

# Recovering the Signifier: New Jack Mormons

*Juan de Santiago*

And now it came to pass that the king and those who were converted were desirous that they might have a name, that thereby they might be distinguished from their brethren: . . . And it came to pass that they called their names Anti-Nephi-Lehies: and they were called by this name and were no more called Lamanites. . . And they began to be a very industrious people; yea, and they were friendly with the Nephites; therefore, they did open a correspondence with them, and the curse of God did no more follow them (Alma 23:16-18).

IF YOU HAVEN'T BEEN LIVING in a cultural bomb-shelter (or serving a mission) over the last few years, you've probably noticed a strange media obsession with my generation. *Twenty-somethings*, they call us. Sometimes *slackers*. Or *Generation X*. Even *Generation X-cess*. None of which I had any say in, nor from which I can escape. Fortunately, I am Mormon and accustomed to being called names. Before I could even ride a bike, I had been called Sunbeam, Star, CTR, and Targeteer. On Tuesdays I was known over time as Cub Scout, Webelo, Explorer, and Eagle. And on Sundays the names became Deacon, Teacher, Priest, and then Elder. At nineteen new names appeared: Greenie, Senior, DL, ZL, Branch P, AP. And interspersed with all of those were Messenger of Light, Ambassador of Christ, and everyone's favorite—Saturday's Warrior.

At twenty-one the interesting names all run out. One becomes the perpetually phlegmatic "Young Single Adult," a soul-less bureaucratic paste-up job, and frankly, after all the other titles, an embarrassment. But not soon after, I discovered there was a future title I'd failed to see, unconsciously overlooked—always thought I'd avoid—and unfortunately, just as lifeless as YSA.

A growing number of former Sunbeams, Blazers, and Merry Misses, now current Gen X-ers (and YSAs), are struggling to maintain a meaningful relationship with their church. Whether due to doctrinal disagree-

ments, lifestyle incompatibilities, modern religious skepticism, or just mere sloth, those Mormon young adults are participating less vigorously in the institutional expression of their faith. Or to use a technical term—following Satan down a slip-n-slide towards endless suffering, eternal damnation, and soggy, flattened blue-grass. Or to use a layman's term with less spine, but more diplomacy: going less-active. "Less-active": those are the words, and that's where this gets started.

Not to be left behind in the sensitivity races of the mid-1980s—the rush to rename marginalized groups of people—the church decided to take a crack at identity redescription. After the successful image make-over of '85 with the daring hymn-book color changes, the Brethren took courage and rolled up their sleeves for the makeover that would change the church's insensitive image forever. The oafish, over-presumptuous "inactive" finally got its long awaited corporate face-lift and emerged sparkingly updated—a stunning application of text-book political correctness. "World behold," announced Elder Oaks, "we give you—less active."

But alas, like Jennifer Grey's post-*Dirty Dancing* nose job, it was handsomely unobtrusive, but forgettably dull. Oaks's announcement fell flat; not even courtesy applause greeted its arrival at the characteristically raucous Saturday morning session. The new name inspired no one. "Less-active" as a new adjective is exactly that—it's just plain less-active. It's paunchy, it drinks Diet Coke, and it dresses like the ward clerk. Who, being identified as "less-active," will ever be able to saunter anywhere with sass? Where's the fun, the danger, the beef?

Something must be done. We "less-actives" pause before a momentous confrontation. Should victory be ours—linguistic liberation. Should we stumble—bureaucratic tyranny. Comrades, take courage, we lack only a title of liberty with our new name inscribed across its undulating face. Follow me through the possibilities.

*Heretic?* It's romantic and handsome, but no. Too Joan of Arc. Besides, what's ultimately needed is a title that's not exclusively specific to doctrinal disagreements. Not all less-actives have read *Women and Authority*. Some just like drinking beer.

*Apostate?* Double no. Too Fawn Brodie. Chances are high we'll end up with that title at some point soon anyway. What's the rush?

*Sunstoner?* Lots of potential, good magazine, cool get-high-on-the-sun implications, but I have to say, ultimately too new-age. Too Shirley Maclaine. And it's always best to avoid Yanni associations. Let's leave it on the back-burner.

*Knights In Satan's Service?* Damn near perfect. But they say it's still being used. Damn you, Gene Simmons.

*Intellectuals?* Sure, with holes in our jeans and Butt-hole-Surfers t-

shirts? Next.

*Liahonas*? It could work, although it's probably too obscure, and maybe a little too righteous. Not to mention it sounds like the name of a Hawaiian cocktail. But it's a dandy metaphor and associations with Richard Poll could only improve our questionable public image. Although, I must wonder if co-opting Liahona in some way slightly disfigures the original integrity of Richard's essay. Let's leave it on hold for a minute.

*Backsliders*? Works great with the slip-n-slide metaphor of hell. And associations with Levi Peterson (our culture's Charles Bukowski) are nothing if not uplifting. But backslider as a name might be just a bit too helpless, guilt-heavy, and redemption-needy. Let's leave it afloat, but keep looking.

*Lamans, Lemuels, Gadiantons, Alma-the-Youngers*? I like them, but ultimately they're too bad-boy, too Sid and Nancy. None of us really plan to tie up our younger siblings and whip them with cords (our lovers, maybe) or abduct church authorities (well, not in the near future), which probably means it's best to avoid the Mickey Rourke associations.

*Anti-Nephi-Lehies*? Fiendishly enticing. A more appealingly underhanded maneuver couldn't exist. The appropriation of the title (meant originally as a distinguishing group name for a band of hyper-righteous Lamanite converts) by a rag-tag group of late-twentieth-century religious misfits would not only be a deviously satisfying scheme but also a fittingly post-modern gesture. It's packed with Derridean playfulness. I think, however, it's just too much of a mouthful. Not to mention there are probably more than one or two bishops out there who might not appreciate its self-conscious levity and consider it an insulting offense. Best to maintain amicable ties, I say. So how about its acronym? *A.N.L's*? It definitely keeps the Anti-Nephi-Lehies sedition thing under-wraps, and it's easy enough to say.

So where does all of this leave us? Down-trodden, beaten, frustrated, and still less-active. But, perk up fellow-travelers, the *deus ex machina* is fixing to descend: say hello to "Jack Mormon."

The etymology of the word will forever be debated, but the way Grandma used it is unmistakable. As a kid whenever Grandma started into the Jack Mormon gossip, my mind followed along rustling up black and white *Life* magazine images. As she narrated, I'd see disillusioned men driving home in their air conditioning-less Monte Carlos, ERA stickers peeling off their bumpers. They'd pull into "Foxes" Lounge for a happy hour drink and small talk with the bartender, Lou, then head home for a TV dinner with the dog and Walt Cronkite. Later they sat shirtless on the porch of the trailer, blowing smoke rings, waiting for the home teachers to arrive. Always good-humored and kind. Eternally outspoken and unapologetic. They lived their lives by their own rules and

called their bishops by their first names. They usually skipped Sunday school and priesthood, but they gave regular fast offerings. And they made good assistant Scout Masters. Never bitter. They knew they'd always be Mormon. They also knew most Mormons would never really understand their jacked perspective on life, but that never stopped them from confounding the ward and bearing a testimony every few years.

I'm sure everyone knows their own childhood version of the Jack Mormon. It probably bears at least some resemblance to my own. In fact, doesn't everyone's Jack Mormon know the bartender at "Foxes" lounge? If your version of Jack Mormon has ever worn a polyester suit, spent weekends at the race track, belonged to a bowling league, drank a sixer of Schlitz, or owned a Herb Alpert record, then you could hardly be more in synch. My advice, fellow travelers: don't miss the train, or rather, the Greyhound. Jack Mormons of the world, unite—claim your new name and your rightful space on the orange vinyl love seat of fringe Mormonism.

I know this all might be hard to take in. Some might at first be wary. I see your thoughts: lots of campy smoke, but no real fire? Trivial culture babble? An amusing, but overwrought argument? In a head-to-head against the other prospects, it clearly out-performs in every way: it already has a proven track record, a distinguished heritage, and name-recognition value. It struts tons of street-talking attitude and it virtually glitters with white-trash chic. Not to mention, it just rolls right off the tongue. But, best of all, it shouldn't offend a soul. Even Grandma was comfortable talking about it.

If the book of Alma is a reliable guide to our future, we can anticipate that a change in name will only improve our fortunes. Besides the obvious "less-active" liberation that Jack Mormon brings, the name change itself promises even greater rewards. For the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, the change of name opened a friendly correspondence with their former adversaries, the Nephites—and most importantly, "the curse of God did no more follow them."

We hope only the same. Jack Mormon and cursed no more.