

# Glimmers and Glitches in Zion

Brian J. Fogg

AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD MORMON can tell you a lot about Zion. At least I could. In response to Sister Jensen's questions in Targeteer class, I'd raise my hand to give my rote answer: "Zion is a people of one heart and one mind. They dwell in righteousness and have no poor among them." I probably didn't understand words like *dwell* and *among*, but my voice rang through the classroom with assurance and authority.

Answers about Zion came easily then. But now that I've mastered *dwell* and *among*, I find the other concepts—like *one heart* and *no poor*—even more difficult. Those words cling to the back of my throat and march only haltingly off my tongue. Still, I cannot deny the ideas are there, ideas about a perfect society. How could the joyful songs of Zion not resonate through my veins? Zion is in my blood.

*We will sing of Zion, Kingdom of our God.  
Zion is the pure in heart, Those who seek the Savior's part.  
Zion soon in all the world Will rise to meet her God.  
(Hymn #47)*

On every branch of my family tree, I've got what Mormons might call a "pioneer heritage." Five generations ago my ancestors left their homes and earthly belongings to follow Brigham Young and trek West with the Saints. Once they arrived, the pioneers tried to build a new society. They tamed the Salt Lake Valley. They built a temple. They practiced polygamy.

Today much of that seems fuzzy to me, like the bedtime stories my mother would read me from pioneer diaries. Sitting on the edge of my

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bed, Mom told of pioneer women who buried their young by the side of the trail, then moved on. She read about small boys—just my age—whose frozen toes had to be sliced off. She spoke of men who lost their oxen, but then miraculously found them again. This was my heritage.

I believe this heritage of idealism and activism has led me to places like a recent rally on campus. In front of cameras and a crowd, I spoke bravely into a microphone. As the publisher of an independent student magazine, I pledged our support to the campus recycling movement. But what had seemed a friendly crowd suddenly turned hostile. “Will you run a recycling symbol on the cover?” someone shouted.

“It’s a design complication, but I’ll check on it,” I promised.

“Will you print only on recycled paper?” “How many articles on recycling will your staff write?” “How many public service announcements?” The pressure came from the same people who’d stood alongside me two weeks before as we protested the pollution from Geneva Steel. Their attacks didn’t seem fair: I was the one who made the protest posters. I was the one who ran a cover story on pollution in Utah. I was the one who received two phone calls that threatened my life.

I no longer tell my parents about those moments in the spotlight. Too many appearances in the local press—articles that somehow found their way to California—caused them once to joke, “Couldn’t you change your last name?” They laughed uncomfortably, wondering where they had gone wrong. Perhaps it was the “hippie summer school” they sent me to when I was four. Every morning Mom dropped me off at the Fresno Arts Center for classes in drama, crafts, ecology, and music. Susan, my art teacher, wore her long brown hair in braids. In her hand, a paintbrush became a magic wand. Carl, my other teacher, played the guitar as we sat crosslegged on the floor and sang the words he’d taught us.

*Slow down; you move too fast.*

*Ya gotta make the morning last.*

*Just, kicking down the cobblestones,*

*Looking for fun and feeling groovy.*

*(Simon and Garfunkel)*

I sang enthusiastically and swayed gently to the enticing rhythm of Carl’s guitar. And I somehow felt guilty. I wasn’t supposed to feel groovy; Mormons aren’t groovy people.

One day, as part of their not-so-subtle indoctrination, Susan and Carl helped us make necklaces. On the way home I showed Mom how I’d strung the yellow yarn through the clay pendant. She looked at it closely. One side had a peace sign etched into it; the other side said

“Zero Population.” I asked what that meant but didn’t understand Mom’s answer. (She would soon be expecting the fifth of seven children.) The next day I looked everywhere for my new necklace, but it was gone.

Even though my family was never groovy, Fresno gave us some consolation. The Saints welcomed us warmly to their corner of Zion, and they taught us to harvest raisins—before raisins were cool, before they danced on TV wearing sunglasses and singing soul. In Fresno, as in many parts of the world, the Church operates a welfare farm. In other places the Saints pick apples, grow potatoes, or package Jello; in Fresno we harvest raisins.

On the first Saturday in September, our corner of Zion gathers: hundreds of San Joaquin Valley Saints get up before the sun and make a pilgrimage to the vineyards. A few families are assigned to each row, and the work begins. Facing the morning chill with dew dripping from the leaves, making your first cut into the dense grape clusters, squashing a few loose berries under your jeans every time you kneel, seeing your hands turn dirty black and sticky sweet—the work seems endless. “Remember to pick from post to post, brothers and sisters,” Brother Thorup barks down the rows. And slowly the Saints progress.

The Church welfare farm is a great leveler. Lawyers and doctors and politicians work shoulder to shoulder with school custodians and truck drivers. For the few Saints who are farm laborers, this is just another day of work; their speed and agility make the rest of us look silly. For this one day of the year, Brother Snow takes a grapeknife in his hand instead of a surgeon’s scalpel. Brother Perkins, the lawyer, judiciously pours pan after pan of grapes onto paper trays for drying in the sun. Bishop Lambert, a dentist, clears vines for Sister Higbee, pausing to ask if she got that new job she applied for. The Medina family works through their row so quickly we lose sight of them; they finish and return to give the rest of us a hand.

*The Church has need of helping hands,  
And hearts that know and feel.  
The work to do is here for you;  
Put your shoulder to the wheel.*

(Hymn #252)

The Mormon grape harvest happens in a blink of an eye (much to the dismay of neighboring farmers). We fulfill our ward assignment in the early afternoon and then help other wards finish theirs. Once we’ve picked acres and acres of grapes and set them out on brown paper to shrivel in the San Joaquin sun, we relax together. We sheath our knives, take off our bandanas, and shake hands to congratulate ourselves. We

eat cold watermelon and spit the seeds on the ground. We catch grapes in our mouths and balance big bunches on our heads. We laugh with our mouths open wide and our heads thrown back. And then our utopia ends: we wash our hands, nest our grapepans, and drive home to play our old roles for another year.

For me the welfare farm seems a symbolic remnant of the early Saints' dreams. My mother once directed Carol Lynn Pearson's musical about the experimental societies in frontier Utah. *The Order Is Love* tells about struggling Saints in southern Utah, sent by Brigham Young to establish the United Order, a community where everyone gives according to their abilities and everyone receives according to their needs. The Saints in Orderville tried to live selflessly, despite human foibles. I still remember the closing scene: After eleven years Brigham Young has stopped the experiment in Orderville. Many of the Saints are packing up to leave as Ezra, the noble leader, comes on stage.

Ezra (enters, downcast): It isn't easy—to see it go.

(Sings)

I saw a world where every man's a brother,  
I saw a world where every man would share.  
A world where not one soul  
Was left alone or cold,  
A world where every man  
Was loved, and clothed, and fed.

(Speaks)

It was good, wasn't it? Everyone out in the fields and in the shops—working for all of us together and not just for his own.

...  
We failed—but then again we didn't fail. Gradually, folks'll get themselves ready to live like real brothers. And we've been a step along the way. When it finally happens, it'll be wonderful.

The musical was a success, but the United Order failed, not only in Orderville, but in one hundred other small communities.

In spite of these failures, the Church continued to grow, largely because of the missionary efforts of faithful Saints. When I turned nineteen, I too accepted the prophet's call to serve a mission. Here I saw my chance to bring Zion to southern Peru. After two months studying in the MTC, I felt nervous but ready—ready not because I could teach simple gospel principles and welfare lessons in Spanish, but because of something less tangible. Perhaps it was the BYU fifteen-stake fireside I attended three days before leaving Provo. After Elder Gordon B. Hinckley spoke, we new missionaries, all two thousand of us seated together, rose in unison—a huge sea of dark suits, conservative ties, and short hair—and together we sang.

*Ye elders of Israel, come join now with me  
 And seek out the righteous, where e're they may be—  
 In desert, on mountain, on land or on sea—  
 And bring them to Zion, the pure and the free.*

*(Hymn #319)*

One burning heart, one joyful voice, one mighty force. That night I couldn't sleep, didn't want to. I sought to savor that feeling, archive it away for future reference: "*And bring them to Zion, the pure and the free!*"

I spent two years walking the dirt roads of Peru, the dust so thick that it often baptized my shoes. I lived and worked most often among the poor, people who had no electricity or running water. And I met families—large families—who survived on the same amount I used to give the Church in tithing. My indulgences—a clean white shirt every day, a silk tie—embarrassed me. I began to feel uneasy about the luxury-laden packages I got from home and the avenues of escape my Visa card offered. Each time I pulled on a pair of cashmere socks or charged dinner on the town, I tried to forget about Brother Chalco, who gathered boulders from the riverbed for two dollars a day. Sunrise to sunset. The economic disparity between my life and the Peruvians' met me around every corner, in every doorway. Because I felt helpless to ease the financial suffering of everyone, I never opened my wallet to anyone. Besides, I told myself, the mission had rules about not giving handouts.

Then one day I confronted my own immense fallibility, something I couldn't blame on mission policies. That day shook my confidence, made me wonder if I qualified for even the crumbs that fell from Zion's table. My companion and I were headed to an appointment in the center of Ilo, a small Peruvian fishing town. As we hurried to meet with a new investigator, an old man sitting against a doorway reached his weathered, brown hand out to us. I'd seen him before. This was the man without legs who moved from place to place by propping his body stump on a skateboard and pushing himself along with his knuckles. My companion and I passed quickly by him; we were in a hurry for a first discussion, maybe another name to add to our teaching pool. Although I heard the old man plead, "*Hermano, por favor . . .*," I didn't break stride; I—the precocious district leader, who had dedicated two years of his life to build Zion up—didn't even glance down.

Two intersections later, I stopped suddenly. I looked back up the hill. "What is it, Elder?" my companion said.

"Uh, nothing. I . . . just thought I lost something back there." I turned and walked on, too embarrassed and rattled to explain.

A few minutes later, we knocked at the new family's door. No answer. We knocked again. Nothing. My companion wanted to wait awhile; this family was golden, he said. While he read scriptures, I stared across the street at people going in and out of the post office, wishing I could trade places with any one of them, even wishing I could be one of the shoeshine boys who slept there in the park. After fifteen minutes, we gave up and left. For the first time, I was pleased no one had opened the door. I knew I had nothing to teach, nothing to share. I wondered if I ever could call myself a representative of Jesus Christ again. If I wasn't willing to minister to those who suffered most, what in the hell was I doing on a mission?

As we walked away from the unanswered door, I told my disappointed companion that I needed to buy some envelopes—my ploy to lead us back up the street where the old beggar sat. This time I would stop. I would squat down beside him. I would ask his name and shake his dusty hand. My fingers would feel the hardened knuckles that propelled him through the streets. I would ask God to help me do the right thing.

But the doorway was empty; the man was gone.

My mission seems long past, almost as long ago as the Targeteer class where I first announced my understanding of Zion. Since then my experiences with attempted utopias continue to be disheartening. I've worked on a Kibbutz in Israel, clearing drip-irrigation lines in the banana fields. The work was strenuous and—worst of all—boring. We started before sunrise and finished before noon. Then we were free. We could eat our fill without price, swing from a rope into the Jordan River, or skinny-dip in the Sea of Galilee. But we never were a real part of their community. The kibbutzniks paid us a dollar a day, and we wore our own shoes, not the leather sandals issued by the kibbutz.

In the People's Republic of China, I visited a carpet factory. I saw the worn wooden bench where Chinese citizens would—in theory—sit for their entire working lives, tying the same knot, over and over and over. One carpet might require an entire year's work. Western tourists would then buy the carpets for a few hundred dollars, and the citizens would start on a new loom. To enjoy their own carpet in their own home: impossible. Everything belonged to the state: the factory, the bench, the loom, the yarn, their tired fingers, their children, and even their dreams—all for the benefit of the state.

In India I sat a full day by the River Ganges and watched the pilgrims bathe, drinking in the holiness. They all seemed to have their own rituals—chants, washings, prayers—yet all were entranced. In the late afternoon, a young Indian explained to me the meaning of the burning pyre nearby and reminded me not to take photographs.

He was of the Brahmin caste and would soon inherit a silk factory on the other side of the river. It was his lot, he said; the untouchables had theirs.

I now bring these glimmers and glitches in building an ideal society to the other side of the Sunday School lesson manual. Tomorrow I'm scheduled to teach lesson #22, "Zion Will Yet Arise," and I'm afraid. Afraid that the manual as written will evoke only simplistic rote responses, like my Targeteer mantra: "Zion is a people of one heart and one mind. They dwell in righteousness and have no poor among them."

I now know what these words mean—well, at least what the dictionary says they mean. Perhaps that's why I've restructured the lesson into an open discussion, where my class can teach me what they know about Zion. I'll ask them to help me learn to perform those songs of Zion that are in my blood, to help me amplify those joyful notes that beat in my heart but so often fail to echo off my fingertips. I don't expect that we'll discover all the answers tomorrow, but I won't be surprised if an honest discussion confirms what I've found: That Zion is as enticing as a strummed guitar but as arduous as lifting boulders from a riverbed; that Zion is as sweet as plump grapes on the vine but as fleeting as a weathered hand that begs.