Pillars of My Family: A Brief Saga

Lydia Nibley

THE MATERNAL AND PATERNAL SIDES OF MY FAMILY intermingle incestuously on the desk among the genealogical records compiled by unknown great-aunts and cousins of cousins. These documents and photos have been kept for years in a white plastic, gold-embossed *Book of Remembrance* I got as a baptism gift at the age of eight.

When it was handed to me with great reverence by my parents, I knew it was an important gift that not only marked my joining the Mormon church but also signified that I was growing up, so I received it happily—although I didn't understand what I was supposed to do with it. The hinge has remained a puzzle that cannot be solved, and so, unable to really open the book, I have stuffed the generations of my family into it unbound for safekeeping.

Now free of the remembrance book they look up expectantly, ready to tell a vagarious history of religious faith. Here is my family: in sepia tones, in hand-tinted color, in early Polaroids faded to pastel, and in more recent photographs of children who grew up to bear a strong resemblance to previous generations.

The question I have for them is: How much of my own identity and belief came from this amalgam of family and faith?

MATERNAL PILLARS

As a young child sitting on my grandpa Alvin's bony knees looking into the stern black-and-white face of a woman named Lydia Seraphias Broberg, I thought it impossible that this image could really be his mother. As unlikely as this seemed, my grandpa was telling me that she was his mother and my great-grandmother. I had an unshakable testimony that I myself was a person named Lydia. I also had a testimony that my grandfather was who he said he was. This led to my belief, be-

yond a shadow of a doubt, no matter how unlikely, that Lydia Seraphias Broberg was my great-grandmother and that I had indeed been named for her.

Once the foundation for the belief in Lydia was laid, other elements fused to it. She was described at the annual family reunion picnic as being "a faithful member of the church who never wavered in her testimony and was a great cook." According to the personal history written by my grandfather, Lydia was also the typical widowed mother of eleven, "I can truthfully say [Grandpa lies] that not once did I ever hear her raise her voice in anger at any of us."

I now believed in Lydia and Lydia had known that the church was true and so now I had a testimony of my name, my great-grandmother, and the church.

Later I learned that Lydia's parents, Isaac and Johanna, had "embraced the gospel in their native land of Sweden" and felt such confidence in their new religion that they left a "thriving manufacturing business, and a good home" to follow their faith. Just before emigrating Isaac's brother-in-law offered Isaac half of his wealth if he would renounce his religion and stay in Sweden. To this the noble father of Lydia (should have) replied, "I regret that I have but one fortune to give for my faith!"

Grandpa Alvin with his strong broad shoulders, his square stoic face, and his full head of hair looked exactly like the photograph of his father, Mons, so it didn't require any faith to believe in Great-Grandpa. It also required little faith to know that my grandpa knew the church was true because he said so every time he blessed the food. He also never forgot to bless the missionaries.

Grandpa may have gotten this idea from listening to his father tell the story of how missionaries had baptized his grandmother Bothilda in the cold Baltic Sea. They had preached a new religion to her, and, according to grandpa's cousin who wrote her history, she "knew it was true as soon as she heard it."

Life was hard for poor farmers who didn't own land and was especially hard for the newly-baptized and always scandalous Bothilda and her numerous children. It is fortunate for my genealogically-sensitive grandpa that his father was one of Bothilda's few legitimate children, having been conceived *both* after his mother and father were married and *before* the twins were born several years after his father's death.

The family lived in extreme poverty, and Bothilda's son recorded, "Many a time have my mother and I knelt down and asked God to open a way for us to gather to Zion." Which meant emigration to America and then the trek to Utah.

Years later, after becoming successfully emigrated, Bothilda's descen-

dants tried hard not to descend any farther. In fact, they wanted to set the record straight if they could, so in his tribute to Bothilda, Grandpa's cousin sums up the family's belief that "her humility, her true devotion to the Gospel, and the Lord's attention to her prayers are great evidence that her imperfections were forgiven her."

This same chronicler also recorded her poetic eulogy: "It is pleasant to think that the Lord she loved and had tried to serve all her life would not be surprised nor unhappy to welcome home once more this Viking hand-maid." There is a tiny likeness of her among the pictures on my desk—the size that would fit in a locket—so I think of her as being short and tiny, although the genetic material she passed on has grown some tall Mormon Vikings.

My maternal grandma's story takes up where this one leaves off and adds politics to the family history previously dominated by sex and religion. Big with child, a patriotic, red-blooded American woman with her water broken and labor pains progressing puts a pot of soup on the stove and walks several miles to the nearest polling place to cast her vote for Utah senator Reed Smoot in the election of 1906. Mary Alice then walks home and finishes her labor to produce a baby girl who could have been named Polliana or Republica but becomes instead Electa . . . my grandma. Here is a photograph of Electa as a beautiful flapper. When I used to climb up on her soft old lap she smelled of violets and urine and shook with Parkinson's disease. Here she smiles like she owns the world and signed the photo, "With love, your sweetheart."

Electa's mother, Mary Alice, is someone the family doesn't talk about very much. In fact there were decades when she was a banned person, but just as an airplane crash leaves a black box in the wreckage, Mary Alice left a black metal box full of papers and secrets to tell her story. My uncle Kenneth took the box away years ago and refused to share its contents with the great-granddaughters of the family for fear we might be led astray as Mary Alice was.

She "left the church" to join a strange cult called I Am. Besides eating suspicious and unusual food (they were vegetarians), they loved the color white, were particular about cleanliness, used herbs for healing, treated animals with respect, used the color purple to improve health, and abhorred red and black because of their evil implications.

We learned about the color issue because Mary Alice's daughter Electa demonstrated a passionate love of purple and decorated herself and her house with it. Although Electa was a faithful member of the church all her life, Grandpa Alvin seemed to interpret his wife's choice of a favorite color as a subtle rebellion against the Mormon church. Grandma Electa also caused quite a stir when one of her sons married a woman who was inordinately fond of wearing black and red, in combination.

Unfortunately, the life, thoughts, and religious beliefs of Electa's mother, Mary Alice, remain a mystery to the next generations because she became isolated from her family after leaving the church. Usually these fallings away provide testimony-building stories for those left behind since anyone who leaves the church soon becomes miserable, penniless, and bitter. But Mary Alice broke with this apostate tradition and led what looked like a productive, normal, even happy life: riding the first motorcycles, living in American Fork, Utah, and supporting her family by working at several jobs which involved fixing things with moving parts, work she had a natural ability for and enjoyed.

Mary Alice looks up from the desk to smile shyly from under the brim of her big hat. The sun is shining brightly. The calf-length dress she is wearing seems too heavy for the hot day. She is straddling a strange-looking motorcycle leaning forward to grasp the handles.

It was years later that Mary Alice made up for her happy life by dying. She requested the "weird" rites of I Am as her final ceremony. Her strange funeral provided an appropriately spooky ending to her life story which became a cautionary tale for her great-grandchildren. I realize it is unfair to mention a weird funeral and not fill in the details, but that is the very nature of the problem. We weren't told about it because it was so weird.

It puzzled the family to see Mary Alice let go of the iron rod because she came from such good "pioneer stock." Her grandmother was the heroic Amanda Barnes Smith, who had endured incredible physical hardship brought on by her choice to join the Mormon church. A group of Mormons, Amanda's family among them, had been persecuted by mobs in Kirtland, Ohio, and had been pursued to Missouri, where in the massacre at Haun's Mill Amanda's husband, Warren Smith, one of their sons, and sixteen others were killed by an armed mob.

Amanda and her children moved on to Illinois, where she met and married another Warren Smith, a widower with five children who was no relation to the first. Together, with their twelve children, they made the long, hard journey to Utah. Amanda and the second Warren were not happily married, and after a few years he left her to live with the hired girl he had put in the family way. Later in life Amanda was sealed to the prophet Joseph Smith, with Brigham Young acting as proxy, in the Salt Lake temple.

Amanda as a flesh-and-blood person has been expurgated from the world, her journal having been heavily edited prior to publication, apparently by a family member who has a day job with the church's correlation department. What remains of her long, eventful life are a handful of faith-promoting stories and—because of her habit of marrying multiple Warren Smiths—a confusing branch of the family tree. But Amanda was

good for the collective testimony of the family because articles about her appeared in the *Church News* section of the *Deseret News,* and her story was included in church history books.

As children we found all this to be wonderful material for Sunday school talks. Imagine the relish with which we told exciting stories of mayhem and martyrdom and then dramatically threw in the surprising closing line, "I am grateful for the example of MY GREAT-GREAT-GRANDMA Amanda Barnes Smith and HOPE TO BE WORTHY OF THE BLESSING of being a descendant of such a fine pioneer woman." Within the Mormon star system, the only thing better than that was to be related to Joseph Smith himself, and we sort of were that too.

Here is a photograph of my two sisters and me dressed in long pioneer dresses and sunbonnets, our violins tucked under our little chins. As descendants of brave pioneers, we were frequently asked to play a violin trio my dad had composed, entitled "Pioneer Waltz." We played this waltz at the dedication of many historic markers placed by the Daughters of Utah Pioneers to which my mother belonged. These dedications and my mother's admonitions about living up to one's heritage caused me to regularly contemplate my family's history of hardship and sacrifice.

Our family participated in Utah's celebration of Pioneer Day each 24th of July with state patriotism fused with religious zeal. Our belief was reinforced by parades and testimony meetings. We knew that if our pioneer ancestors were willing to sacrifice so much for their religion it was our duty to remain faithful to it and to them. It was also comforting to know that they wouldn't have endured such hardship without a damn good reason; therefore, the church must be true. Everything pointed to the conclusion that our family had been fortunate to find the true church and that our ancestors had focused on living lives to demonstrate that they had made the right choice.

Besides this religious and family connection with the Mormon pioneers, there was also a general love of the past that came from something more personal. I felt whatever it was as I marched off to take the lightly-used flowers to the graves in the new cemetery to decorate the resting places of babies who had died of consumption, men who had died in Indian attacks, and young women who had died of broken hearts. Some of the first words I read when I learned to read were chiseled in the soft worn stone in the pioneer cemetery near our house.

When we knelt beside our three little beds, a typical good-night prayer in our house went: "Bless that the leaves will grow back on the trees. Bless that I won't have bad dreams or wet. Bless all the pioneers up in the cemetery that they'll be loved."

Paternal Pillars

The paternal branch of my family tree is not the carefully-pruned Mormon testimony of the Viking side. It is true that all of the great-great-grandparents of the family joined the church in the early days and that the majority of the family has remained faithful, but on the paternal side there are also stories, not necessarily told to reinforce belief, but just stories for the sake of a good story. Like the one about my great-great-grandma being asked why she considered ALL of her children to be Scottish even though half of them were born after the family moved to Ireland. Her reply was, "If a cat has kittens in the oven, they're not biscuits!" Another of my favorites is the story about Grandmother hearing that old line that has captured so many Mormon brides, "I had a vision that you are to marry me." And her reply to the much older priesthood leader, "Wonderful! I'll write you when I have the same vision!"

My first memory of the extended Nibley family is of sitting with my feet swinging over the edge of a chair in a wardhouse on 1st Avenue in Salt Lake City, transfixed by the circus of the yearly family reunion. The amazing Nibley boys were featured entertainment.

The opening hymn was played for laughs by concert pianist and uncle Reid Nibley, who pretended to have forgotten the melody of *Love at Home,* picking it out like a first-year piano student and then appearing to gain confidence throughout the hymn, finally adding the flourishes of Liberace-in-Las-Vegas to the last verse while my father conducted the singing with an expandable baton with which he accidently stabbed himself in a fit of conducting vigor. His death scene in the final, "all the world is filled with love when there's love—at—home," left him collapsed on the floor to be revived by his cousin who was President and Dictator of the family organization.

El Presidente was booed as he stepped to the podium. Members of the family shouted out accusations of numerous improprieties in his dealings with the finances of the family organization. A kangaroo court was called into session and a jury of his peers found him guilty of all charges and quickly voted him into office for his nineteenth consecutive term.

This was followed by the customary introductions. The objective was to introduce everyone as incorrectly as possible. That was made easy by the inordinately high number of Hughs, Sloans, and Reids in the family. People struggled to remember their own names, introduced their sons as daughters, and forgot the names of wives and husbands. Quips and puns ricocheted around the room, and stage whispers heckled anyone who was speaking. The minutes of the previous year's reunion were read. "Things started as usual, not promptly, which is usual. We gathered to practice the family fight song *Love at Home.* We were not allowed to leave until we could sing it the way it deserved to be sung."

The comedic formula of the reunion never changed, and the howls from the basement of the wardhouse always brought observers from the more reverent German mission reunion that met upstairs. One year a German defector asked to join the family, so he was instated by unanimous vote and showed up the following year, taking his place in the family.

Our favorite entertainment was Hugh Nibley the scholar, ancient scriptorian, and uncle who entertained us with his version of "Tales from the Crypt." I didn't understand anything he said, which put me in the company of the adults of the family, but listening to his rapid delivery and his quiet intensity was its own reward, and I liked to see if I could guess the precise moment when he would hitch up his pants with his elbow and clear his throat with a small snort.

Uncle Hugh talked to us in Latin, Greek, Shakespeare, scripture, and poetry ancient and modern. I could tell he was the smartest person in the world. He believed in Egypt and the Book of Mormon, and because he had the world's most beautiful nose and smelled wonderful—I loved him with all my heart and believed in Egypt and the Book of Mormon, too.

In less formal family gatherings at Uncle Reid's house I liked to hide underneath the grand piano and feel the music above me. The adults talked religion and the arts, weaving in and out of topics with such ease that if you nodded off, you were likely to have a dream in which Mozart was in the First Presidency of the church playing golf with Great-Grandpa, and the words, "In the course of justice, none of us should see salvation: we do pray for mercy; and that same prayer doth teach us all to render deeds of mercy," could be found in the Doctrine and Covenants.

The religion practiced by the Nibley family was an extension of some of the most wonderful things in the world. There were the images of art, the discoveries of science, and the joys of music, language, and literature. Religion was made up of good solid hymns from the Mormon tradition and the adoption of Bach and Handel into the fold, since living before the restoration of the gospel meant it wasn't their fault they weren't Mormon.

There was a true church (definitely one true Mormon church), true scripture (literature included, if it was properly brilliant and of spiritual nature), and true music (no rock and roll). We even had the true place. When Brigham Young said, "This is the right place," families were responsible to make sure Utah WAS the right place. The Nibley family had joined the church in Scotland and emigrated west with the Independent Company, feeding six barefoot children on buffalo meat along the way. Settling in Cache Valley, they lived for several years in a one-room dugout. The family struggled to subsist and had to begin at the very beginning of things to make the earth produce food and shelter.

Here is the first photograph ever taken of my great-grandpa, Charles Wilson Nibley. The year is 1865, and he is sixteen years old. After spend-

ing his childhood in the same pair of overalls, he is now proudly wearing his first coat and trousers. He looks straight into the camera with the clear eyes and the high forehead that in a few years he will pass on to his son, my grandfather, Alexander Nibley.

At this young age he has already held several jobs and has determined to do well in the world. By the time he is nineteen he will be successful, managing a store in Brigham City, Utah, and will marry his sweetheart Rebecca Neibaur, who is the daughter of Alexander Neibaur, the first Jew to join the Mormon church. The autobiography written at the end of his life details the prices of things bought and sold and tells of his business adventures in lumber, law, Z.C.M.I., railroads, banking, Utah Power and Light, the sugar industry, and his involvement in building the Hotel Utah. He was the Presiding Bishop of the church and enjoyed many rounds of "the ancient and royal Scottish game of golf" with President Joseph F. Smith. He kept a flask of whiskey in his sock and loved Utah.

Great-grandpa's hard work in Utah made me feel that I belonged here. Watching my father work with other preservationists to save the cast-iron Z.C.M.I. storefront, driving past Nibley Park in Salt Lake City, seeing the town of Nibley near Logan on a Utah map, eating dinner at the Hotel Utah made me feel at home. The desert state that had blossomed as a rose had been shaped by people who grew up in dugouts and made millions the hard way. (The next generations of Nibleys have been able to enjoy the sense of belonging in Utah guilt-free because the family fortune was lost in the stock market crash of 1929.)

We heard tales about our great-grandfather from my father, who snuggled with his girls on Sunday afternoons to read the scriptures and tell stories. My father moved to Utah after growing up in Oregon and California and living in New York City for most of his adult life. He believed in Utah as Zion and chose to live here because it was where he felt connected to his roots. I had internalized this Zionist view to the extent that when I decided to move to Virginia there was a moment when the idea of leaving Utah to live somewhere else struck me as blasphemous.

Here is a picture of my dad. It is a publicity photo, so he looks very serious holding his violin in long strong fingers: the artiste, member of the Utah symphony, also available for solo performances. The family snapshots in faded colors show a serious ham. But this black-and-white photo is very dramatic. My father's love for his daughters was communicated by the way he described how much Heavenly Father loved his children—something a daddy could understand. When we visited cousins in the summer, my dad sent letters full of fun, a few dollars, and reminders to pray daily and live the commandments.

When I was eight I walked from the cold tile of the dressing room into the warm baptismal font with pride and relief. Pride because I was

about to be a member of the true church, living in the true state, with my true family smiling their approval. And relief because I had lied and stolen a candy bar and read a dirty James Bond book and needed my sins washed away. In the photograph I smile a toothless smile in my new yellow dress. I am holding the *Book of Remembrance* and a Book of Mormon. I am safe. Sure of the love of God and the love of my family. My universe is orderly, my future is certain, my father's hand is firm on my back, and the spirit of God like a fire is burning.

Epilogue

This version of the family saga is as I absorbed it and how I remember it. It may or may not be true. What is true is that growing up as a congenital Mormon involved a complicated mingling of religious and family beliefs and the development of a personal identity that was interwoven with the faith and practice of generations.

There was a time when I became angry with the family faith. There was a time when leaving the church was the spiritual equivalent of a family fight with angry tears and doors slamming. Now, from the safe distance that comes from being gone for several years, I am able to look at the family and its faith and see things differently. I am used to being free of the heaviness of some of the things I left behind. I am also more aware of many precious things I took with me as I said good-bye. I am becoming more aware of the wonderful, quirky qualities that are a part of old Mormon families and their faith, now appreciated and understood at deeper levels.

With a little distance I see the story of my family as more than I understood growing up. The story of immigration to a new country—a story reenacted by many generations in this world. The story of the colonization of the west which is a story of stubbornness, bravery, and conquest that I understand at a visceral level—as inappropriate and politically incorrect as that may be.

The family shared a utopian vision of a true religion and a true place. I don't share those particular visions, but I do suffer nearly intolerable bouts of optimism about a variety of subjects.

Gathering the photographs from the desk, I decide not to separate the maternal from the paternal side, as I had first thought of doing. I'll let them work it out. I still have no idea how to open the binding, so again everyone is stuffed between the pages of the *Book of Remembrance.*

Growing up in the Mormon church was an experience that caused my family and their faith to fuse into one true and revealed reality. That in turn became my faith, my identity, my reality. I am glad I left the Church. And I'm also grateful to take the ideas, the images, the music, the books, the remembered smells, and the connections bred in the bone.