

# The Precarious Walk Away from Mormonism, All the Time with a Stitch in My Side

*Phyllis Barber*

IN APRIL 1995, JUST BEFORE I LEFT for a month-long trip to Slovenia, I had a brief telephone conversation with Linda King Newell. I had been invited to speak at the annual Pilgrimage Retreat. She told me that the theme for the conference was "Our Stitch in Time" and asked if I had a title for my speech. I jokingly said, "What about A STITCH IN MY SIDE?"

"Why not?" she said in her inimitable and gracious way.

"I'll call you if I come up with something better," I said as I hung up but knew I'd be in Slovenia where it would be an ordeal to make a long distance call. This title would have to find a text.

Three days and much thought later, as I sat on the edge of Lake Bled in Slovenia watching white swans glide through the mist at 7:00 in the morning, I was struck with a title: "The Precarious Walk Away from Mormonism, All the Time with a Stitch in My Side." I laughed at the sound of the words, at the idea, at the audacity of speaking about a walk away from Mormonism to a group of Mormon women. But why not talk about my wanderings of the last twelve years, my exit from the ward doors to see what I could see in the big wide world? Why not talk about my encounters with other "isms"—Taoism, Buddhism, humanism, existentialism, fundamentalism, Sufism, Southern Black Baptistism where the gospel music made me "you go girl" happy as the choir rocked down the aisle in their yellow robes with gold thread and white satin hoods and my feet tapped out the time? Why not talk about my search for a religion that didn't insist upon being "the one and only true Church of God" and yet could still capture me as Mormonism once had? After all, Mormon-

ism was my first love. Why not talk about my subsequent doubts about fitting into a larger picture, about having no niche in which to curl and sleep and be cared for? Why not talk about the loneliness of such a decision and the fact that there's a stitch in my side?

But isn't it arrogant to think one's story is so important? In China they call a crazy person, "A person with only one story to tell." Could this be the case, that my struggle with Mormonism is the only story I truthfully have to tell?

Then I remembered my reasons for writing from the personal vantage point in the first place. I am a person who likes, who loves, who cherishes my safety. Though some may choose not to listen to or read my writing, no one can quarrel with my experience. They can't take it away. It's mine. People have a right to get angry with me, however, if I try to speak for them, if I try to witness for them. Julia Kristeva, a French critical theorist, says that writers must be aware of "the indignity of speaking for others. . . . We risk the indignation of excluding those others, whether we side with them or oppose them."<sup>1</sup> With that in mind, I decided to trust my intuition at the edge of Lake Bled and speak of the stitch in my side.

Just what did a stitch in the side mean anyway? A pain in the side from walking or running too fast? A pain in the side from laughing too hard? But whether it's caused from laughing or running, the stitch in the side hurt me in the same way—like a large needle pulling a thread through an unnameable place. Somewhere in my side.

Of course, my imagination took over as soon as I tried to find a definition. The first images I saw were the traditional ones: a needle and thread pulling at disparate pieces of old pajamas, old coats, old blouses, silk ties. Simple, unassuming, seemingly insignificant thread, so easily broken, attempting to hold so much together, trying to keep the pageant of humanity covered and comfortable as the play of life proceeds.

Then my imagination crossed over to the fantastic. I saw the large needle of God poking into people's sides and trying to connect them to the whole, trying to pull everyone together. I saw God for a moment as Janus, the Roman god identified with doors, gates, and all beginnings, the one usually represented as having two opposite faces. In this double-faced picture of God, the One, the female facing one direction, the male facing the other, neither beheld the other's face. Neither was able to leave the other's backside. Mother God was sewing on one side while Father God was digging in the fields on the other side, wearing out his overalls so they had to be mended. Mother God poked him with a needle every so often to remind him to take better care of his work clothes. She had enough mending to do.

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1. Quoted in Richard Jackson, "What Are Poets For," *Mala Revija: A Review of Slovene Art and Culture*, Spring 1995, 6.

And then there were the needles of responsibility sticking in my side. Do this. Do that. Don't be lazy. An idle mind is the devil's workshop. You can't sit still. You can't be a sloth. So much to do. So much time that mustn't go to waste. The needle in my side. God sewing.

Maybe this stitch in my side is God waking me from my walking slumber to assure me there's a God who'll be there when my seams come undone, who will sew me back together if necessary. God needling me. Mother/Father. One.

Am I a marionette of God, dangling from threads? Can I walk nowhere without the hand of God directing me? Threads. How they hold me. How I feel those stitches in my side.

The brief text of my own particular life, pertinent to this theme, is that, after thirty-eight years of dedication and every-meeting, ever-church-job devotion to Mormonism, I decided, through a strange, broken and knotted and broken and knotted again thread of events, that it was necessary and compulsory to find my way to God by myself, that I couldn't really know God unless I had a direct, unsecondhand, personal knowledge of the One, the Divine, the All, the Absolute. I needed to take this journey alone, even though I knew I might get lost. Other more hardy, sturdy individuals had died or gone insane before they were wakened by the Divine. I thought I should look for God everywhere—in nature, in the grace of a hawk's flight, in the rising and setting of the sun, in the faces of all the people who passed me, in the myriad expressions of the children of God, be they rich or poor, brown, black, yellow, or white, be they devout or rebellious, addicts, or homeless. All of these were manifestations of God, and I mustn't turn my face from any creation filled with life. I'd grown suspicious of my innocent, teenage, Las Vegas 5th Ward, Las Vegas Stake conception of God, the one that fit into a few pat testimonial phrases that I'd repeated over and over to distraction, as if I repeated them often enough, they'd be true. And I'd grown disillusioned, even broken-hearted about the loss of this innocence.

But still I wanted to try again—to really know God and God's love. I wanted to explore the Divine without the rhetoric of exclusivity. I would run away from home. I would brave the world myself, even as Don Quixote had done. I would find God.

And as I first walked from west to east, so to speak, from Mormonism to the exploration of the other, I thought it possible to walk away from the roots that held and succored me. But how long can one travel east before it becomes west again? is one of the more recent questions I've been asking. And is my struggle such an individual, such a particularly Mormon one?

I've chosen two stories from many I could tell from my running away from home.

*Story Number 1.* This past month I met Melena in a Slovenian University in Ljubljana. She is a professor in the pedagogical school, the university being separated into pedagogical and philosophical divisions. Melena is gracious in every way, but there was something automatic about her, as if she had been programmed to be nice, to say all the right words to guests from the United States. She was something like a marionette. It takes one to know one, maybe? She reminded me of the stereotypes of communism, the form of government that had ruled Slovenia (even if Tito had his individual stamp on it) until as late as 1990. Incidentally, even if the name communism is no longer in vogue, people in the know say that only the labels in Eastern Europe have changed, not the realities. It was evident to me that Melena was raised with certain concepts. With a certain language. That she'd been molded and shaped by the idealistic phrases not unlike the ones I'd known. "This is the ideal. This is the way life must be lived."

While many of the younger people in Slovenia didn't wear the mark of the past in the same way she did, she seemed trapped by the language and propaganda she must have listened to for the thirty-five plus years of her life. She was slightly stiff, eager to please, graciously abrupt, overly polite, and a product of a culture which has rigid ideas about how one must behave and think. I felt a *déjà vu* in her presence. I knew this woman. I recognized something of myself in her.

*Story Number 2.* Ariel Atzil, a tour guide in Israel, was once an Israeli fighter pilot. Ariel is movie-star handsome, intelligent, and the most intense man I've ever met. Two of his brothers were killed in the six-day war, and Ariel and his family live in constant fear of sending their children off to school. No wonder. On some of my tour group's excursions, we had seen laughing school children on school outings, accompanied by parents carrying semi-automatic weapons. Someone might harm them. A Palestinian may attack. The whole atmosphere of Israel felt as if it could combust at any time. There was palpable hysteria everywhere. In the Old City, young Hasids walked through the Arab Quarter at breakneck speed, carrying a weapon, looking at no one, acting as if they could be contaminated or killed if they slowed their pace.

One afternoon when our tour bus took us to a place where there was a spectacular view of Jerusalem, a Palestinian tried to pull a money changing scam on one of the older men in our tour group. He was showing bills, counting them out, all the time double ending the bills so they seemed to be twice their value. Ariel started shouting at the man in Arabic. The voices got louder. Ariel had a gun in a holster at his side. The men were suddenly nose to nose. The Palestinian was pulling up his tunic as if to procure some assistance, a weapon maybe. Everyone ran for the bus. My husband, David, ran interference, grabbed Ariel by the

shoulders, pulled him back to the bus, even as he was still shouting and fingering the gun at his side.

That evening at a quiet social in Ariel's home, I asked him why he stayed on in Israel when the tension was so intolerable. He replied that he'd lived in Switzerland for two years, but that he hadn't really liked it there. The people were closed. Hard to know.

I read between the lines of the conversation, maybe overdoing it with my fiction writer tendencies, but Ariel had a cause in Israel. He had something greater than himself to fight for. Something to live and die for. Dying for a cause must have seemed greater to him than dying in a nice, safe, possibly boring life. And he was trembling, even consumed, but most of all alive with his cause. Thus, Ariel.

These stories make me wonder about two issues that keep me tied to Mormonism: (1) the power of language, i.e., how caught are we by the language and precepts we have learned, and (2) the necessity of cause, i.e., conflict in one's life, meaning to strive for.

As for the first issue, how much are we shaped by the concepts with which we've been raised? Is it possible to emerge into a different sensibility (the notion of a daisy becoming a different daisy or a daisy becoming a dahlia comes to mind), or are we forever shaped, as Melena in Slovenia seemed to be, by the rhetoric of our young lives and idealism? How flexible is the language we learned as children in Sunday school? How deeply entrenched? At our cores will we always speak a language that is internal to our culture alone, only truly understood by other Mormons? Are we governed by a language that is rigid and set in its ways? Is it possible to expand beyond the perimeters of this language to create new possibilities for ourselves, our brothers, our sisters?

And the number two issue: Is it necessary to have a cause in one's life, a conflict that engages you, that engages me? Do our lives matter more if we care deeply about something?

Many of you have chosen to stay and stand firm within the structure of Mormonism, to have integrity in defending those principles that seem to have warped into unrecognizable shapes. Some could be described as "Freedom Fighters," not unlike the Slovenian partisans during World War II, many of whom lost their lives defending their country, their ideals. The people in the front lines (excuse the war-like, male metaphors) are heroines, heroes, if you like.

But one pause for thought: If the people in the front lines accomplish their goal, they may be out of a job, as is the case in Eastern Europe. And what then? According to Aleš Debeljak, a Slovenian poet, who feels he now writes in the shadow of literary giants who have truly suffered for their cause as he has not:

In a communist regime, constantly eroding under the radical criticism spearheaded by prominent members of the Slovene Writers' Union, young literati

were left with little ideological taboos to debunk, almost no political blacklists to challenge, and virtually no censors peeking over their shoulders. They had to design their own responses to a predicament that currently haunts so many Eastern European writers: "How to address broader moral and social dilemmas of the time when they seem to be better dealt with by anti-totalitarian activists?"<sup>2</sup>

It seems that causes can change. How does one identify oneself once the war has been fought and won? Is there always need for a cause to give meaning to our lives? I think perhaps there is, in one shape or another.

Other people have taken different stances that bear their individual stamp, their own brand of faithfulness within and without the fold. Still others have tried to take a stance in a broader and less defined world, such as myself, but have found themselves still entangled with Mormon threads.

As a writer continually searching for new ideas, Mormon themes, in particular, and spiritual themes, in general, continue to present themselves to me. A children's book I wrote entitled *Legs: The Story of a Giraffe* was chosen as one of the ten best books in Macmillan's spring 1993 catalogue by the Seventh Day Adventists, but it didn't sell well to the larger public when critics claimed the book was too sad. If they had believed in an eternal life, the sadness of the book would not seem so sad. But there it was: my assumption of eternal life, not always shared. But how can I be concerned with much else after thirty-eight years of trying to live The Gospel? Spiritual themes, Mormon themes, are like lullabies I heard as a child. They float up out of nowhere and feel like music that whispers to me even as I try to sing other songs.

As I have tried to present stories from Mormonism to a wider audience, to be an every-member-a-missionary like my parents always hoped I would be, to help the culture at large see the beauty, complexity, profundity, and engagement of Mormonism, rather than the usual scandalous misperceptions, I wonder if maybe the prospects for carving out a niche in a larger cultural frame are unpromising. I have a book of stories based on Mormon lore with a literary agent, and numerous national publishers have turned it down, usually saying that they love the writing and the stories, but they just don't have a clue who would buy them.

As I stand with my arms stretched out toward both my old world of Mormonism and the other world of many-isms, I wonder if I have a home anymore. Have I lost something in my precarious walk away from Mormonism? Should I have stayed and engaged in the fight closer to the

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2. Aleš Debeljak, "Public Matters, Private Trials: Slovenian Poets of the 80s," *Mala Revija: A Review of Slovene Art and Culture*, Jan. 1994, 2.

ward house? Am I doing any good in my corner of the territory—I so want to do some good?

But I have to face the question of whether I can return to a nostalgic past. Is home only an illusion I've hung on to? Maybe I'm deluding myself to think I have a home in this world anyway. We're all travelers and students here, and I'm happiest when I consider myself a traveler without the worry of having to belong, to be popular, to be right, to be safe—most of all without the worry about safety. Maybe it's best to surrender and be still. To make peace with heaven and earth and be a Siddhartha, ferrying travelers and seekers across the river. To be content with not knowing all the answers. But regrettably I'm not quite ready to sit by the river, in bliss. I'm still engaged in the search for God, looking for ways to experience "The Unbearable Lightness of Being."

Milan Kundera, the exiled Czech novelist and author of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, characterizes the modern writer in the Don Quixote gesture. Is this writer noble or foolish as she ventures out into the world to test her own paradigms for it?

What she finds, suddenly, is what the modern man and woman finds—a world that no longer fits her expectations, however learned, from religion, society, family, state, philosophy, science, etc. And worse, she finds a collective world actively or passively subverting her images and models for it. The contemporary writer must question a world that tries to force its dogmatic answers on her. That questioning of everything, from external modes of authority to the very motives of the self . . . must be continuous.<sup>3</sup>

But there is a thin line to consider as one establishes oneself as a questioner of authority: Czeslaw Milosz, the Nobel prize-winning poet, asks "What is poetry which does not save/ Nations or people?"<sup>4</sup> Many of us would hope we're involved in such a task. On the other hand, Richard Jackson, my colleague from Vermont College who took a group of students and writers like me to Slovenia, asks another question:

What sort of poetry can save nations or people and *not* participate in its own self-made imperialism? What sort of poetry can do this and not attempt to establish itself from a falcon's perspective, from a distant and austere Parnassus, looking down upon the very people it should serve?<sup>5</sup>

So by taking a walk away from Mormonism, I have found I can't tout myself as a brave soul or as a more valid authority on the subject because

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3. Jackson.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

I've asked questions. So-called bravery may be a lot of puffery. I can't negate the place, the roots, the ground whence I sprang. It isn't my wish to establish an imperious throne on which I can sit and toss wisdom pearls to the masses (though I confess to notions of grandiosity from time to time). But I had some need to assert my will, a small thing perchance, and an impetuous, immature thing maybe, but I have wanted to know what the word freedom means, freedom of choice, free will. But freedom is a lonely place sometimes. When there are no walls around you to hold you in place, no walls to keep you in your niche, what do you have to tether you to the earth? What cause do you have? So the question I have asked myself is just how far can I walk away from Mormonism until I have walked into something I am not, until I lose myself, pull out the roots that have given me nurture? What is the other side of so-called freedom?

God plucks at me. Pricks my side. I walk into the Uffizzi Museum in Florence, Italy. I find a painting by Gabrielle Moroni. I think of the angel on the temple, blowing his horn. I see a baptismal font in the Baptistery at the Duomo in Florence. It is not like the fonts found in today's Catholic churches, those used for the purpose of baptism by sprinkling. It is obviously deep enough and large enough for immersion, and part of me thinks, "Aha, just as my teachers told me in Sunday school. Ah yes, Mormonism is the truth after all." But then my traveling companion tells me that baptism by immersion fell into disuse because of the plagues and the concern about spreading disease, not because of some corruption of the church, as I'd always been led to believe. And on the last day in Slovenia, when I'm very late trying to catch a train from Ljubljana to Vienna, I stand in line until I finally reach the woman at the counter and ask for a ticket to Vienna. She tells me something in Slovene I can't understand. I plead with her. "What are you saying?" She repeats her Slovenian, which can't penetrate my brain. "What? I don't understand." And who should show up like Superman and Superman, but two Mormon missionaries from Utah, of course. They take me to the right ticket counter, wait while I buy my ticket, and carry my over-heavy bags to the train. "Truly the Mormon church is true, I say. Young boys like this. Saviors in embryo. Earnest and good and honest and fine young men." Somehow, in the young girl part of my heart, I want all guardian angels to be Mormon, but then I've found them everywhere, I must admit.

Why do I keep wanting to prove that the Mormon church is the only true church when that stance has always bothered me? Why is that question always at my back? Always on my tongue? Always there like a stitch in my side? Because there is always and forever a part of me who fell in love with Mormonism before she fell in love with anyone or anything else. It's a story of true love. People were there to nurture me, to guide me, to encourage me. I learned to dance, to give speeches, to play the pi-



ano by accompanying almost everyone who ever sang or played an instrumental solo in our ward. I have been given much. I have been blessed by my country which I call Mormon. I am a Mormon in my blood and in my bones. One ancestor was baptized by Hyrum Smith in Nauvoo, Illinois. Another drove the wagon for Joseph Smith and then for the Heber C. Kimball Company. These men are in my blood. And yet, and yet, one of my great-grandmothers was one of the first suffragettes in Utah. A public speaker. A singer for Brigham City holidays and occasions who didn't spend enough time in the home. Another Danish grandmother, a convert straight from the Old Country, used to brew beer in her basement. Thank God for the variety of ancestors, not all of whose stories would qualify for a Daughters of Utah Pioneers anthology. What is this thing called Mormonism, so revered in certain places in my heart and mind?

I think again of Melena who is still committed to the principles of communism, even though the regime has changed to something other than it was. She's a good woman. She believes in good principles, things like all people being treated equally, like materialism being an insatiable monster of sorts. She is shaped by these things much as I've been shaped by the communal character of Mormonism. But in order for me to grow, in order for me not to be static, I must question. That is the way of my being. I don't do it for any other purpose than that I must question in order to discover new values, even to transcend old ways of comprehending on the unrelenting path to God. I am, after all, on the path to God, not Mormonism. I need to be prepared for the face, possibly many faces of God that I'm unable to see in this mortal state. What we see may surprise all of us. Dash our expectations.

According to my colleague, Richard Jackson, the poet and the poem must always be at the frontiers of the heart and the imagination. Wallace Stevens in his poem, "Of Modern Poetry," says the poem must question everything it confronts to discover new values, however tentative: "It has to construct a new stage." At the same time it must fight a simple nostalgia for a simpler past: "It has not always had/ To find: the scene was set: it repeated what/ Was in the script./ Then the theatre was changed/ To something else. Its past was souvenir."<sup>6</sup> Can this be true of the never-changing principles of Mormonism?

The language we speak, even now, has been created by the richness of "Sisters, Brothers, the priesthood, the laying on of hands, spirit, testimony, obedience to the Word of God, the building of the Kingdom." We are shaped by these words. We are who we are because of these words, and yet I ultimately believe we need to keep questioning them, if only to

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6. Ibid.

find the far reaches of those words, the possibilities of those words. Words are not cement. They are fluid. They are alive with possibility. They can grow. They can transcend the old meaning. If "man is now as God once was," then all things are capable of growth, change, and transcendence, especially our habitual ways of seeing the world. Should we therefore not question the assumptions around us, the language we use, the traditions that may have outworn their usefulness? Should we also not pay tribute to that which is good, that which has blessed lives, in other words, the true gospel of Jesus Christ?

Maybe all of us are incapable of walking away from the truth. Maybe the truth surrounds us at this very moment. Maybe we are, indeed, in God's hands, or maybe we are a cell on the body of God as the Hindus say. The truth is in front of me, to the sides of me, as it is behind me in the nostalgic past.

So maybe I need to revise my thinking about the stitch in my side and consider if it's not from laughter after all. Maybe it's God poking me to say that no one can walk away from The One because we are all part of God. Maybe I've been in too much of a hurry, going somewhere I already am, maybe panting too much, caught on the horns of a dilemma I've created to keep my forehead scrunched, my brow knitted, myself occupied with a cause. Maybe God has a larger sense of humor than I'll ever comprehend. Maybe the stitch in my side is a gentle, though sometimes painful, reminder that we are on our way back to something that transcends this planet, this mortal life, these earthly and querulous ways, these confused times. Walking away. Walking toward. God is everywhere. We can't walk away because maybe we're inside of God. East is West and West is East.

As I write the final paragraph, my imagination now sees each of us as pictures on cardboard, the kind through which we used to thread yarn when we were young girls, a needle in hand, learning the feel of the needle, the yarn, the ancient art of sewing. The Mother Aspect of God is threading each card, still doing her mending, keeping us close together, keeping the pieces from falling apart. The yarn is filling in the outlines of these pictures of women holding smaller needles—mending, sewing, maintaining, caring, yes, but probing as well. Needle. Thread. A stitch in time.