From Emerson to Alma: A Personal Odyssey

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IT WAS MY FATHER WHO TAUGHT ME to love Emerson. I can remember him wanting to know what authors I was studying in my tenth-grade English class, and then, at the mention of Keats or Emerson, his shaking his head slowly with closed eyes, implying inexpressible delight at the great masters and savory defeat at trying to explain it. The mystery and promise that attended my father's bemused, silent nod attached itself in my mind to all famous writers of the past. I came to know that lofty pleasures awaited me if I could fathom their archaic but beautiful language, their complex but eternal meanings. Cherishing my father's opinion on all things, I automatically valued what he valued. And cherishing my closeness to him, I wanted to know what he knew, to be "in the know" along with him. My father loved Emerson. I was destined to do the same.

This confluence of taste lasted several years. But as our travels together comprised a mid-life journey for him and an adolescent one for me, it was inevitable that we would finally follow separate roads. I joined the Mormon church seven years ago; my father, had he been converted before his death in 1975, would have made an unlikely Mormon. In fact, he spent most of his adult life as a Unitarian, in part perhaps to rebel against his Seventh-Day Baptist upbringing. Toward the end of his life, searching for the hope that comes with ritual, mystery, and stained-glass windows, he gravitated toward the Episcopal church. I had his temple work done as a Mormon of one year, but I wonder if he has accepted the gospel. A Catholic friend told me when we were in junior high school that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Ghost. My father's reaction to the news was to ask whether it tickles us when the ghost moves around in there. He longed for something to revere, yet he had limited patience for reverence. Emerson's blend of

awe at nature and contempt for social institutions was a comfortable home for him. In the end, it lacked the ring of truth for me.

Still, as a Mormon, I have wondered how I could have started out so close to my father and wound up so far from him. The question reasserts itself when I consider the similarities between Emerson's thought as I understood it as a teenager and Mormon thought as I have come to know it since my baptism. Even those similarities do not diminish the amazing distance I have travelled since my Transcendental days. And now, having come so far, and having only recently arrived, I am still assessing my new home. The correspondences between Emerson and Mormonism, as well as the differences they reveal, are helping me to delineate my faith. Furthermore, they are helping me to understand the role of my past in getting me where I am.

Two aspects of Emerson's thought that shaped my teenage world shape my adult world as well. The one that first seized my imagination was the notion of a spiritual dimension to all of nature. Emerson tells us that "all the uses of nature admit of being summed in one, which yields the activity of man an infinite scope. Through all its kingdoms, to the suburbs and outskirts of things, it is faithful to the cause whence it had its origin. It always speaks of Spirit. It suggests the absolute."[1] For Emerson, nature is animated by spirit. His thought gives great prominence to the transcendent, which, like Christians, he associates with the term *God.*

Furthermore, I was very much taken with Emerson's exaltation of the individual. In using this phrase, I *do* have in mind the full spiritual development in the Celestial Kingdom that Mormons strive for. But I mean to suggest, more precisely, one of its secular counterparts, the dignity acquired by individuals on earth through access to the spiritual and the perfect. This intimacy with the transcendent is a continuous theme in Emerson's thought. I once told my tenth-grade English teacher that I thought all people had a capacity (figured as a sort of interior black box) to receive impressions and feelings from God (figured as an amorphous, pervasive spirit). She told me that I had obviously been reading Emerson, at which point I decided for the first time to do so. How delighted I was to find out about poets that "the condition of true naming, on the poet's part, is his resigning himself to the divine *aura* which breathes through forms, and accompanying that."[2]

The poet is empowered, and thereby ennobled, by contact with the true and the perfect. When I read also that all people are poets to one degree or another, I knew I had found a system of thought I could stay with. It didn't

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1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature" (1849), 40, in Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 40.

2. Emerson, "The Poet" (1844), in Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 459.

occur to me then that having come upon a writer who expressed my own vague inklings, I was adopting him on self-validating terms: in a sense he was both defendant and judge. Never mind. At last I could claim with certainty the inherent dignity I had tentatively, hopefully ascribed to every individual, and had always wanted for myself.

Here then in Emerson, were two of the starting points of my journey toward Mormonism. But in my early twenties I abandoned him as a prophet. By that time I had lost my father to a depression he would never conquer. A painful and disorienting turn of events for me, it took away my youthful faith in life as a logical, ultimately kind experience. My father's idealism seemed now an ineffectual weapon in the face of abrasive realities, the most abrasive of which was that we are not guaranteed our just deserts. In my eyes, no one deserved happiness and success more than my father. He was an exceptionally good person. He was an exceptionally gifted person. And yet his life ended in defeat. Furthermore, the despair that was slowly infiltrating my view of things was underscored by the normal ups and downs of a twenty-year-old's life. A painful *affaire du coeur* had taught me that our needs are precisely that which life intends to thwart. My father and Emerson along with him came to seem naive to me. Both had clearly missed the point.

At the same time, I was studying Emerson in college, practicing on him a form of literary analysis I was just learning. Suddenly I saw the essay "Self-Reliance" as encouraging arrogance rather than offering dignity. In distancing myself from this new Emerson, I pointed my journey of faith a little more squarely at the LDS church, although I had barely heard of it then. The individual in "Self-Reliance" is empowered through contact with "the Over-soul," just as he or she from a Christian point of view is empowered by God. But the gratitude, humility, and worship that characterize the Christian's stance toward God are far less evident in Emerson's thought, and at times they are actively rejected. "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind," Emerson says.[3] Or, "As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg. . . . men's prayers are a disease of the will."[4] For Emerson, the Over-soul exalts the individual but does not ask for humility in return. The posture of humility, and the distinction between it and what we commonly call humiliation, were concepts I would need to acquire elsewhere before my Transcendentalism could evolve into my current faith.

In fact, I probably acquired them naturally as I was growing up and simply did not recognize Emerson's divergence from them until I had spent

3. Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (1841), in Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 261.
4. Ibid., 276.

some time with his thought. I think too that vestiges of "Self-Reliance" that are discordant with Mormonism stayed with me to the time of my conversion in my mid-thirties, and that it was a predilection for another mode of thought that helped me get past them when the time came. Christianity has always seemed to me more dichotomous, more paradoxical, than the tenets of Emerson that influenced me as a teenager, and I think a taste for ironic, paradoxical writers engendered in me by my father's emotional problems and by my own life as a young adult played in my conversion. Consider these examples of Christian paradox.

For the Mormon, humility and exaltation, apparently opposites, are two sides of the same coin (while for Emerson as I understood him they were mutually exclusive alternatives). For the Mormon, a bodily heavenly father is not inconsistent with a spiritual messenger who pervades our world; the fullest freedom comes from obedience; the highest development of one's individuality comes from conformity to the church; a difficult life can find reassurance in the knowledge that nonetheless things are going as they should; the savior and king of the world took his first earthly sleep in a manger. As Mormons, we barely notice the paradoxical nature of these concepts, so accustomed are we to accepting them; yet their irony lies at the heart of our faith. For those who would like to embrace the church but are not willing to let go of a simpler logic, they can form a stumbling block.

For me, an English major who became a teacher, the way to accepting them was paved by literature. My father loved the Romantic writers who believed in perfections they strove to achieve. But I found coping strategies I could trust in the bleaker vision of Modern writers who studied life's frustration of human needs. In the poet Wallace Stevens, I saw a would-be Transcendentalist who had to admit that reality as he saw it fails to cooperate with our need for sublimity and individual dignity. Not believing in God, but desirous of the order and plenitude only God can provide, Stevens explores the power of the wishful imagination to rearrange reality to meet our needs. He gives us moments of warmth and sufficiency contrived by the imagination in spite of the absence of God. He portrays us "collect[ing] ourselves"

> Within a single thing, a single shawl
> Wrapped tightly around us, since we are poor, a warmth,
> A light, a power, the miraculous influence.
>
> Here, now, we forget about each other and ourselves.
> We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
> A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous,

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one . . .
How high that highest candle lights the dark.[5]

Stevens ends this poem by telling us that "being there together [wrapped in the shawl, feeling the miraculous influence] is enough." *Enough* suggests that needs are met, but only in minimal ways. In other poems, he is more forthright in saying that moments of fulfillment are imaginary and therefore transitory. That which is "arranged" by human means, like the rendezvous above, cannot outlast changes brought by time or abandonment when imaginative attention is turned elsewhere.

A complex of emotions falls apart,
In an abandoned spot. Soft, civil bird,
The decay that you regard: of the arranged
And of the spirit of the arranged, *douceurs*,
Tristessess, the fund of life and death, suave bush

And polished beast, this complex falls apart.[6]

Stevens's nostalgia for the wealth possessed by the believer, his honesty about the absence, as he saw it, of anything metaphysical to believe in: these appealed to me during the "existential crisis" of my early twenties, when Sartre, Camus, and John Barth also seemed to see things as they really were—devoid of intrinsic meaning or value. And I admired the way Stevens brings something and nothing, presence and absence, together in his vision, as though he cannot permit himself to possess something unless, simultaneously, he admits that he can't have it. The admission makes the possession possible. He describes

. . . the listener, who listens in the snow,
And nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.[7]

Stevens literally makes something of nothing: "The nothing that is" becomes a presence, the best our imaginations can do in an impoverished world.

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5. Stevens, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (1950), in Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 368.

6. Stevens, "Credences of Summer" (1946), in Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, 292.

7. Stevens, "The Snow Man" (1921), in Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, 54.

I think Stevens's walking the razor's edge between something and nothing helped me as a new Mormon, sixteen years later, to focus on humility rather than power, obedience rather than willfulness, as ways of fulfilling my potential and dreams. By admitting our powerlessness, we achieve power. That is how Stevens works. That is how the gospel works. It was in part the respect for paradox that I found in Stevens that enabled me to listen to the promptings of the Spirit during my conversion. What active feminist without such a respect would give up her political strategies and goal of earthly political power to join a church promising her empowerment only in return for obedience to a patriarchal "authority," an authority she would be likely to misinterpret as the earthly political power she had been working for for herself? What individualistic post-Emersonian without such a respect would participate in church programs and support church leaders, ignoring Emerson's claim that "society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members"?[8] My faith as a new Mormon had to be agile, embracing contraries, and pursuing a journey that seemed to lead away from, to be inconsistent with, the desired goal. Only the flexibility to consider that, ironically, a willing obedience might bring the fullest freedom could make me go through what at first felt like a renunciation of freedom in order ultimately to acquire it.

And so it served me well to have adopted Stevens as a prophet for a while before the missionaries knocked on my door; it helped me embrace the church to have first accepted a self-contradictory world without attaching a redemptive spirituality to it. As Mormons, we cannot turn away from the world even though we strive to remain untouched by it. Emerson (like his friend Thoreau) advises a detachment from the compromising tangle of social relations, but God commends Alma's missions through the thick of things, and commands us to serve each other.

Still, I have been able to define my Mormonism against Emerson's thought only because they have so much in common. In fact, Alma sounds a great deal like Emerson when he describes his joy at the spreading of the gospel: "Now, when I think of the success of these my brethren my soul is carried away, even to the separation of it from the body, as it were, so great is my joy" (29:16). Alma has had to work for this moment, even to the point of obediently ignoring his own inclinations (8:16). But his joy is so great that he describes it with a metaphor of complete transcendence, much like those Emerson uses for his own joy at the power of poetry: "With what joy I begin to read a poem, which I confide in as an inspiration! And now my chains are to be broken; I shall mount above these clouds and opaque airs

8. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 261.

in which I live . . . and from the heaven of truth I shall see and comprehend my relations."[9]

There is no irony in either passage. Unlike Stevens, neither Emerson nor Alma deflates the moment of triumph by dwelling on its transient or ephemeral nature. The Christian surrender to paradox does not diminish in any way the spiritual fulfillment it yields the believer. Furthermore, Alma's focus on the success of his brethren mirrors the emphasis Emerson places on the power of the poet. Emerson tells us "that magnitude of material things is relative, and all objects shrink and expand to serve the passion of the poet."[10] In Emerson's vision the poetic imagination, the needy human mind that inhabits nature, comes to preside over it. Nature takes its cue from the imagination and serves its needs. I'm sure my adolescent desire for the power of the Transcendental poet has fed my adult joy at the empowerment I have felt in following Jesus Christ.

So as a New Englander like my father, I like to think that strains of Emerson infuse my Mormonism. Now it is true that in the days surrounding my baptism, the words of Modern poet e. e. cummings, not of Emerson, were running through my head:

> i thank you God for most this amazing
> day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
> and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
> which is natural which is infinite which is yes
>
> (i who have died am alive again today,
> and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
> day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
> great happening illimitably earth)
>
> . . .
>
> (now the ears of my ears awake and
> now the eyes of my eyes are opened)[11]

cummings's exuberant message of rebirth seemed to break through the bounds of ordinary syntax as my spirit was about to break through the bounds of my former life and of death. It takes Modernist experimentation,

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9. Emerson, "The Poet" (1844), in Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 451.

10. Emerson, "Nature" (1849), in Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 35.

11. cummings, "i thank You God for most this amazing" (1950), in cummings, *100 Selected Poems (Evergreen Edition)* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 114.

I remember thinking (with a sniff at Transcendentalism), to portray spiritual truths in language.

But in the end, the part of me which had loved Emerson played a larger role in my baptism than the part which loved Modern poetry, reactivating feelings of grief for a lost father and the lost perfections we had believed in together. I have always thought that our spiritual lives are substantially shaped by elements of our pasts—ideas we once held, feelings we once felt. In touching us, God works with all the raw materials we provide, addressing us as individuals who have evolved over time. The day before my baptism, a day of fasting and anticipation, showed me how true this principle would be of my experience as a Mormon.

At the time I was living in a small farming community in upstate New York. Because there was sulphur in the municipal water supply, I used to fill bottles with water from a spigot by one of the Finger Lakes that was close by. On the day in question, a Saturday, I was filling bottles as usual. I remember likening the clean water from the lake to the water I would be baptized in the next day. For some reason I started thinking about the story of the prodigal son, which I had probably read that morning since it was fresh in my mind. I came to understand and then to visualize with great intensity the urgent excitement that the father felt when he first saw his lost son coming home, and I realized that was exactly what God was feeling for me at that moment. Never having felt such urgent love and concern on my behalf, I sat behind the wheel of my station wagon for an hour or so and cried. I felt sorrow and fulfillment together, as though my heavenly father's love were evoking memories of my earthly father's love, long banished from thought, and replacing it even as I mourned. Thinking about the cloak, the "best robe," that the biblical father calls for for his prodigal son, I felt God's love for me surround me as if it were that robe. I stayed wrapped in it all that day.

And since that day, I have realized how freely my feelings for my earthly father played in my feelings for God, both in my station wagon by the lake and always. As an adult, I have come to understand my father better, to see that he succumbed to depression because of specific elements of his nature and childhood, not because life in general is a defeating experience. Knowing this has restored some of my faith that a transcendent, benign logic directs the events of our lives, and my adult relationship with God has restored the rest. But my sense of that logic will always include the paradoxical, the ironic. Maybe seeing God as ironic is a way of giving him space to do things that I won't always understand. Maybe it is a way of contriving a faith that can withstand the shocks of experience. But I prefer to think of it as a way of compensating for the narrowness of human perception as against the vast scope of divine creativity. Emerson strove to describe in some detail the workings of the divine in nature. I am content

to let them elude me, leaving in contradictory fragments what I can see of them and knowing nonetheless that the love that powers them is as far from irony as Alma's joy in his missionary work or the prodigal's comfort in his father's best robe.