

Liberal Spirituality: A Personal Odyssey

L. Jackson Newell

The broad ethics of Jesus were quickly narrowed to village theologies, which preached an election or favoritism. . . . So far as a man thinks, he is free.

—Emerson

Now let us frankly face the fact that our culture is one which is geared in many ways to help us evade any need to face this inner, silent self.

—Thomas Merton

“LIBERAL SPIRITUALITY” IS THE TITLE and theme of this essay. A double entendre is intended—suggesting the interdependence of a *free* and *abundant* spiritual life. My aim is to explore the nature and possibilities of liberal spirituality by reflecting on some of the key experiences and major ideas that have shaped my philosophy. I am concerned here with the essential values at the core of religious experience, a state of mind and an approach to life. The Mormon church has been but one of the anvils against which I have forged my identity.

CONTRASTING LEGACIES

A Latter-day Saint heritage—family and church—can be powerful and good. Temple-centered, missionary-disciplined, and authority-anchored, there is a vision and structure to it that often gives meaning and strength to peoples’ lives. Our son Eric, a missionary in Louisiana’s bayou country, is seeing the transformative power of this theology and culture as he works with prospective members and new converts to Mormonism there. “The

church is certainly different here than it is in Utah," he writes, "people change so much when they find some direction for their lives." He notices joy in eyes that seemed vacant only weeks or months before.

Among my Utah-born, Mormon-bred friends, I see the blessings of such conversions generations back down the family tree. Some of them represent Mormon traditions and culture at its best. In their lives I see generosity of spirit, devotion to the well-being of others, self-discipline, loyalty to the church, and much more. It is all there, it is all tied together, and it springs from a noble (for the most part) pioneer legacy. This way of life is often reinforced by a powerful family ethic. I recently wrote such a friend, our pediatrician and now our bishop, Ted Evans: "Whether up a generation or down a generation, people like you make the Mormon community work. You inspire me, you have blessed our family in many ways, and you make the world a better place. I owe you a great debt." I know this culture well—after thirty years it is mine too—and I love and respect it.

I sprang from a very different heritage, but a similarly powerful and good one. Mother's family was largely Catholic, Dad's mainly Protestant, and our Ohio home was the gathering place for scores of Wahlenmaiers and Newells scattered across the midwest and beyond. Mother and Dad welded them all together as one big, loving family, and we children were taught—by example and by precept—to judge others by the content of their character, not the contour of their theology.

My school and community reflected the religious diversity within my family. One-quarter of my classmates were staunch members of the Church of the Brethren or Dunkard Brethren (akin to the Amish), while some were Catholic, and many were one sort of Protestant or another. We were among the latter; that is, sort of Protestant. There was no dominant religion among my classmates, nor were there divisions among children based on church affiliation.

Dad's father earned his Bachelor of Divinity degree from Bonebrake Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, and was ordained a Methodist minister there in his late thirties. Shortly thereafter, doctors concluded that Grandmother had tuberculosis and, in the interest of her health, they advised the young family to go west. Within weeks my grandparents pulled up stakes and moved with their four young sons to Colorado. In the autumn of 1902 no Protestant church near Denver lacked a pastor, so Granddad resumed what he had known best as a youth, carpentry and farming.

Shortly before Grandmother died in 1907, Granddad homesteaded in the Rockies in the shadow of mighty Longs Peak. She had chosen the place. Granddad built a successful ranch and farm operation, raised his four sons alone, and for many years preached as a Sunday circuit rider in remote

frontier settlements. Thomas VanBuren Newell died with his boots on at age 95. I was in college at the time, and I revered him.

Dad emerged from this heritage, hopped the Burlington Express Railroad to Ohio in 1919, and enrolled at Otterbein College. He later studied medicine at Ohio State University and practiced medicine in New York and Dayton for fifty years. Three of Dad's six siblings (two brothers and a sister were born after Granddad remarried in his sixties) also earned doctoral degrees. This is the Newell family saga, just like the handcarts belong to many of you.

Mother's influence was equally compelling. Her mother was Catholic; her father, Protestant. Grandmother died when Mother was seven. On her deathbed, responding to the competing pleas of Catholic and Protestant kinfolk to let them raise Mother according to their religious persuasions, Grandmother stated flatly: "I don't care what religion Henrietta follows, I just want her to grow up to be a good woman."

Protestant Grandfather deferred to the wishes of his in-laws, and Mother agreed to attend the Catholic church at least through catechism—the course of doctrinal study then completed a youth's early teens. Mother made good on her end of the bargain, but, following her Catechism passage at thirteen, she declared her religious independence and forged her own faith. Weary of doctrinal contentions, she opted instead for a deep personal spirituality that exuded reverence for God, for life, and for learning.

Mother earned a bachelor's degree at Ohio State University, took a master's from Stanford University in 1927, and returned to Ohio as a school teacher and clinical professor. A seemingly universal acceptance and unselfish service to others defined her personal and professional existence. When Ohio State initiated its Distinguished Alumni awards in her college in 1952, Mother was the first to receive that honor. This is my Wahlenmaier heritage.

From both sides of my family, then, I inherited a passion for freedom, a love of education, and a sense of obligation to enhance the dignity of human life. My liberal spirituality, and that of my family, arose primarily from a love of noble ideals—justice, mercy, forgiveness, equality, and truth—rather than from religious doctrines or church leaders.

Obedience to authority was never held up as a value, though respect for others, including authorities, surely was. Where an LDS child typically grows up with "Follow the brethren!" I grew up with "Do what you believe is right!" These are sharply contrasting principles.

Mother, my two sisters, and I went to the local Methodist church almost every Sunday, but it was the inspiration of great hymns, the camaraderie with good friends, and the insights from an occasional fine sermon that kept us going. At home, we talked about ideas and principles over dinner and noted how they affected the actions of public figures, neighbors, and

friends. We had a keen sense of gratitude for what we knew and how we lived, despite our share of tragedies. Tears of joy were natural among us; tears from grief the same. Stoic Dad excepted.

The distant heroes in my childhood home were Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, Helen Keller and Eleanor Roosevelt, Douglas MacArthur and Mohandas Gandhi (now there is diversity). The intimate heroes were my grandparents, several aunts and uncles, and . . . professors. Mother and Dad both told splendid stories about the professors who had inspired them with a love of truth and a concern for the human condition.

I had similarly powerful experiences as an undergraduate, first through the self-governing and self-sufficient community of unique Deep Springs College, then as a senior at Ohio State University in Harold Grimm's history courses on the European Renaissance and Protestant Reformation. Professor Grimm raised my sights and fired my imagination. I walked out of his classes knowing who I was and what I wanted to become.

Given my background, my choice of profession may not surprise you, though my conversion to the LDS church as a Duke University graduate student might. But it shouldn't. Joining the Mormon church was a natural outgrowth of a youthful search for truth, a college roommate, Richard Haynie, whose Mormon home had been much like my own, and an LDS church presidency that included a vigorous David O. McKay and Hugh B. Brown. It all fit together: I was religiously liberal (though politically conservative at the time) and so were the Mormons I knew best—as well as those who spoke for the church. That was thirty years ago.

SEARCH FOR MEANING

I turn now to another stream of thought and experience that has influenced my perspective on contemporary culture and lent strength to my notion of liberal spirituality. Having taught college students for twenty-eight years—through the Great Society, the Vietnam War and Civil Rights Movement, Watergate, Reaganomics, and the Gulf War—I have seen (arranged alphabetically) altruism, cynicism, hedonism, idealism, radicalism, and every other “-ism” on the faces and in the actions of my students. Through my students, as well as through the history, education, and human values we study together, I have seen the twentieth-century crisis-of-confidence across a wide spectrum. That modern culture is, to an alarming degree, mired in materialism and spiritually starved, I have no doubt.

No, I do not look back to the halcyon days of an earlier and better time, nor, with Walt Whitman,¹ do I believe that human nature changes for the

1. From “Song of Myself” in *Leaves of Grass* I have often found perspective

better or for the worse. For one thing I see inspiring examples of community-mindedness and love-for-others every day, often among my students—representing a wide range of religious and nonreligious beliefs. But we in our time are struggling mightily to comprehend our place in the universe after several centuries of revolutionary advances in knowledge, technology, and economic production.

Who can look around this nation or the globe today without seeing the growing chasms between rich and poor, illusion and reality, spiritual values and socio-economic facts. Some scramble for fortunes, others simply to survive, but few are spared the ache of doubting their worth, their direction, or our collective future.

Rapid change and social instability frequently precipitate a flight to the extremes of religious fundamentalism and political fanaticism on the one hand, and of cynicism and alienation on the other. Evidences of both of these polarities are everywhere within the LDS leadership and membership, just as they are everywhere else.² Abandoning the middle ground of *reason, trust, and hope* augers ill for human dignity, democratic institutions, and genuine spirituality.

Many scholars and social critics have tried to make sense of contemporary affairs. Among them, two have offered ideas and perspectives that provide especially useful insights to me as a teacher and as a person. What follows is a short ramble through the works of Joseph Campbell and Ernest Becker, with references to related thinkers and illustrations from my own experience. Campbell and Becker are important to me not because their logic or evidence are airtight but because they continue to stimulate my thinking and raise questions I like to ponder.

LIFE AS HEROIC JOURNEY

Having read Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* several times (and other books by and about him), I am increasingly impressed with the sweep of his knowledge and the power of his insights concerning human nature.³ Joseph Campbell died in 1987, in his early eighties, ac-

in these lines: "There was never any more inception than there is now, nor any more youth or age than there is now, and will never be any more perfection than there is now, nor any more heaven or hell than there is now."

2. A friend read a draft of this essay and remarked that church *leaders* are not found on the cynical side of this divide. I disagree. For example, naming an official (but secret) group charged with collecting personal information and keeping secret files on liberal members of the church "The Committee to Strengthen the Membership" is an unmistakably cynical and ironic act.

3. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ): Princeton

claimed as the world's foremost authority on the myths and tales of human civilizations. Throughout history, Campbell claimed, myths have cropped up all over the world about the origins of life, the nature of our existence, and the struggle to find meaning in our individual lives. These myths reveal a surprisingly common vision of the purpose and meaning of human life. They have instructed us as individuals, and they have bound tribes and societies together. These culture-conveying stories appear in the oral traditions of "primitive" tribes, in the teachings of the prophets of the world's great religions, and in the celebrated literature (including sacred scriptures) of every society. Campbell regards the common insights at the core of these myths as "messages from the cosmos." In this regard, his conclusions parallel those of philosopher Huston Smith who wrote the classic comparative study, *The Religions of Man*.

What are these seemingly universal myths, and what messages do they convey? They tell us that life in this world is full of dangers and opportunities, that it is temporary, that "another world" (lasting and spiritual in nature) exists beyond this one—and that we get to it by mastering challenges we face here. If we attain the highest consciousness possible in this life, which we might call wisdom, then we get a glimpse of the world beyond.

Joseph Campbell also believes, with Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung (especially Jung, who saw dreams as messages that our subconscious sends forth to help us comprehend our problems), that our subconscious minds harbor versions of eternal archetypes for living—images that are distorted by our unique personal experiences since birth. The role of myths and theologies, therefore, is to provide more pure versions of the universal archetypes that lurk foggily in our minds. (Plato would, no doubt, be pleased.)

At the moment that our personal visions snap into focus and synchronize with the "true forms," we transcend our individual and parochial limitations and gain an unbounded consciousness. This is "the moment of release" from our individualistic imprisonment into universal experience. Campbell describes this experience as "moving from the morals of one's time to the morals of one's art." Campbell continues, "Where we had thought to be alone, we will be with the whole world . . . life is henceforth enjoyed as the encasement of eternity."

Others, too, have captured this exquisite idea. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his 1841 essay, "The Over-Soul," about "that Unity . . . within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all others; that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship,

University Press, 1972). Also see Campbell's *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains everyone to pass for what he is, and to speak for his own character and not from his tongue."⁴ Catholic mystic Thomas Merton, in his essay "Love and Solitude," claims that "He is truly alone who is wide open to heaven and earth and closed to no one." Yet "our projects, our exploitations, and our machinery" have alienated us from both heaven and earth.⁵

Whatever the words used or the explanations offered, the peaks in our consciousness that transcend our mental and physical boundaries are the essence of spirituality, and those who experience them—be they Christian or Jew, Muslim or agnostic—describe a reordering of their values and priorities and a feeling of freedom beyond freedom. Where and how are such epiphanies achieved?

According to Campbell, each of us embarks on a life journey that is all our own. But our separate journeys have common steps. The world's great myths all describe these steps by telling of heroes' lives. The stories may be about real people (Mohammed or Brigham Young) or fictitious characters (Greek gods or characters in novels), but they all reveal the elements of a successful life in a similar way. The insights contained in these myths are the "messages from the cosmos" bearing moral truths; they are the substance of wisdom. Campbell uses the phrase, "the hero with a thousand faces," to remind us that every human being dreams dreams for her future and faces challenges and fears in his life that are unique. Yet each of us faces tasks that demand courage and perseverance, and each of us may negotiate our journey successfully. Agony and grief, Campbell claims, "is being without an inner call or an outer doctrine."

How do we avoid such misery? What are the elements of a successful life journey? This is how Campbell and others describe the milestones along the trail:

Loss of Innocence. At this initial stage, we discover that the world is not as it should be, that no one is perfect, and that life isn't fair. We encounter unanticipated ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies. Insecurity, fear, and terror enter our lives, starting with early childhood and mounting in scope. Fears of death, injury, failure, humiliation—they all haunt us. We lose our bearings and our confidence wanes; we are "out of synch." Accidents happen. Our subconscious harbors these demons, seeming to hold onto them even as our conscious mind treasures our cherished memories. We have nightmares, anxiety attacks, and turn to various, often self-destructive

4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1982), 206.

5. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985).

tive, means to escape our discomfort. William Perry has traced this slide into the pit with unusual insight.⁶

The Summons or Call. Sooner or later, we hear a call from within ourselves to “venture into the dark forest,” to carry out our dangerous mission or do a specific and difficult piece of work. This inner summons urges us to reach beyond our safety zone, our comfortable limits. If we take courage and accept the challenge, the gods will assist us. Refuse the call, and we become victims. If we falter, opportunity will pass—perhaps never to return. Growth and wisdom will escape us.

As Emerson and Merton reminded us, when we are most completely in solitude we suddenly become aware of our connectedness to everyone and everything else in the universe. But you have to get beyond the clatter of this world to hear these voices and sense these connections. One’s summons or call ushers from within, but some believe it is prompted by ethereal contacts between our minds and the larger consciousness. If we answer the call, our heroic journey begins.

The Threshold, the Battle, and the Initiation. Demons await us in the forest, and the guardians of the deep lurk behind obstacles. Armed with courage and knowledge, we cross the threshold and challenge these monsters—whether they be real or imagined. Now in harmony with the forces of the cosmos, we discover that “hidden hands assist us” and we find a way to prevail, though the battle may be long and pitched. Our enemies the demons finally recognize our heroic qualities, come to respect our courage and perseverance, and accept us. We are then initiated into a new world, a higher level of experience.

The Triumph. Having successfully negotiated the dark forest, we are reborn and “released” to move freely and without fear to explore and understand the world beyond our previous horizons. This is a peak experience, an atonement, in that we become “at one” with the universe. The former self, racked with anxiety and preoccupied with conflict, “dies,” and the new self is born. This emerging hero surrenders herself or himself humbly to truth and love, and gradually ceases to struggle with the dualistic conflicts that, until now, loomed so prominently in life.

Asian religion and philosophy offer insights here as we overcome the Cartesian dualism (the split between mind and matter, facts and values) on which the Western World built its scientific and technological mastery. Merton described the epiphany one experiences when basic polarities are resolved as an “explosion which happens as all opposites clash within oneself.”⁷

6. William G. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1970).

7. Merton, 10.

A CREDO OF LIBERAL SPIRITUALITY

The "explosion" Merton describes creates a new spiritual and mental synthesis that defines the credo of liberal spirituality:

—Life and death are interrelated, each leading to the other.

—The divine and the human are no longer separate, but divinity can dwell in every soul.

—Work and play lose their distinction as our work becomes our pleasure.

—Leading and following are inseparable acts (the master must be the servant).

—Freedom cannot be attained without self-discipline.

—Stability is not possible without reasonable change; reasonable change is not possible without stability.

—Communities cannot be healthy unless their members are genuinely free and individuality is respected.

—Loyalty may demand criticism; criticism may be an act of loyalty.

—Liberty and equality, seemingly opposites, must be joined in the interests of justice and mercy.

—Terror can be the precursor of joy.

—Teaching and learning are inseparably connected.

—The child returns to live in the adult, as wonder and awe return to the soul.

—Blessings may come disguised as curses.

—Our body, mind, and spirit are no longer at odds with one another, but in each other's service.

—Other human beings can no longer be classified easily as educated or ignorant, friends or foes, good or bad—though there are certainly good and evil acts.

When this mental and spiritual transformation occurs, heaven and earth are joined, our inner and outer worlds merge, we are in harmony with the universe. Reaching this understanding is the triumph.

The Return. To know and to understand are not sufficient: wisdom joins truth with action. The hero's final task is to return to the world as it exists, but to live in it according to his or her wisdom. Personal integrity requires living among—and loving—people who accept other assumptions and rules, but fully honoring your own principles, your hard-won understanding. Whether this return brings anonymity or fame is now beside the point; success is internal, joy is internal, and the hero has completed his or her journey.

The returned hero will "make his or her offering" (make a difference), whether it is widely recognized by contemporaries or not. Mother Teresa is famous, Otto and Rosa Schloss (my ninety-year-old neighbors who

sponsored seven refugee families on custodian's wages) are not. Each has changed the world for the better, neither measures success by what others notice. The hero may fear dying, but not death. The universe is a friendly place; another world awaits.

LIVING IN OUR TIME

How do these notions inform our lives and our times? How do we know today, in this era that has so discounted and discarded myths, what our journey entails? Where do young people learn what a good life will require of them? In the past, theologies and cultural myths provided the patterns and taught essential moral truths—though each child faced unique struggles and was ultimately left alone to hear the summons and find the courage to make her journey.

The rise of science, the coming of technology and industrialization, and rampant hedonistic individualism have stripped us of our life-orienting myths and cut twentieth-century humans adrift without compass or chart. As a result, our fears and anxieties loom larger, while we lack the truly heroic images that once offered courage and hope. "God has nowhere to hide," Campbell asserts, due to our excessive trust in sensory knowledge and rational methods.

Without archetypes for living nobly—real or mythological heroes—our subconscious minds ramble out of control without means to school them, and fanaticism has a field day. Faced with changes, conflicts, and perils that we cannot easily understand, contemporary humans are attracted to naziism, fundamentalism, and other extremist ideologies in our desperate quest for stability. And we flock to psychoanalysts to purge our demons. The modern world has created for some a precarious material paradise that is locked within a mental and spiritual hell.

How does this view differ from twentieth-century existentialism? Campbell is like the Christian existentialists, but he goes further—believing that the universe is purposeful and that the cosmos (God) instructs and supports human beings in their life struggles. The great myths conveyed these larger truths, he says, but we have destroyed their vehicles and they no longer reach inner lives.

A cultural and personal transformation is needed to restore our spiritual equilibrium. The great nation-states cannot lead this reformation, they have bought the technological panacea completely. Authoritarian churches cannot do it, they have become religious corporations—seeking secular power and defending ideological territory, striving less to liberate than to control the faithful. Psychoanalysts cannot, they deal chiefly at the individual level, and then generally as a cure rather than a preventive.

SEEKING SPIRITUAL MATURITY

What does Ernest Becker, author of *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*, add to this sobering conclusion?⁸ In this Pulitzer Prize-winning 1973 book he tries to make sense of the knowledge-explosion of the last two centuries. Becker's work is especially pertinent here, because he takes up just where Campbell left off—by examining the works of the social scientists whose research and ideas have well-nigh destroyed the mythological traditions around the globe.

Having dispatched the myths, Becker claims, we have been left without a context to understand death. Unsure of an afterlife, we are preoccupied with death and the prospect of eternal anonymity or oblivion. Modern humans, therefore, are pathetically beset with anxiety and obsessed with symbols that might assure our personal endurance. To fill the breach, we have turned to *psychoanalysis*⁹ to deal with our fears, to *materialism* to validate our personal significance, and to *fame* to perpetuate our individual achievements. Fearing death, we have lost our joy in living. Fear without solace, materialism without conscience, and individualism without community—these are the tragedies of our modern human condition.

In our crises, personal and societal, we are now lured by “-isms” or ideologies (political and/or religious) because they appear to offer pre-packaged sources of knowledge and power into which we can tap. Yet the longer we rely on these ready-made ideologies and borrow meaning and energy from their doctrines, the less likely we are to develop a vital, personal spirituality. Becoming comfortable with a form of spirituality structured and defined by others, we gradually lose the capacity to develop a rich and textured spiritual life of our own. Fearing to venture out, to trust our own experience and powers, we may never become truly ourselves or fully secure with life. We remain perpetually vulnerable to the fortunes of

8. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973); also his *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975).

9. Several readers of this essay noted that I seem critical of psychoanalysts. Actually, I have great respect for what they do and the contribution they make to our society. My point, and Becker's, I believe, is that other institutions like family and church, and simple lasting friendships, are not providing the psychological support they once offered to individuals. Coupled with the loss of mythology, this downward shift in life-sustaining relationships results in painful loneliness and anxiety. Psychoanalysis is an important and legitimate response to these conditions. Further, of course, there are now and always have been short-term and long-term personality disorders that no amount of friendship or community support is capable of addressing. Professional counseling or psychiatric treatment can be of great benefit to individuals and to society in these cases.

an institution and our relationship with it—with all the ups and downs of church policies, politics, personalities.

Becker's own journey was punctuated by a "terrifying interlude" in his thirties when he recognized that he was "living on second-hand knowledge" of the essential things. He finally accepted the necessity of shifting to the development of, and reliance upon, his own relationship with the universe. In the end, Becker concluded that God exists, that "there are tremendous creative forces in the universe," and that we must "give ourselves up to these larger forces." This he repeated on his deathbed at the age of forty-nine. Gaining a receptiveness to God and accepting natural forces in our individual lives is what Becker calls "genuine religiosity." It ushers from within us, though it has been inspired from without.

In contrast, Becker explains, fundamental and evangelical religions breed dependence on authorities and doctrines, and cause their believers to experience a restricted spiritual life, orchestrated for purposes of control by others rather than to encourage a healthy and complete relationship with God. Love and community are spontaneous manifestations of the individual soul when genuine religiosity is present. In fundamentalist contexts, however, these qualities must be documented as the price a believer pays for salvation. The first is anchored in love, the second may be anchored in fear.

In sum, Becker analyzes in much greater depth what has happened since humans have been left without their life-directing, meaning-giving myths. Campbell struggles to tell us what we had and how we let it slip away. Becker tries to explain how we have coped after the loss and why we act as we do now. Both agree that contemporary humans are in grave danger of self-destruction, but each also believes that higher forces are present in the universe.

The question is whether or not we can clear the clutter from our lives (the projects, the electronic noises and images, the incessant trivialities around us that Merton enumerated) long enough to regenerate a free and abundant spirituality. A spiritual life that recognizes our connections with one another, with nature, and with God . . . a spirituality that springs from within (even as it may be inspired from without), that cannot be schooled to fit institutional boundaries, and that places ends before means.

IDEAS AND EVENTS CONVERGE

It may be tempting for a Latter-day Saint (or any other believer) to respond to these ideas with a confident shrug. "We don't doubt our worth, we're children of God." "We have heroic archetypes in our theology and sacred scriptures, and they seem to be just what others have lost." "We know God like no others do!"

But look at the evidence if you think we are spared the doubt and malaise of those around us. Consider Becker's three manifestations of spiritual distress: LDS people seem to need psychotherapy at about the same rate that others do, materialism thrives in Zion like everywhere else, and Mormons seek and celebrate fame and power as though there were no tomorrow.

Sure, Mormons are made of the same stuff as everyone else (back to Walt Whitman), and we are subject to the same forces and problems. But if our religion provided the answers that many claim it does, or if our spiritual health were what we think it is, or wish it were, then it ought to show more than anyone can reasonably claim it does.

One element of this problem, I believe, is that the Mormon church has so limited its definitions of spirituality, service, loyalty, and even the manifestations of deity, that it often stifles the natural religiosity of its members, while at the same time making it increasingly difficult for others to call it home at all. Echoing the flight from the center that I described above, more members than ever are becoming "church-broke fundamentalists," while others are increasingly alienated and forced to the sidelines, taking their talents and insights with them. These twin tendencies signal an unhealthy community life—both within the church and as we influence the larger American and global cultures. This polarization is, in truth, a dangerous omen.

The lack of widespread LDS protest over the church's escalating attempts to squash *Sunstone*, *Dialogue*, *Exponent II*, and other independent voices should not be misread by church authorities. Indeed, some members are *giving in* to the church's attempts to bridle their curiosity and restrict their freedom to read and think widely. But increasing numbers are also *giving up* on the church because it seeks to narrow their horizons. A decade or two ago LDS college students who entertained creative or unorthodox ideas sought to express their views and to find ways to reconcile them with the church's teachings and practices. These were acts of courage and fidelity. Now, increasingly, I see these students simply disengaging and wandering off.

I have many LDS friends who have known a religious heritage much like my own, and who see the world much as I do. I'll be brash: The Mormon church needs people like us—on the edges, nonconforming, Dialoguing, Sunstoning. We *are* the reasonable middle ground. Spiritually liberal. Liberally spiritual. I like those two words together. They belong together. And they belong to the human race.

My world view, and my four-generation family legacy of liberal spirituality, once found room and even nourishment within the LDS church. But as today's Mormon leaders hammer their iron ring of orthodoxy ever

tighter, I no longer slip within its hoop—wet or dry. My beliefs and experiences not only spill over the edges, they take other shapes.