

Seeing the Stranger as Enemy: Coming Out¹

Edwin B. Firmage

Many people—many nations—can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that “every stranger is an enemy.” For the most part this conviction lies deep down like some latent infection, it betrays itself only in random, disconnected acts, and does not lie at the base of a system of reason. But when this does come about, when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premise in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, there is the Lager. Here is the product of a conception of the world carried rigorously to its logical conclusion; so long as the conception subsists, the conclusion remains to threaten us. The story of the death camps should be understood by everyone as a sinister alarm-signal.

—Primo Levi

IT'S NOT EASY TO MOTIVATE TWO THOUSAND people, about evenly divided among high school students, young parents, and older citizens, to march a mile up a steep hill to listen to speakers on an unseasonably beautiful winter day. But Utah's state legislators had been up to the task. With language so raw, so full of homophobic hatred, they had called these young citizens, our own children, bestial and subhuman. Another had declared that since gays couldn't reproduce, they recruited our children to sodomize. In a bizarre display of frantic ineptitude almost disarming in its naivete, an illegal secret meeting had been held to which selected state legislators had not only been invited but had attended. The exploitive demagoguery that followed violated every code of civility, honor, and human dignity in its attacks on homosexuals.

1. In March 1996 the Utah state legislature banned gay / straight student support groups in all Utah public high schools. This act, along with the rhetoric of several legislators attacking gay and lesbian students, precipitated a rally of some 2,000 people at Salt Lake City's Wallace F. Bennett federal building and a march and rally on Capitol Hill. The essay that follows resulted from the dialogue engendered by the rally.

Utahns are a conservative lot. But most of us, like most other folks, possess an inner sense of fair play and respect for other human beings, however we may categorize each other by race, sexuality, religion, or nationality. But these words of our state leaders had constituted hate speech, and hate speech invites and seems to legitimize hate crimes.

What moved me to words on 2 March 1996 at the Utah state capitol building was precisely that these words had been spoken by our elected representatives. They had been motivated, I believe, by deep homophobic fear among the leadership of the state's dominant religion, the Mormon church, resonating to its perception of current litigation and debate in Hawaii relating to same-sex marriage. (The church-owned *Deseret News* had reflected this fear in an editorial that was an embarrassment to the journalistic profession.) And since these legislators have the authority to make laws in our name, their actions ceased simply to be individually ridiculous. Their fearful beliefs became embodied in various pieces of legislation which threatened the civil rights and civil liberties of every Utahn.

Their words had been made flesh in the form of laws violating the civil rights of teachers and volunteers in schools and in their private lives. The prevention by whatever means of the formation of gay/straight high school student support groups was clearly in the public record as the ultimate objective of this legislation. Such pressure had been placed on the Salt Lake City School Board resulting in the banning of all extracurricular student clubs.

Thus as I looked at the hundreds of people before me on the capitol steps that winter day, my heart ached with the love of an old teacher, father, and grandfather of my own children. I spoke. My words, which follow, were angry and terse.

There will always be people ignorant enough, sick enough, or sufficiently mean-spirited (as a raisin is to a grape—shriveled up and hard) to call others subhuman, bestial. But, as Primo Levi noted, when this process of dehumanization becomes the policy of an institution—church or state—massive, dark evil results.

The Utah legislature and the dominant religious leadership of this state, as reflected in legislation, in illegal, secret meetings, and in an editorial in the Deseret News have embarked upon this journey into the heart of darkness.

Scapegoating other human beings violates the essence of Judeo-Christian religion, which teaches unconditional love and the equal worth of all human beings. Scapegoating reveals individuals and institutions which have not examined their own dark side and have therefore projected it onto others.

Scapegoating, projecting, and thereafter attacking a vulnerable and politically weak minority is the antithesis of prophetic religion and democratic politics. As we act by stigma, stereotype, or scapegoating, we practice the politics and the religion of hate. Prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Jesus—spoke on behalf of the weak and defenseless, the poor and the vulnerable. They thundered against the tyranny, the

blindness, and the ignorance of an establishment insensitive to social justice.

Social justice has been denied by the Utah legislature in naked attacks on our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, and all our school children and young adults.

Hate speech has been indulged in by state legislators who thereby invite hate crimes.

And leaders who claim a monopoly of prophetic guidance have abandoned true prophetic leadership—sensitivity to the poor and the vulnerable.

In both church and state Utah is experiencing the cost of inverse Darwinism in its leadership: the survival of the least fit.

Shame on our legislature for this outrage.

Shame on our governor for hiding behind his mantra of federalism in acquiescing to this outrage.

Shame on our senators who have applauded this act in direct violation of federal law sponsored by one of them.

Shame on a school board for caving in to the pressure and the politics of scapegoating, stereotyping, stigmatizing—violating the constitutional rights of students and teachers to assemble and to speak.

And perhaps most serious of all in its moral bankruptcy in this situation—shame on the Mormon leadership for fomenting this spirit of intolerance and hate. I say “worst of all” because I believe this is the source, the cause of such irrational, illegal, and immoral action. In debasing the prophetic role from its honored position of speaking fearlessly for social justice, dominant religious leadership has at once violated the First Amendment and the first and second commandments: that we love God and one another.

I express my love, my admiration, and my support for all students gay, straight, black, brown, white: at East and West high schools and other schools. I honor the image of God in each of you. Reject any idea that demeans your full and complete humanity in the image of God.

Your struggle ultimately will result in greater understanding, greater love, and a greater, healthier community. God bless you.

In my own life I've learned fundamental lessons terribly late and only then through the grace of other people. Usually great pain and personal loss were necessary before I could be sufficiently open—really, to be savagely broken open—to be vulnerable and to learn.

As a young boy and man growing up in Provo, Utah, I don't remember ever seeing a black person. Only once, as a young boy on a buying trip for Firmage's department store traveling to St. Louis with my parents and grandparents, did I see black porters in the Pullman car and waiters in the dining car.

Years later, living on Chicago's South Side while attending the University of Chicago, my learning of race began. Then a graduate course with wonderful teachers at the White House: Hubert Humphrey, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the Urban League, and Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I fell into the arms of loving teachers who somehow responded lovingly to

what must have been a provincial, crude, and unconsciously offensive young man. But they chose to see beyond that. Slowly, and ever so late, I began to learn.

One would hope that the destruction of the lines that divide us might be done—at least, in part—by deduction and not by personal experience. But I've not been that sensitive or smart. Usually, however similar the categorization, I've not seen the obvious connection. Like a young law student who just couldn't see that cases A and B were really the same, distinguished only by incidentals, not fundamentals, I've had to learn that Hispanic rights are like black rights by working with Hispanics. Young Hispanic students at the University of Utah, the first group of any number, helped me learn. With their support, I became the first faculty advisor to the Hispanic Caucus, which evolved into our Minority Caucus, as other groups grew and joined.

Then women. In my own law class ('63) at the University of Chicago, there was only one woman. I never knew her. Much later, after joining the faculty at the University of Utah, we enjoyed in one year more women in law schools throughout the nation than had been at any time before in all laws schools, the bench, bar, and teaching faculties nationwide combined.

Empathy can go no farther than our experience permits. Usually, when we say, "I understand," we do not. "Human Rights" is a magnificent vision, but the whole is comprised of distinct parts. Women students and faculty taught me numerous lessons that I thought I already knew. But I did not. At least, I did not know that many issues looked very different through a woman's eyes. I had much to learn. I still do. My views on critical issues—abortion, the ERA, many others—turned 180 degrees within a few years as female colleagues in classes and on our faculty taught me.

Even then it was years later, and only in the agony of separation and divorce, that my own unconscious patriarchal pretensions burst into consciousness in a dream—the most powerful archetypal dream of my life. That dream of a beautiful Woman influenced what became the McDougall Lecture I delivered in 1989 at the Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City. The audience of 1,000 was predominantly Catholic and Mormon. Neither church ordains women. Though the lecture covered thirty pages on the teachings of Jesus, Gandhi, and Jung, one page dealt with the ordination of women. That lecture, entitled "Reconciliation," with dark cosmic humor, ended a thirty-year marriage and affected my relationship with the church of my birth. Of course, my relationship to both church and marriage was rent by many issues over many years. But what I then thought was a loving statement of personal realization of my own appalling patriarchy was perceived by many as a threatening attack on

the institutions of marriage and church. Hundreds of letters and phone calls, including three death threats, and a media firestorm that lasted six or eight months followed. While 99 percent of callers and correspondents were favorable to my message, I am under no illusion that my views reflected the thinking of my fellow Utahns. A majority, then and now, probably disagrees with me. The debate continues. My views remain as I put them, only stronger, more sure.

Before this debate on the ordination of women, I participated in the struggle against basing the MX missile in Utah and Nevada. I began in an op-ed piece published in the *Salt Lake Tribune* in 1979. Antonia Chayes, then Under-Secretary of the Air Force, responded. We joined in combat from that time. My position, in retrospect, was shockingly conservative and provincial: "Don't put MX in my backyard. Try somewhere else." But an unexpected thing happened as I fought the Air Force and our own politicians. I met wonderful leaders of many religions: Jews, Catholics, Episcopalians, Baptists, the Brethren, Quakers, Hindus, and Buddhists. We organized to beat the MX. And we did. But in the process another line dividing me from others was breached. My Mormonness and their Catholicity or Jewishness were important but lesser truths. To be honored to be sure, but never again to be the basis for derogation or discrimination. For the incomparable transcendence of the higher truth of our common humanity blazed before my eyes like the noonday sun. For this, I owe a special debt to Rosemary Lynch, my dear Franciscan sweetheart, now eighty, who introduced me to St. Francis of Assisi, and to Sister Mary Luke Tobin who introduced me to the works of Thomas Merton.

As this struggle about nuclear weapons raged for many years, my speaking became nationwide and foreign. Other strangers could be seen as either enemies or sisters and brothers. Groups of Germans protesting Pershing II missiles in their backyard joined us, together with young Russians. Again our common humanity clearly bound us together not as adversaries but as mountain climbers roped together scaling a frightfully perilous peak. Together we lived, or together we died.

As a young Mormon boy, I married a lovely Mormon girl after graduation from Provo High School and one year at Brigham Young University. We were both nineteen. I was called on a mission to England and Scotland after one week of marriage. I left my new wife in Provo and went to the United Kingdom for two years. (A long, happy, and fruitful marriage followed with eight children, seven living, and the same number of grandchildren. Our ways later parted, but we are now better friends than we were mates during the last painful years of huge differences.) After Chicago and the White House, I served twice as a ward bishop, twice on high councils, and on the General Board of the Mutual Improvement Association. My first bishopric was interrupted to allow

me to attend the United Nations in New York and the arms control talks in Geneva, Switzerland, as United Nations Visiting Scholar. Under a dear friend, Oscar McConkie, Jr., my stake president, we enjoyed great freedom of conscience and action in our bishoprics. Later changes in leadership, however, gave far more authoritarian, restrictive leadership.

In my ward were two young men. As bishop, I knew one had experienced a homosexual act. I sensed that he was heterosexual, but, of course, I didn't really know. I was only a few years older than the young students over whom I presided. The other young man was open and obviously gay. I knew of no sexual activity on his part. The identity of the first, as far as I knew, was not known by the stake president. The homosexuality of the latter was known, but not through me. Technically, I was obliged to reveal their circumstances to my superior. I did not.

Mormon doctrine on the confidentiality of confession (the sacrament of reconciliation) is far less structured or sacrosanct than in the Catholic or Episcopal traditions. Often information obtained in confession will be given to a succeeding bishop or to ecclesiastical superiors. I refused to divulge such information to successors, superiors, or to any living person, including my spouse. I was ordered by my superior to initiate excommunication procedures against one of these young men. I refused. My superior told me he would come to my ward and release me if I refused. As an M.D., and much older than I, he assured me that homosexuality was learned, chosen. I had no experience or knowledge to refute him, but I sensed deeply and powerfully that he was wrong. His demand aggressed my soul. As angry as I can ever remember being, I shouted in the phone, "You damn well come down and release me, but I'll not excommunicate this young man, neither will he ever know of this conversation." He released me shortly thereafter. One young man married, is highly successful in his profession, and has served his church in ward and stake positions of leadership. The other disappeared from my life. I owe them both an enormous debt.

Of much greater impact, however, and much later, I had the privilege as a teacher of working closely with research assistants. Teaching hundreds of students, teachers can only enjoy the opportunity of intimate friendships with few of them. Three young men and several women fell into that category with lasting power and love. Two men, now not so young (both grandfathers themselves teaching law at Creighton and Louisiana State), are as close to me and as loved as my own children. The third, brilliant, sensitive, and gifted beyond all but a few and at least their equal, I dearly loved. I still do. He worked for me two of his three years. I tried not so subtly to get him to date one of my daughters. I hoped he would become my son-in-law. For two years I invited him to vacation with my family after his graduation and association with a large law

firm. For reasons I couldn't then understand, he always gently declined.

Before "coming out" publicly as a gay man, he flew from New York to have lunch with me and tell me personally what I already had come to know. I owe my friend a great debt, so significant that I can never repay him. I can only love him. I learned to love this magnificent human before I knew he was gay. My own knowledge of homosexuality at the time was appalling. It was simply nonexistent. Speaking and acting from my own heterosexuality, my unconscious ignorant insensitivity must have been as apparent to my young friend as were my racial attitudes in my twenties at the White House with Roy Wilkins. Still, he loved me.

Later, following the McDougall Lecture at the Cathedral of the Madeleine, Mormon gays asked me to speak at their meetings. As I did, at first with trepidation, I had a chance to talk with these young Mormons. I asked each one, alone, how early they recognized their homosexuality and to what degree they considered it innate or chosen. Every one told me that he knew when he was very young: seven, ten, thirteen. And each *knew* it to be innate. I believe them. Scientific research, not present before the 1970s, now powerfully supports my own and others' conviction, personal and anecdotal, on this point. Not one gay person with whom I have ever spoken considers that he or she *chose* to be gay or lesbian. They *knew* they had same-sex attraction early in life. None whom I have met has felt that he or she could change this.

Affirmation, the organization for Mormon homosexuals, with branches throughout the country, met, at least in the gatherings I addressed, in the Unitarian church. They were not allowed the facilities of their own faith. I asked each young man what had been his experience with the Mormon church. Many had been excommunicated. Others had asked to have their names removed from church membership. A few kept their homosexuality secret and were in varying degrees of activity within their church. The majority had suffered greatly by the words and actions of Mormon leaders, from general authorities to local bishops and stake presidents, whose inexperience with this issue led them to respond occasionally with incredible sympathy and support, but more often with well-intentioned ignorance, at best, to callous insensitivity to outright vindictive malice. Ecclesiastical intimidation and action have been taken as well against heterosexual parents of gay children when they too openly defended the integrity and humanity of their children. Mormon parents try to cope with social and ecclesiastical ignorance and ostracism by forming support groups and publishing a newsletter among themselves. Our children in high school deserve no less. I am grateful to the members of Family Fellowship, a voluntary service organization composed primarily of parents of homosexual children and siblings, extended family, and friends.

We Americans fought a civil war and enjoyed a century thereafter in which the nation, not the state, became the final guarantor of our civil rights. What do we find so appealing today in the fragmentation and disintegration of the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia that we want to emulate that catastrophe? The Constitution guarantees these rights to us as Americans, not as citizens of the sovereign state of Utah. These rights include the right to speak; to remain silent; to assemble; to petition the government regarding our grievances; to worship and to be free from the same; to enjoy the rights of privacy and autonomy and conscience; to be free of racial and sexual discrimination. No bill depriving teachers, students, or the rest of us from enjoying these rights should come out of a session, special or otherwise, of our legislature.

Our governor must demonstrate the courage and conviction of one deserving national recognition to prevent such misbegotten legislation in the legislature before it gives birth to such a deformity. If birth occurs, veto any such bill. With an 80 percent approval rating among Utah's voters, he can afford the luxury of following a good heart.

Our national political leaders should defend the very legislation protecting equal access to extracurricular public forums they helped to create. The Salt Lake City School Board must stand up and reverse its decision banning extracurricular clubs. And, of course, gay/straight support clubs should be allowed, encouraged, and guided by loving, qualified professionals.

Most important, every religious denomination should thunder from the pulpits the constant prophetic vision of four millennia: In the name of social justice, we are obliged as humans to protect the powerless and the vulnerable. Our own humanity finds its fruition and fulfillment in the image of God.

I wrote the initial draft of this essay in one night from 9:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m. the next morning since my travel schedule started at 8:30 a.m. and allowed no other time. When my son Eddie met me early to drive me to the airport, I handed him many pages of illegible handwritten script and asked him if he and his wife, Carrol, could somehow decipher and type this piece and fax it to me in Nauvoo. Carrol was to give birth to Christopher in two days.

My travel plans took me to Nauvoo to spend a few days with my wonderfully Mormon mother who still refuses to give up on her wayward son. In loving reunion we stood on the banks of the Mississippi River a week after the ice had broken. It was eleven below zero in March. And 150 years and one month after her great-grandmother and my great-great-grandmother Zina D. H. Young with her husband, Brigham Young, crossed that frozen river with 17,000 Mormons following. Wagons fell

through the ice. Women and men ran from other wagons to save the children. Zina later looked back from her wagon and saw their beloved Nauvoo temple in flames. Over 70,000 would ultimately make that trek. Thousands would die along the way. Yet they sang: "And should we die before the journey's through, happy day! All is well!"

I returned home three days later to packets of personal stories from many individuals and families, stimulated by my capitol hill speech. My sources were predominantly Mormon. I read this material through a second sleepless night. It included letters from young people just prior to their suicide. Many young gays commit suicide with no one to talk to: not parents; not friends; not church authorities; not professionals or others. Bereft of anyone to whom they might express bewilderment and pain, they simply chose to die. No one will ever know the cause of their suicide; letters to church leaders pleading for understanding and love; letters from heterosexual women and gay husbands, describing the hopeful beginning and then the growing sense of futility, frustration, failure, the painful understanding that things simply wouldn't work, and the ending of their marriages; letters to and from bewildered parents and children in unimaginable pain and fear. Unable to approach church leaders, fearing excommunication, clinging only to each other. And sometimes not even that. Sometimes parents disowning and rejecting children for being born homosexual. Unable to put these documents down until I finished, I returned the next day to teaching, ragged and spent. Random thoughts and feelings were going through me, only partially integrated. Such as, if homosexuality is as prevalent as even the most conservative studies indicate (from 3 to 10 percent of the population), then in the Mormon faith alone approximately one million people, gay and lesbian children and adults, their parents, siblings, and close friends, would be directly affected by church teachings and ecclesiastical policy. Are these people strangers or fellow citizens? Ostracized or in hiding, or in communion? What is the moral and spiritual quality of pastoral care extended to them? What is the effect of such teachings and practice on the larger political community within which Mormon citizens reside? Upon elected officials who determine state legislation and policies regarding our schools?

Like race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion (and increasingly, I hope, age), being straight or gay is an important but lesser truth. So how does someone gay or lesbian reach that truth? Generalizations for the homosexual community are as difficult as trying to formulate a description of the "typical" heterosexual. Preference for a particular sex is indeed implied, but how each individual manifests this is extremely diverse. They are old, young, celibate, in the early throes of infatuation, in long stable relationships, raising children, living alone. Homosexuals are mostly

born into heterosexual families and have been assumed to be "straight." Knowing they are not becomes obvious to all of them at different times in their lives. Some "know" as children. They innately sense their difference. Others know in young adulthood when, even though they've been taught that they are to desire the opposite sex, they find they simply can't. They don't have those feelings within them. Others believe if they can only marry they will learn to feel "appropriate feelings"; after two days or twenty years they learn that they can't. It is not in their makeup. Wanting to conform cannot change this. It doesn't happen because the individual or society wants or demands it. There are a few who even claim to have chosen this difficult lifestyle, to avoid the repressions of patriarchy, but they are a small minority.

Homosexuals do have one thing in common. All have had to make the same journey. They have had to review their lives, their families' expectations, their religion, their societal norms, and at the end accept that they must face tremendous opposition and discrimination yet stand up for their personal truth. This process is called "coming out." It is facing your personal truth. Admitting to yourself and others that you can only be what you are. They are as male, female, and homosexual as the Creator made them. It is this act that sets the spirit free but subjects your mind and body and emotions to the restrictions of a society that chooses not to recognize an individual's truth, integrity, civil rights, the love that fills his heart, her very humanity. For many this is a terrifying step that is never taken lightly. To be straight or gay is a difference to be honored, respected, acknowledged. But when that runs into the greater truth of our common humanity, it must give way. That is the true meaning of human rights.

And if we follow St. Francis, as I try always failingly to do, even humanity might not be the greatest truth. Increasingly I feel that humankind is but the articulate and self-conscious advocate for a living, breathing cosmos as singular and interconnected as a vast grove of identical aspens connected by a cosmic tap root, animate and inanimate somehow animate.

Primo Levi entered my life as he ended his. I discovered his book in 1987 while writing the annual University of Utah Reynolds Lecture, "Ends and Means in Conflict" (the 1989 McDougall lecture was its sequel) in Canterbury Cathedral in England. The week I read Levi, he took his own life in Italy. This eloquent victim of the Holocaust recognized that there will always be people who will deny the humanity of others. Having denied this humanity, they are then free from the restraint we place upon ourselves as our spirituality, our morality and ethics, and our laws demand respect for each other. But these individual people accomplish random and disconnected acts—horrible but not threatening the in-

tegrity of the whole society. But, Levi says, when *institutions*—church or state—accept the dehumanization of any group (Catholics, Mormons, blacks, women, Jews, Bosnians, Russians, gays, lesbians), that becomes the premise of a syllogism which when carried to its inexorable conclusion ends in genocide. The final solution.

The brilliant Stanford cultural theorist René Girard, and his equally brilliant disciple and my friend Gil Bailie (see Bailie, *Violence Unveiled* [New York, 1995]), have revealed the heart of the politics and the religiosity of the scapegoat: that process whereby society—or an individual—in a state of disintegration attempts to recollect itself by placing its own guilt on a victim, the scapegoat. Biblical religion demonstrates this phenomenon time and again and provides the only way out. Antique religion organized society based on an original scapegoating act: the death of one to foment enough passion that others in the hysteria of the moment might coalesce. The greatest evil in modern time—the Holocaust—is only the latest and greatest example. Hitler, an evil genius, played upon the scapegoat to organize Germany of the 1930s from the disintegrating chaos of loss in war, depression, and the greatest inflation the modern world has ever known. Jews, homosexuals, Slavs, communists, Russians, gypsies became the scapegoats. The sacrificial victims to foster a reunited Germany, and by that process to feed ever more victims to this monster God of Darkness who must be fed an increasing number of human sacrifices. This violence is insatiable. Like heroin addiction, temporary satiation can be maintained for a while only by increasing the dosage. Bailie reveals, from a biblical perspective, the only alternative: Love so enormous that violence and projection of darkness onto another is rejected for deep introspective non-violence. One who withdraws the shadow from projection onto another needs no objective enemy “out there.” He has already met the enemy within. And that enemy is reconciled by integrating love.

During much of my life, I have fearfully seen the stranger as enemy. I thank God for friends—old, young, dead—who have helped me change ever so slowly. I have so far yet to go.

When I was sixteen and suffering from pneumonia, Dr. Nixon made that traditional house call, with penicillin in his black bag. He said, “Eddie, you’re so healthy, really, that you’ll live another ninety years!” I hold him to his promise. At my present stage of evolution, I’ll need at least that many years.

I’ve recently had three back surgeries, and the pain as I write is constant. I’ve had to write this piece lying on the floor of my office and home. But the pain that matters isn’t really in the back. The image that has been coming to me, repeatedly, is from an early episode of the original *Star Trek* series. In that episode, “Devil in the Dark,” on a planet far

away, miners are beginning to be killed, inexplicably. They're mining rocklike nodules filled with rich minerals. Kirk, Spock, and crew go to the planet to investigate. Thousands of these goose-egg nodules have been harvested. Spock travels to the heart of the mine. There he finds a large turtlelike creature, but with rough, ugly, rocklike skin. Sensing a relationship between this homely, presumably subhuman creature, Spock places his hand on her to meld his mind with hers. Then he collapses from the pain. Unending, unbearable pain. Pain from this mother of the thousands of eggs, not rock nodules, animate, not inanimate. Those were her children. The miners in their ignorance were slaughtering her children. Isaiah said, "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb" (49:15). In his own pain, Spock could not remove his hand from this grieving mother.

I put my own hand on thousands of pages of appalling stories of grief, grief and pain so enormous that I think I will die. And I can't remove my hand.

When I write something like this, it pursues me relentlessly. It follows me to my classes, to my home. I become even more absent-minded. Years ago at Chicago, my dear spouse, pregnant with a baby (who would die three months after birth), asked me to go into the bathroom and bring her her morning sickness pills. Reading a book and writing a dissertation, I wandered into the bathroom and somehow found my way back, with the water. She said, "Ed, where are the pills?" I said, "My hell, I just took them!" I suffered no morning sickness throughout the pregnancy.

Tonight I return home to write. I turn on the bathroom faucets to wash and wander out with an idea, pen in hand, looking for paper. I begin to write. Eventually returning to the bathroom, I discover, for the fourth time recently, water pouring out my sink, submerging my carpets. I call Class One; they no longer ask directions to my home. Then I find I put my pen, uncovered, in my favorite faded red shirt. Now with everlasting ink-mark to remind me of this essay.

I'm lying on the floor, listening to a magnificent guitarist, Michael Dowdle, perform a collection of Mormon and other Christian hymns. "Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning," "High on the Mountain Top," "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief," "We Thank Thee, Oh God, for a Prophet," "Come, Come, Ye Saints," "Let Us Off Speak Kind Words," and "Lead, Kindly Light," "All Creatures of Our God and Our King," "I Am a Child of God." There are no words. Just the guitar. I know the words. It's been a long time.

Cynthia, my colleague who helped in the creation of this essay, just handed me music the likes of which I've never heard before. A lesbian singing her sexuality. I hear Jamie Anderson sing "Bad Hair Day," "I'm Sorry," and "Straight Girl Blues." I laughed so hard I rolled around my

office floor. Then I wildly danced. Lord help me if a student or colleague wanders in. I must be violating some new state statute since I'm having so much fun. Sorry, Jamie, but you are now dancing with a straight man. A Mormon man! Sorry, Brigham. On second thought, I think he would laugh, cry, laugh again, and ask where he could get the CD. He would understand.

It is now Sunday morning, Palm Sunday. I'm still dancing with Jamie, taking her CD home and watching through my large front room windows, watching hundreds of my Mormon sisters and brothers stream into the chapel a stone's throw away. As the sun streams over Mount Olympus. No accidents.

Now I'm in my office, listening to Gregorian chants. Thinking of Sister Rosemary and Rome. We've been there together for many weeks, in 1987 and again in 1993. The first time, more naive and therefore more open, I blurted out: "Rose, don't you ever miss having children and a family?" I was then two years from my own divorce but, blessedly, I didn't know it. She said, "Ed, I've always had a family. I have mother, father, brothers, and sisters." With wonderful simple-mindedness, I said, "But you're celibate and can't have a husband or children." She said, "I have hundreds, thousands of children all over the world. I have a community in which I live. My sisters and brothers in Christ. I have friends in hospitals and schools and in jail." With more prescience than I knew, I concluded, "How do you move from one family to another?" She said, "Ed, as one family disappears, or at least changes form, another appears. God works that way. Don't fear."

Who is my family? What is family?

Here I sit in Utah, largely and initially colonized by Mormons fleeing Missouri where a governor issued an extermination order inviting their slaughter. Many were. And then Nauvoo. I've spent nearly a decade of my life writing of that time in the first legal history of the Mormon experience in the nineteenth century, *Zion in the Courts*. Polygamy was secretly practiced in Nauvoo by church leaders. The *Nauvoo Expositor*, a paper published by anti-Mormons and alienated former Mormons, exposed this practice (along with publishing outrageously false claims about Mormonism and church leadership). The destruction of the *Expositor* under the order of Joseph Smith was a precipitating cause of his murder along with his brother Hyrum.

Marriage—strange inexplicable marriage to the majority of Americans—was at the heart of this great mass movement and colonization of a major part of the western United States. Zina had been married and "sealed" to Joseph Smith in a temple ceremony and now, following Joseph's death, at her choice, was married "for time" to Brigham Young. I would come much later through this union, so strange for so many of my

fellow Americans.

The United States would ultimately wage war on the Mormons. Their civil rights, one by one, would all be denied. The right to vote, to serve on juries, to hold office (never mind that the Constitution prohibited a religious test for such honor), to emigrate, to not give testimony against one's spouse. Babies were born in jail to women who, though pregnant, remained there rather than testify against their husbands.

Finally the federal government crushed nineteenth-century Mormon culture, Mormon communality, theocratic government, and polygamy. It took an army and threatened seizure of all corporate property of the church, including our temples. But it worked. The Manifesto came. And statehood.

But did it really work? What are the limits of law? Of force and violence? Within fifty miles in any direction of where I sit on the University of Utah campus, thousands of fundamentalist Mormons continue to live with the people they love. In plural marriage.

The law, with all its savagery, may swoop down in an Arizona town at early morning while people are still asleep and rip children from the arms of their parents.

But then a society gasps at the savagery of what they've done. While never formally possessed of sufficient decency even to apologize for such a violation of fundamental human rights, the institutions of church, state, and media collectively realized that they had been colluding partners to a great crime.

I have no final answers regarding the deep mysteries of human love. I would approach this issue of love and sexuality as if it were a burning bush on sacred ground. I would honor the mystery. No, I'm not proposing a return to polygamy. But I am old enough to remember going with my grandmother Zina when I was six or seven to visit "Aunt So and So" and other "aunts." I vaguely knew that they were surviving widows of men living in polygamy when that practice formally ceased in Mormon culture. They loved each other.

When we marginalize and criminalize whole groups of people, why should we be surprised if some begin to act on that vision seen in the eyes of the predominant culture? If we deny the benefits of monogamy to whole groups of people, why should we be surprised if some are not monogamous?

What are the limits of the law? Where must compassion, non-judgment, inner-spirituality, long-suffering persuasion, and dialogue begin when law passes the point of being effective?

People who love each other will live together. They always have and always will.

We have much to talk about in our state and in our country and in

our world. Talk. And listen. It trumps law and violence most of the time when we reach down into areas as deep, as mysterious, as wonderful as our sexuality, religion, spirituality.

And love. So that we may refrain from judgment when there is so much we do not know. How can we legislate when, honestly, we do not possess the knowledge to know what we should be legislating?

What we do know is that we are all in the same soup. Together. If we drop the pretentiousness of position and power, we know this. We are all wonderfully, humorously, sadly, joyfully human. In the image of God. All of us.

Thomas Merton said it best:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, or spurious isolation. ... If only we could see each other [as we really are] all the time, there would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. ... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other ... but this cannot be seen, only believed and understood (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* [Garden City, NY, 1968]).