do. However, to rely on others' experiences and decisions to determine one's own convictions is to live life vicariously.

There was much in the faith of my fathers and mothers that I loved and believed, but I had too many questions and too few personal spiritual experiences. About four years ago, in an effort to discover a richer and more honest life, I undertook a spiritual journey, bound by three requirements. First, I wanted to start with no assumptions, no core beliefs. Second, I would not predetermine where I might or might not find truth. Third, I could claim a belief only if I had personal confirmation of its truthfulness.

These were frightening and liberating standards for a pilgrimage. I let the world be my sanctuary and let my responses be my compass. I hoped I would find truth and God's hand at church, in the scriptures, and during prayer. I did. But even more compelling was that almost everywhere I looked, I was brought to my knees in gratitude for the extravagant abundance of spiritual truths I discovered. Capturing these truths in words is a task beyond my limits. My feelings reach past the edge of my logic and transcend the boundaries of organized religion—so what I share here are wild blossoms of faith, not a canonized, ordered bouquet.

I began my journey by talking with people from all different faiths and visiting their services. Rather than comparing and contrasting Mormon beliefs and practices to whatever I observed, I tried to be true to these requirements: What moved me? What felt true? At the African Methodist Episcopal Church, I found black gospel music, which—more than any other religious music I have heard—pierced my heart and filled my whole being with its melodic, impassioned prayers to God. The sermons there began softly and slowly and then crescendoed to a thunderclap, opening my heart to the word of God. I listened attentively because the method of delivery awakened my senses and gave me ears to hear. The spontaneous “amens,” “alleluias,” and applause from the audience gave sound to my reverence for God. Partaking of this new type of spiritual language and ritual helped me return to my own chapel to see the familiar, but now fresh, beauty and power of Mormon hymns, sacrament, and prayers.

Another adventure enriched me spiritually. Last summer I participated in a service project in Poland. Side by side with 120 people from Japan, Africa, Thailand, India, Syria, Australia, and Europe (representing varieties of Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and

Buddhism), I dug ditches to supply a water system for a small Polish village. The Lord blessed us in our efforts to break down barriers created by cultural, political, and religious differences. Israeli Jews worked, ate, and sang with Muslims from the Middle East. Despite the years of bloodshed because of their conflicting religious and political beliefs, they learned, with difficulty, to embrace one another.

Other barriers came down too. One evening a Ugandan, a Kenyan, and a Cameroonian told of their respective countries' histories of oppression while under white colonial rule. A white American woman began crying, for although she was thirty-five, she had never been taught this side of African history. She wept at her ignorance and at her own country's history of ugly racism. The black Africans expressed their love for her and then turned to a white South African woman and said, "You are also an African. You are also our sister." I beheld the power of forgiveness, a divine principle for which Christ bled.

Let me relate another story. Sharif, a Muslim from Syria, was my companion on many afternoon walks after we finished our work. We shared our experiences of fasting, praying, reading the scriptures, learning from prophets—and in the process developed a deep spiritual kinship. One day I told him how I struggled to feel connected to God when I prayed. Sharif explained to me how his spiritual teachers taught him to focus mind and body on God. A few days later, all 120 of us dedicated a day to silent prayer and contemplation. I tried what Sharif had suggested. I experienced a holy festival in my heart that day because of the intimacy I felt with God. Though I had heard about prayer all my life and had mouthed words to God in public and private, it took a Muslim man from Damascus to teach me how to unlock heaven's gate with faithful, reverent prayers.

When I returned to my own Mormon congregation in the United States, I could testify that God's hand reaches to touch the whole world with its sweet pressure, and his voice resonates in the throats of many worshipers. Though our paths and theologies may differ, I knew that all the friends I met in Poland yearned to be righteous, to serve humanity, and to feel God's presence in their lives. As I learned from people of other religions, my love and respect for them and their faiths grew, as did my commitment to and appreciation of my own religion.

My quest also called me to the streets. In offering community service there, I found miracles. In homeless shelters I met people who had committed grievous sins, had repented, and now relied on the Lord to give them strength and hope to carry on in a painful recovery process. This reliance humbled me and took me to my knees to find a similar devotion.

One evening I felt particularly discouraged when I arrived at a shelter. David, a dynamic thirty year old going through the drug rehabilitation program, sensed my mood and asked how I was. I was taken aback, as I was usually the one to ask that question. But I found that I wanted to talk. I shared with David my feelings of loneliness and discouragement. In turn he told me how he had turned to Christ. While earning money as a pimp and drug dealer, he had come very close one day to killing a man. Realizing how corrupt he had become, he knew he had to change. Unemployed, illiterate, and drug addicted, he felt hopeless. As a first step toward change, he decided to learn to read. The tutor he found chose the Bible as their text. Almost immediately David began to read and then to recite verses. The more he read, the more evil habits he eschewed. He rejoiced in his change of heart, in Christ's infinite compassion, and in his opportunity to share his witness of his Savior's grace. And as he related his story, rich in metaphors lifted from Old Testament prophets, I felt as though God had sent me a modern-day psalmist to sing a comforting song of salvation.

A month after our discussion, David moved to a halfway house where he could receive further treatment. A few weeks later, I called to arrange a visit. Much to my disappointment, I learned that David had relapsed and had been expelled from the program. There was no way to locate him, no way to know how he was. I could only have faith that his conviction and Christ's love would somehow continue to work a change in his heart.

While such experiences move me deeply, nothing compares with the joy I feel as I watch my high school students serve in the community. Alone and in small groups, they tutor school children, visit guests at shelters, take care of children with AIDS, and volunteer at hospitals. Over the past five years, they have helped more than one hundred service organizations. These young people learn to consecrate their lives to others and mitigate their fears and prejudices of people whose economic status, education, health, nationality, and habits may differ from their own. I see my own capacity to listen, empathize, and counsel improve. I feel the power of Christ with me as I do this work. His fearless service and ministry—healing lepers, associating with social and political outcasts, forgiving an adulteress, asking a tax collector to be an apostle—made him unpopular and endangered him. His teachings and atonement, both evidence of his unconditional love for all of his brothers and sisters, give us hope in our own striving for personal change and salvation.

Most important, his example invites us to consecrate our lives to serving in order to help break such barriers as class, race, and nation-

ality. As our love for others deepens, we begin to fathom the Father and the Son's love and concern for all of us. Then indeed we are pressing forward with steadfastness in Christ, with a perfect brightness of hope guided by a love for our Lord and for humanity.

Today, more than four years after my journey began in earnest, I rejoice in the opportunity to say why I believe. When I pray, I am often filled with light and inner peace. When I read the scriptures, their words emblazon truths in my heart. When I meet members of other faiths, I learn from their convictions, experiences, and wisdom and share my insights with them. When I feel the depth of my parents' love for me, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for such a gift and begin to understand how much God and Christ must love me. These are the divine experiences that now fill my life. Finally I know that God lives. I feel his power and love flow through me almost every time I ask to know he is there. I see now that all matters can be spiritual. Studying and teaching literature, building friendships, resolving conflicts with colleagues, fasting for a loved one, recovering from a serious illness, and raising children; the list is endless. All these activities can be spiritual because they can involve the Lord's hand; have healing, sanctifying powers; and give us a glimpse of our own and others' divine potential.

And what of my original questions and doubts about Mormonism? Some have been solved, others now seem insignificant, a handful remain, and a few new ones have surfaced. My guess is that questions and doubts will always be part of the luggage I carry with me on my journey. I also suppose that Mormon chapels, Muslim Mosques, African Methodist Episcopal churches, Quaker meetinghouses, and homeless shelters will continue to offer me wild blossoms of faith.