

# Mormonism, Alice Miller, and Me

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IN THE PAST TWENTY YEARS MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN about unhealthy family dynamics and their later manifestation in adult dysfunctional behavior. One of the pioneers in this field is Alice Miller. Miller worked for more than twenty years as a Freudian psychoanalyst before abandoning traditional Freudian theory. In *The Drama of the Gifted Child*,<sup>1</sup> she describes what she believes to be the root cause of adult dysfunction and neurosis, and the path to healing from it. In this and subsequent books, she lays out her own healing journey and her discoveries as a psychotherapist.<sup>2</sup>

Like others, I have found Miller's work to be of significant value. In many ways her discoveries describe not only my healing process in relation to my family, but also in my relationship with the LDS church. In this essay I would like to explore how the family dynamics Miller writes about may be applied to relationships with the church. I will begin with an overview of Miller's basic tenets, then explore some of their applications to my relationship with the church.

Miller's work begins with the premise that all children have a fundamental need to be respected and validated as the people they really are and as the central actor in their own lives. The fulfillment of this need is essential for the development of a healthy sense of self. When Miller speaks of children "as they really are at any given time," she means their

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1. Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981).

2. Additional books include *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983; The Noonday Press, 1990); *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1984); *Banished Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); *The Untouched Key* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); and *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1991). See also J. Konrad Stettbacher, *Making Sense of Suffering* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1991).

“emotions, sensations, and their expressions from the first day onward.” A child’s inner feelings and sensations form the core of the self, the “feeling of self,” around which a sense of identity develops.<sup>3</sup>

In the first months and years of life, children need to be at the center of their parents’ attention, and receive ongoing mirroring and validation from them. If children are lucky enough to grow up with mirroring parents who are able to meet their needs to be validated, understood, and respected as the unique individuals they are, then a healthy sense of self can develop in them.<sup>4</sup>

Miller defines a healthy sense of self as “the unquestioned certainty that the feelings and wishes one experiences are a part of one’s self.”<sup>5</sup> It is based on the authenticity of our own feelings. Spontaneous, natural contact with our own emotions, thoughts, and wishes is what gives us inner strength. It means that we can live out our feelings as they occur. We can allow ourselves to be afraid when threatened, happy when happy, or angry when our needs are not met. We know what we want and don’t want, and are able to express ourselves, regardless of whether we will be loved or hated for it.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the conditions Miller finds in healthy families include:

- \* Strivings for autonomy and independence are not experienced as an attack on the parents.
- \* Aggressive impulses do not upset the confidence and self-esteem of the parents, and thus can be effectively neutralized.
- \* There is no need to please anybody, and children are allowed to experience and express whatever is active in them during each stage of their development.
- \* Children are allowed to experience and express strong feelings such as jealousy, anger, and defiance.
- \* Because children are able to express ambivalent feelings, they learn that we all have both “good” and “bad” within us. They do not need to split off and repress the “bad” from the “good,” either in themselves or others.
- \* Children can use their parents in child-appropriate ways, because their parents are independent of them.
- \* Because parents love their children as individuals separate from themselves, children’s ability to experience healthy love is made possible.<sup>7</sup>

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3. Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 32.

5. *Ibid.*, 33.

6. *Ibid.*, 33, 39.

7. *Ibid.*, 33-34.

To provide this kind of healthy emotional environment, parents themselves need to have grown up in such an environment. If they did not, they need to have worked through the resolution of their own resulting unmet needs before they can fully meet their children's needs. Parents who have not become aware of and worked through their own unresolved needs remain emotionally deprived. Throughout their lives they seek, consciously or unconsciously, what their own parents could not give them. This search can never fully succeed, because it belongs to a time that has long since passed, when the self was first being formed. Nevertheless, adults with these unsatisfied, often unconscious, needs will be repeatedly compelled to gratify them through substitute means.<sup>8</sup>

When adults with such unresolved needs become parents, unconsciously and despite their best intentions they may use their children to meet these needs. They may experience their child not as the center of his or her own activity, but as a part of themselves. If their children do not behave as they wish or need them to, they are deeply hurt and disappointed. Loss of control over their children often leads to uncontrolled anger. They may attempt to take from their children (or train their children to give them) the things they never received from their own parents—including respect, devotion, and the presence of someone who always takes them seriously. This can all be done under the conscious rationale of simply training children to be respectful, dutiful, and proper, which is “for their own good” (as Miller later titled another book).<sup>9</sup>

This does not happen because parents are bad, but because they remain emotionally deprived and depend on a specific echo from their child to maintain their own emotional equilibrium. Though quite unconsciously so, they are still in search of a mirror for their own validation and worth. Their child serves this purpose, because a child is at its parents' disposal. A child will not run away or abandon its parents (as the parents' own parents may have done). Parents can feel themselves at the center of their child's world and see themselves mirrored in their children's love and admiration. They can feel strong and powerful in their children's presence, which they did not feel when they were children. When parents have had to suppress these needs in relation to their own parents, their needs continue to live in them on an unconscious level, and will seek gratification through whatever sources are available, including their own children.

This can happen regardless of how educated and well-intentioned the parents may be, and does not rule out strong parental love and devo-

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8. *Ibid.*, 7.

9. *Ibid.*, viii, 8, 31, 34-36, 93-94.

tion. On the contrary, such parents often love their children intensely, because their children meet their repressed needs. But this is not the way children need to be loved. Children need parents who do not depend emotionally on them, and they need a supportive environment in which they can experience and express their own feelings. In healthy families children can be sad or happy or angry whenever anything makes them sad or happy or angry. They don't have to suppress their feelings to meet their parents' needs. They can be angry at their parents without losing their love.<sup>10</sup>

Parents cannot be aware of the ways in which they fail to meet their children's needs, or how this lack affects their children, if they have never allowed themselves to consciously experience their own unmet needs. They remain unable to realize the full effect of their behavior on their children, because they have never been able to consciously experience their own pain at having been treated similarly.<sup>11</sup>

What happens to children when parents are thus unable to meet their children's emotional needs? It would be natural for children to feel angry and hurt when their needs are not met. But young children depend completely on their parents, whose love and care is essential for their existence, and will do everything they can to avoid losing it. So before they are old enough to understand what they are doing, some children may adapt to their parents' failure to meet their needs by suppressing these needs, along with their anger and hurt.<sup>12</sup> Miller refers to this suppression of parts of a child's true self as a partial "killing off" of what is spontaneous and alive in the child. Some of her clients report dreams in which they experience themselves as partially dead:

I see a green meadow, in which there is a white coffin. I am afraid that my mother is in it, but I open the lid and, luckily, it is not my mother but me.

I am lying on my bed. I am dead. My parents are talking and looking at me, but they don't realize that I am dead.<sup>13</sup>

Miller believes that if these people had been able as children to express all of their feelings, including their anger and pain towards their parents, they could have stayed fully alive. But that could have led to the loss of their parents' love and acceptance. So they "killed" (repressed) their anger and hurt, and with it a part of themselves, in order to preserve their parents' love and care.<sup>14</sup>

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10. *Ibid.*, viii, 11, 14-16, 34-36.

11. *Ibid.*, 90.

12. *Ibid.*, 7-9, 31-32.

13. *Ibid.*, 13.

14. *Ibid.*, 13, 81.

Miller describes several kinds of defense mechanisms children may develop to allow the continued repression of their feelings and needs. These may include denial (“That doesn’t hurt me” or “I’m not afraid of that”), intellectualization, projection of repressed feelings onto others, and idealization. All of these defenses enable children to suppress the conscious experience of their real situation and the emotions belonging to it, which may only surface years later.<sup>15</sup>

When children repeatedly repress their feelings and needs, it becomes difficult or even impossible for them to consciously experience certain feelings, either in childhood or later in adulthood. This continued repression results in the development of a “false self.” Children learn to reveal only what is expected or desired of them, and they fuse so completely with what they reveal that it becomes the whole of their conscious identity. They are not able to fully develop their true selves, because they are unable to live it. This is not necessarily an obstacle to their intellectual development, but it is an obstacle to the unfolding of their authentic emotional life, and a serious obstacle to later adult relationships. Over time children may be able to adapt completely to the demands of their situation and develop a false self that seems to serve them well. But this unhealthy adaptation in childhood contains the seeds of later adult dysfunction.<sup>16</sup>

As this process of suppression and denial takes place, children also internalize their early experiences with their parents. This internalization results in the creation of our own “inner parents”—a presence that is incorporated into our psyches from an early age on. When we have internalized our parents in this way, we no longer experience their influence as coming from outside of ourselves. We experience it as a part of ourselves—as the way we automatically think and feel—often without consciously seeing the connection to our parents’ influence. One of Miller’s clients relates the following:

The day before yesterday I was so happy, my work went easily. I was able to do more work for the exam than I had planned for the whole week. Then I thought I must take advantage of this good mood and do another chapter in the evening. I worked all evening without any enthusiasm and the next day I couldn’t do any more. ... [N]othing stayed in my head. I didn’t want to see anyone either, it felt like the depressions I used to have. Then I “turned the pages back” and found where it had begun. I had spoiled my pleasure as soon as I made myself do more—but why? Then I remembered how my mother used to say: “You have done that beautifully, now you could surely do this too ...”<sup>17</sup>

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15. *Ibid.*, 12, 68, 70, 73.

16. *Ibid.*, 9-10, 12, 14, 20-21, 87.

17. *Ibid.*, 52.

If we fail to become aware of the source of these unconscious, automatic responses, throughout our lives we may continue to censor in ourselves those things our parents first censored in us. In this way portions of our true feelings and needs remain beyond our own conscious awareness, and the loneliness we experienced while growing up will eventually be replaced by isolation in ourselves.<sup>18</sup>

Miller believes that freedom from our early wounds and resulting dysfunction is not possible without the work of “true, deep, and defenseless mourning” for what we needed but did not receive in our childhood. All of our substitutes can bring only temporary satisfaction. True satisfaction is no longer possible, because the time for that lies irreversibly in the past. Only the conscious acceptance of, and mourning for, what we missed at the crucial time can lead to real healing.<sup>19</sup>

For healing to occur, at some point our repressed feelings and needs must emerge. When they do, they are often accompanied by deep pain and despair. As children we may not have been able to survive this intense emotional and psychological pain, because this would have only been possible in an empathetic, emotionally supportive environment, which is exactly what we lacked. But as adults we have the psychological resources necessary to experience strong emotions and allow them to run their course, thereby neutralizing them.<sup>20</sup>

Once we have learned through experience that the breakthrough of painful feelings will not destroy us, and that these feelings will eventually pass, we will approach “undesired” feelings differently. We will no longer be compelled to follow the same unhealthy pattern of detachment from our feelings, often followed by depression, because we now have a new possibility—that of dealing with our emotional life—experiencing all of our feelings as they occur. In this way we gain access to those parts of ourselves that have previously been hidden from us. It is only after the self becomes liberated from repression that it begins to grow, express itself, and develop its true spirit and creativity.<sup>21</sup>

“The true opposite of depression is not gaiety or absence of pain, but vitality: the freedom to experience spontaneous feelings.”<sup>22</sup> We cannot have this freedom if our childhood roots are cut off. Living out of our true selves is only possible when we no longer have to fear the intense emotional world of our early childhood. Once we have experienced this world, it is no longer threatening, and need no longer be repressed and

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18. *Ibid.*, 14, 19, 20-21, 45-46, 52-53, 86-87, 92-93, 101-102, 110-11.

19. *Ibid.*, 43, 56-57, 85, 89.

20. *Ibid.*, 11, 90, 99-100, 102.

21. *Ibid.*, 20-21, 54-55.

22. *Ibid.*, 57.

hidden.<sup>23</sup>

It is one of the turning points in healing when we are able to experience the reality that much of the love we may have struggled so hard to gain with so much self-denial was not intended for us as we really were, but rather for our false selves. When we realize how much of ourselves we have sacrificed to gain this love, we will feel a desire to end the courtship. We discover in ourselves a new authority—a need to live according to our true selves. And we no longer strive to earn a love that, “at root, still leaves us empty-handed, since it is given to our false self, which we have begun to relinquish.”<sup>24</sup>

The dream of finally receiving what we needed from our parents—a dream which many adults still hope and search for—is unattainable. But the experience of our own truth and the post-childhood understanding of it make it possible for us to return to the world of feelings at an adult level—without paradise, but with the ability to feel. With this ability, we can finally develop our own sense of self—the self we were never able to develop in childhood.<sup>25</sup>

In my own life, learning to experience and express all of my feelings and needs has helped me to find my own voice, and this has spilled over into every area of my life, including my religious life. The stronger my own voice has become, the clearer my experiences and feelings about Mormonism have become. I have come to see many ways in which the dynamics Miller describes also apply to my experience of the church. I realize there are as many different experiences of Mormonism as there are Mormons, and I can only speak with complete authority to my own experiences.

I grew up in a very active Mormon family. The church permeated every aspect of my world. As a young child, I took to heart everything I learned in church, and built my understanding and experience of reality around it. I knew that I was a child of God, and that before I was born I lived with my Heavenly Father. He sent me to earth to gain a body and to learn to choose between right and wrong. If I chose the right and kept the commandments, one day I would return and live with him forever. Because my parents had been married in the temple, our family could be together forever if we all lived the gospel. And if I kept myself worthy to go to the temple, someday I would marry and have a family of my own to be with forever. This was the lens through which I saw and interpreted everything—myself, my family, the world.

On the surface there was nothing wrong with these simple doctrines.

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23. *Ibid.*, 57, 111-12.

24. *Ibid.*, 15, 57.

25. *Ibid.*, 15.

I saw only goodness and beauty in them the whole time I was growing up. What I didn't see during that time were the psychological and emotional forces that came into play as I accepted and incorporated these beliefs. For example, Miller describes the mental and emotional lengths children may go to in order to suppress their own needs and feelings when the expression of them might cost them their parents' love and care. In the Mormon world view as I understood it in my childhood, the psychological risks for children were even greater. For me to have consciously experienced or expressed feelings and beliefs that did not agree with what I was taught in the church would have meant not only risking the loss of my parents' love in this life, but also eternal separation from them (as well as the loss of my chance to ever live with my *heavenly* parent again).

I don't recall a specific incident in my childhood in which I was straightforwardly told, "You *must* feel and believe this way, or you will never see your family again after you die." But it was certainly implied as the only logical conclusion to what I *was* directly taught, which was that *only* those families who believed in Mormonism and were sealed in the temple would be together forever. In some ways the indirect threat that resulted from this teaching was more difficult to deal with than a straightforward threat. When a threat is presented clearly and straightforwardly, it is more easily seen for what it really is, and can be dealt with directly. But when the threat is indirect, or only implied as part of what is presented as a beautiful, eternal truth, it can sometimes be difficult to realize consciously that this unspoken threat is a motivating force in our lives.

To teach young children, even indirectly, that unless they feel and believe certain things they will be separated from their families for eternity seems to me now to be a kind of emotional blackmail. It plays heavily on a child's fear of abandonment. In Mormon theology faith and family cannot be separated. To doubt Mormonism is to risk severing eternal ties to the people we love and need the most, and to hurt our family throughout eternity. This gives our theology a powerful conscious and unconscious tool—our love and need for our family—with which to ensure acceptance and compliance. But genuine spiritual belief and commitment must be freely chosen. They cannot be compelled under the threat of losing one's family, even if these threats are unintended or not directly communicated. If we are not truly free to say no, then we are not truly free to say yes.

I also see this perhaps unintended manipulation of family affections in our policies regarding attendance at temple sealings. I experienced this for myself when one of my sisters married in the temple several years ago. At the time I had made a voluntary decision to stop attending the



temple. Having one of my sisters marry during this time showed me a perspective on temple marriage that I hadn't seen before. Through the church's policy of only allowing temple recommend holders to attend temple marriages I was being told, in effect, that unless I felt and believed what the church said I should, and was willing to commit myself completely to the church, I would not be allowed to attend my own sister's wedding. This feels like more emotional blackmail, and I believe it damages family relationships because it makes them conditional. It makes the acceptance of certain theological beliefs a prerequisite for full inclusion in important family celebrations.

In addition to being manipulative of our family ties, our temple policies can also be spiritually manipulative. When two people fall in love and want to marry, if they are from devout Mormon families, there is only one socially acceptable way for them to marry—in the temple. To marry outside the temple brings disappointment and heartache for the family as well as a certain amount of shame within the Mormon community. But in order to marry in the temple, couples must pass a worthiness interview in which they profess belief in the tenets of Mormonism. In addition, temple marriage requires a prior endowment in which lifelong commitments to the church are made. This means that if I fall in love and desire to marry (as most young people in or out of Mormonism do), the only way I can get married that will not wound my family and bring us shame within the larger community is to profess my belief in Mormonism and make lifelong commitments to it. These two things are so tightly bound together that we don't even consider the possibility of doing one and not the other. This provides a very powerful conscious and unconscious motivation for young people in love to make a lifelong commitment to Mormonism, and unconscious motivations are the strongest and most difficult to see through.

In my youth I was encouraged many times to "study it out" and then pray and ask God for myself if the church was true. But long before I felt the need to ask this question, I had already internalized what the answer would need to be if I wanted to live with my Heavenly Father again and if I didn't want to be separated from my family forever. This was true not just with prayer, but with my whole spiritual life. Before I was old enough to begin seeking my own spiritual experiences, the limits of what those experiences could consist of and reveal to me had already been established. And should I ever think I had received an answer from God that fell outside of these pre-set limits, that would mean the voice I was hearing was not really God's.

Imagine a fast and testimony meeting in which a young woman bears witness that after serious fasting and prayer the Spirit has told her not to marry in the temple or that her priesthood leaders are wrong about

something. Imagine a nineteen-year-old boy bearing witness that the Spirit has told him not to go on a mission. In the mind-set I grew up with, the possibility of these kinds of revelations being true revelations from God was, by definition, non-existent.

One might argue that if I ever came to believe that God had revealed to me that Mormonism wasn't true, then I would no longer need to believe that failure to accept Mormonism would mean eternal separation from both God and my family. Logically this makes sense, but unconscious fears internalized at an early age rarely surrender to logical persuasion. And one of the fears I learned growing up in the church was that of being spiritually deceived. Church history was full of people who followed their own revelations instead of those of church leaders, and lost their chance at exaltation because of it. Who was I to think I knew any better than men who talked with God himself, face-to-face, when I never had? (Of course, if my answers to prayer always fell within the boundaries I'd been taught true answers would, then I would never have to deal with this kind of internal conflict.)

Another unhealthy adaption Miller describes is the development of a "false self." This happens when we adapt to an unhealthy environment by repressing parts of ourselves. We reveal only what is expected or desired of us, and we fuse so completely with what we reveal that it becomes the whole of our conscious identity.<sup>26</sup> I think we can also develop a "false spiritual self" while growing up in the church. The church has an idealized image of its members—the kind of perpetually happy, faithful, obedient, and successful individuals and families we see on the covers of the *Ensign* or the *Church News*—and it rewards those who conform to this ideal (or who can at least maintain the appearance of conforming to it). Parents can feel a great deal of pressure to maintain the appearance of the ideal Mormon family, and may in turn pressure their own children to comply with this image.

But what happens when a person's experiences or feelings fail to meet the ideal? What happens to members who experience anger, doubt, depression, or who are unhappy with some aspects of their church experiences? What happens to families who struggle with divorce, homosexuality, poverty, addiction, or abuse? One way to adapt ourselves to the church's ideal is simply to suppress or deny those parts of ourselves that don't fit the image, thus developing a kind of false spiritual self that becomes the whole of our spiritual identity. In one of her books Miller describes what she calls "poisonous pedagogy"—ingrained societal beliefs that are harmful to children's development. They include the belief that anger (or any other feeling) can be done away with simply by forbidding

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26. *Ibid.*, 12-13.

it, and that the way you behave is more important than who you really are.<sup>27</sup> These kinds of beliefs contribute to the development of a false spiritual self.

Some may argue that in the case of the church's ideals, the ends justify the means—that the ideal is desirable, and if we live “as if” it represented our real selves long enough, eventually we will become the ideal (or at least get closer to it). But in my experience this kind of change is only surface change—we may appear, even to ourselves, to measure up to the ideal, while remaining far from it in our deepest being. Surface change is the only kind of change that institutions, dogma, or manipulation can bring about. For many years I tried to live as close to the ideal as I could, and it failed to change who I really was. It failed to heal my deepest wounds or make me truly free. In my experience real transformation at the deepest level of our being is only possible through an awareness and experience of the whole truth—the truth about ourselves, and the truth of God's amazing love for us.

If we live out of a false spiritual self long enough, eventually we may internalize the church's influence on us just as children internalize their parents' beliefs and influence. When this happens, we may continue to self-censor what the church originally censored in us, often without any conscious awareness that this is what we are doing. We may refuse to allow ourselves to consciously experience doubts, or suppress any unhappiness with our church lives. Once this external influence has been thoroughly internalized, it is easy to understand how it can be almost impossible for us to see anything other than what we have been taught to see. To paraphrase Miller, things we can see through do not make us sick. What makes us sick are those things we cannot see through—things we have so thoroughly absorbed that they have become a part of who we are.<sup>28</sup>

When people have unresolved childhood needs for mirroring and validation that drive them to search for substitute sources of gratification, the church may function as one such substitute. The church gives love, acceptance, and respect to those who conform. And because its leaders are viewed as God's agents, acceptance and validation from the church can also be experienced as acceptance and validation from God. What we may have failed to receive from our earthly parents, we can now receive from our heavenly parent (or his “authorized agents”) through church activity and faithfulness. When the church is meeting our unresolved childhood needs for mirroring and validation, we may become as dependent on it as a young child is on his or her parents. We may idealize (and

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27. Miller, *For Your Own Good*, 59-60.

28. Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, 100.

idolize) the church and its leaders the same way children idealize their parents, even abusive parents. And we may use the same kinds of defense mechanisms and illusions children use in order to maintain our idealized images.

I experienced this kind of idealization in my own need for the church. For many years the church met my needs for validation and belonging, and I believed that it was without fault—that our history was inspired at every turn and our prophets and apostles infallible. I believed that all of my leaders were completely benevolent and wise, and would always know what's best for me and act in my best interest because they were God's representatives. I needed the church and its leaders to be perfectly loving and wise, because for a long time they were the source of my sense of self. I maintained my idealization of the church and its leaders by refusing to even listen to anything about them that was contrary to my idealized image. I saw the world in black and white—those who accepted the ideal image, and those who questioned or found fault with the church or its leaders in any way. For many years this idealization enabled me to accept without question things I now consider to be manipulative, inappropriate, and unhealthy.

I see now that my idealization of church leaders, both past and present, was unfair. No human being is perfectly benevolent and wise. Leaders are human just like the rest of us. They each have their own life story, complete with biases, blind spots, fears, and needs, as well as unique strengths and gifts. It's unrealistic to expect them to be more than human. Nevertheless, I believe the church fosters this unrealistic idealization through its unwillingness to make a full and truthful disclosure of church history and current governance. I believe that if we could see the complete picture of these things behind the public presentation, we would see that our leaders, while at times inspired, are just as human and fallible in their callings as we all are. This would prevent the unhealthy idolization of our leaders and give us a much more realistic view of God's dealings with all of us.

My own idolization of church leaders led to another unhealthy dependency in my spiritual life. Because I saw my leaders as God's representatives, I experienced my relationship with them and my relationship with God as one and the same. If church leaders were pleased with me, so was God. If I was doing what my leaders told me to, then I was doing what God wanted me to do. If I was good enough to win their love, then I had God's love too. And if I angered, disappointed, or disobeyed my leaders, then I had also angered, disappointed, or disobeyed God. Church leaders stood between God and me, and functioned as the mediator of my relationship with God. This gave them a great deal of psychological and emotional power in my life.

When people who use the church as a source of substitute gratification become parents, this unhealthy dependency can affect their relationships with their children. Because they gain their sense of self from the church, they may put loyalty to Mormonism above everything else, including their children's emotional needs. I remember in my youth being told the story of a general authority who went to the train station to see his son off on a mission. His last words to his son were that he would rather have him come home in a coffin than having lost his virtue. The story was meant to convey to us the grave seriousness of sexual sin. But all I can think of when I remember it now is how painful it would be to be told by my father that he would rather see me dead than having made a mistake—that he valued my sinlessness more than he valued me.

I have seen this kind of family dynamic result in two extreme outcomes. Some children adopt their parents' loyalty to the church above all else and stay firmly inside the circle of what their parents love most. By doing this, they receive at least some of their parents' love. Others completely reject the church out of anger or resentment because they know, if only unconsciously, that their parents love the church more than they love them. In both cases somewhere deep inside children sense that given a choice between them and the church, their parents would choose the church.

Miller's writings and my own healing experiences have helped me to better understand instances of ecclesiastical abuse. They have shown me how it is possible for leaders to be good people with kind hearts who genuinely love and desire to serve those they preside over, and yet still act in abusive ways in exercising their authority. When people grow up unable to see through the manipulations or abuses to which they have been subjected, in either their family or church experiences, they are unable to see their own perpetuation of the same kinds of abuses for what they really are. If leaders are to provide a healthy church environment that is free of abuse and manipulation, they need to have grown up in such a family and church environment themselves. If they did not, and have not been able to see and work through the reality of their own manipulation, they are far more likely to behave in manipulative or coercive ways. They may act out of a sincere belief that what they are doing is for the member's own good, just as it was for their own good when it was done to them. Only when we have been able to feel the reality of our own manipulation or abuse will we be able to recognize our own similar treatment of others as abusive.

I first began to see some things about the church differently during and after my mission, when for the first time in my life I began to read and experience things that left me with real questions about the truthfulness of some of what I believed about the church. On my mission I grew

to love people of other faiths whose spiritual experiences seemed as valid and meaningful as my own. I attended a Catholic first communion service that was as spirit-filled as any LDS meeting. After my mission I began reading books about church history that presented a more complete picture of the origins and development of Mormonism. But I remember thinking at the time that I could not allow myself to seriously entertain doubts about the church, because if I were to lose my faith and turn out to be wrong, I would be separated from my family forever, live singly throughout eternity, and lose my opportunity for exaltation and eternal happiness. It seemed much wiser to save my questions for the next life, and trust in the church and its leaders in this life.

But once I had consciously realized that fear kept me from questioning my faith, my spiritual life began a gradual, irreversible change. Little by little, I found I no longer had the same degree of certainty in my testimony. How could I continue to be certain that what I believed was true, when I now realized that deep down I had fears that prevented me from seriously considering the possibility that it wasn't? Having spent my whole life immersed in the mind-set that produced and maintained those fears, how could I ever hope to see the church objectively? And how could I continue to wholeheartedly live out a commitment that I could now see was at least partially rooted in fear?

Eventually I reached a point where the only way I could retain any genuine faith in Mormonism was to risk losing it—to entertain my doubts and questions, and allow myself to consider the possibility that some or all of the things I believed about the church might not be true. This was a much different process than the one I undertook in my youth—to read the Book of Mormon and ask God if it and the church were true. This was an attempt to remove myself at least temporarily from my immersion in the church in order to get a clearer look at both it and myself. I realized that I had internalized such a strong “inner church” voice, and at such an early age, that my own voice was nowhere to be found. And I felt that as long as I remained within hearing distance of the thundering voice of the church, I would never be able to hear my own. It took several years away from the church before I could even turn on the television during general conference and hear those voices again without feeling my own disappear. It felt as though the church were a giant vacuum, threatening to swallow me whole again if I got too close. It felt as though if I accepted *anything* the church said, I would once again have to accept *everything* it said. Everything about the church was black and white, there was no middle ground. It was only after I became aware of groups and publications such as *Sunstone*, *Dialogue*, and the Mormon Women's Forum that I realized a middle ground exists and that many wonderful and interesting Mormons live there.

During these years away from the church, my spiritual journey progressed as I continued to read and search for God and truth wherever I might find them. One of the first things I discovered about myself after stepping back from Mormonism was that I did not believe a perfectly wise and loving God was the author of those aspects of Mormonism that I had experienced as coercive and manipulative. Even I can see the ultimate futility of such tactics in matters of the spirit, and I have to believe that God is far wiser than I.

I also realized that if the celestial kingdom was as I had been taught it was, then I didn't *want* to live there, with or without a family. I was taught, among other things, that the celestial kingdom would be governed by patriarchy—that we would continue to be presided over by faithful patriarchs, from Adam to Joseph Smith and beyond. But after stepping back from the church, I realized that I didn't like patriarchy and felt no need or desire to be "presided over" by men (even benevolent men)—not in this life and certainly not for eternity. And I felt no desire to become a heavenly mother who sits silently in the shadows while my husband creates worlds and brings to pass our children's immortality and eternal life by himself.

One of the reasons I had accepted everything I learned in the church, including things that bothered me on a gut level (like plural marriage, or the subordination of women inherent in the structure of the church), was because I believed that even if something didn't make me happy in this life it would in the next, when I was more like God. But eventually I realized that eternity is *now*. This present moment is as much a part of eternity as any past or future existence, and it is the only portion of eternity to which we currently have access. So if there are truths that will bring me happiness and peace "in eternity," I believe that they ought to bring me happiness and peace now. In fact, if the Mormon plan of salvation is true, it was God who structured our mortal experience so that the only part of eternity we would have any conscious awareness of, and thus be able to experience and learn from, is the present.

Another important thing I discovered about myself was that, at least for me, the inner voice of the church that I internalized while growing up and the voice of God's Spirit are not the same thing. If I had not spent time away from the church, I don't think I would have realized that these were two different voices.

I no longer believe everything I used to about Mormonism, and my idealization of the church and its leaders is gone. But some parts of my faith remain, and they are genuinely mine. They arise from my own direct experiences of God and bring joy and meaning to my life.

I still believe in God and in the power of prayer. I have felt God's presence within me, both inside and outside of Mormonism. I am grate-

ful that one of the things being raised Mormon instilled in me was the belief that I could communicate directly with God, just as Joseph Smith did. Once I became free of predetermined constraints on my experience of prayer, it became even more real and immediate. I have never seen God face to face, so I don't know with certainty the exact nature of God's being, but I am more certain than ever that God exists and knows and cares for me and will help me.

I still believe in Christ and the Holy Spirit. To me they are both manifestations of the love and power of God—a power that can heal our wounds and change our hearts, making us into beings more like God—more joyful, wise, and, above all, loving. They represent God's ability to redeem and nurture what is godly in each of us. My experience of what God offers us in Christ and the Holy Spirit has been so full of generosity and love (and free of threats or manipulation) that no coercion has been needed to make me desire or accept it. In fact, I believe that what God offers can only be fully efficacious in our lives if it is freely chosen—in an atmosphere totally free of coercion or manipulation.

I still believe in prophets, but I no longer believe that priesthood ordination is what makes a man or woman a prophet. For me, it is the truth and power of their prophetic message that makes a person a prophet, and I find compelling prophetic voices that speak to the needs of our time and to my own spiritual journey in many different places and faiths. I also believe that true prophets point us beyond obedience to them, to our own direct experiences of God. Joseph Smith's greatest legacy to me was in the example he set in seeking God for himself, and then trying to live out his understanding of what he received. I believe that the most important thing for me now is not to live out Joseph's answers from God, but to do as he did and seek God for myself.

I still value Mormon scripture, and I find truth in scriptures from other faiths as well. But I no longer believe that scripture is infallible, any more than I believe the men who wrote them were infallible. Growing up, I believed that the scriptures came directly from the mouth of God, and I built my understanding and experience of God around them. It never would have occurred to me to look at anything in the scriptures critically or to judge them against my own independent experiences of God. Rather, they were the standard against which I judged and interpreted my experiences. I now see scripture as the story of how different people in different times and places experienced and understood God. Some of their experiences resonate with my own, others do not.

I find beauty and inspiration in many things in Mormonism when I look at them symbolically. It is only when I take the symbol literally—mistaking the symbol for the thing itself—that I find some of our doctrines to be manipulative. For example, I believe that the power of our



love can connect us to one another forever, and that this truth exists independent of any one group or practice. In Mormonism we have a beautiful ritual that symbolizes this truth. To me, temple sealings mean that Mormonism's highest ceremony is one that acknowledges our eternal interconnectedness with one another. It only becomes manipulative when we take the symbol literally, by teaching that it is the ritual rather than our love that actually connects us, and that only those who participate in our ritual will be able to experience the larger truth it symbolizes.

The most important thing I have discovered about myself and Mormonism is that, when all is said and done, my deepest tie to Mormonism is the simple fact that these are my people and I love them. They are my family, literally and figuratively—the people I live among and with whom I learn to understand and love myself and others. I am deeply connected to this people, and will always want to be a part of them. I consider myself a tribal Mormon, and I have come to believe that our relationships with one another are the most valuable thing a church can give us.

When I started this journey, I had no idea where it would lead. Growing up, I always believed that my deepest tie to Mormonism was my testimony that it was the only true church on earth and the only way I could reach exaltation in the celestial kingdom. When I found my own truth, I discovered that my ties to the people I love are far more important to me than any doctrinal truth claims. Alice Miller teaches that the discovery and acceptance of the truth of our own unique lives is the only way to find true healing, freedom, and joy.<sup>29</sup> Her whole philosophy might be summed up in the simple verse, "the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). This has been my own healing path.

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29. *Ibid.*, 3-4.