After the (Second) Fall: A Personal Journey toward Ethnic Mormonism

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WHEN MY FIRST MARRIAGE ENDED IN DIVORCE in 1991, what I describe as my current spiritual life seemed to begin. It is the first of three seminal moments in the past three years that I have chosen to detail here. Before that, however, I need to give some autobiographical information.

I had the pedigree of every good Latter-day Saint. I was born under the covenant of my parents' temple marriage, was a youth leader in priesthood and scouting, a missionary for two years, and the recipient of a B.A. from Brigham Young University. At age twenty-six I was married in the temple on a fragrant Manti, Utah, morning. I realize now that I was raised in what Kendall White and others have called a neo-orthodox LDS home. Since my father was in the Church Educational System, eventually landing in BYU's Department of Religion, I think it's safe to assume that I was raised in an ultra-neo-orthodox home.

I experienced my oddly high-pressured upbringing as my destiny. And what a wonderful destiny it was! Not only was I a member of God's kingdom on earth, but I was on the cutting edge, through the status of my father as a popular professor and lecturer, of the expanding church which revolved around his stirring advocacy of a personal Christ.

For the first thirty years of my life, I garnered the social privileges of being in what I thought to be, as did others, not just a family headed by a man with a special calling, but a morally superior family. My father taught over two thousand students per semester in his hey-day at BYU, and I was often looked upon as a sort of marvel-by-association. Popular, handsome, vigorous, Dad was the high priest of charismatic Mormonism from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. For many, his was an intoxicating mix of absolute truth, sexualized energy, and self-deprecating humor. But like the LDS church, and, I believe, like all charismatics of the funda-

mentalist bent, Dad's public persona couldn't match his private and family life which were distortions of the romanticized "Super Patriarch." Perhaps because of my intimate association with Dad, or maybe in spite of it, by 1976, when I was ninth-grade seminary president, I had already begun to carve out a psychic space where my life's experience smoldered in opposition to what I knew was supposed to be the correct experience, the experience publicly personified by my father.

Compartmentalizing, that is, keeping different understandings of the world separate from each other, is a common strategy, especially, it seems, for Mormons. To illustrate the phenomenon, consider the novels of Chaim Potok, two of which are *The Chosen* and *My Name Is Asher Lev.* These books are often considered by Mormons to be a moving account of orthodox (Hasidic to be exact) Jewish boys breaking from their religion and tradition in order to pursue a powerful, inner identity. But these books are only moving, for most Latter-day Saints, within the compartment of literature, or within the compartment of Jewish studies. Few seem to see the parallels with their own contemporary Mormon lives, and if they do, momentarily, such parallels are soon subsumed by an LDS imperative. If one is good at compartmentalizing, one doesn't have to acknowledge even the parallels, even though one can, in a way, appreciate the fictional experiences penned by Potok in a profound way.

As a literature major in college, I often remember reading stories that I related to on several different levels—James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* being one of them—and then immediately distancing myself from them personally, with the mental disclaimer that "*my* system, unlike the story's, is God's system"; and "how unfortunate that Joyce's autobiographical anti-hero didn't know about the Gospel"—that is the Gospel with a capital, Mormon "G."

Even with this rational process of compartmentalization, backed by a dense, albeit localized support system, I grew to loathe myself. Somewhere deep inside I knew that I was not a good Mormon, and therefore not a good person. Somewhere down there I knew that I was a pervert who even when he tried to sing hymns, like Elder Boyd Packer suggested, still masturbated, and did so with ever increasing frequency and skill. I sublimated every doubt I ever harbored about the gospel, sending them all to a dark bed of sorrow that eventually would turn to rage, and then back to self-loathing. There was no one with whom I felt I could share any of this. About the time I realized that the hymn "I Need Thee Every Hour" caused sexual arousal, I found solace and good times in intellectual pursuits. And it was there that more furiously than ever I began boxing in and out the experiences of life and the different ideologies that didn't fit the world view I had been born into and believed.

The downside of my efforts at compartmentalization eventually

caught up with me. My wife and I had been separated once before, but the morning after she and I decided to split for good I knew instinctively that my life was never going to be the same again. For the first time in my life, and yet still in the revelatory fashion of Mormonism, I felt the unconditional love of God warm me with the bracing message that it didn't matter to him if I was a good Mormon or not; that he didn't care so much what I believed but that I took responsibility for it and grew by it. "Don't be so hard on yourself," was the message that morning. "And please try not to fuck up again by denying your true self." Aside from the fact that I now knew that God sometimes uses the "f" word, I realized that the burden that was lifted from my heart that morning was not just that of a failed marriage, but the burden of keeping my dark side a secret.

On that updraft of spiritual assurance, I sat down and wrote to my father a letter that if I still had it, I would probably mat and frame, billing it my "manifesto." It was the most honest moment I think I'd ever had with my good father up to that point, and, perhaps more importantly, with his puzzling but powerful persona. In short, I told him that I was my own man; that my life was not to be guided and controlled any longer by the expectations of the church or of him; and that I would likely be crossing lines that I had lived within for my entire life.

A new life does in fact emerge out of the ashes of the old. I would like to think that I am a phoenix. But the operative word here is "new." In some ways the past three years have unlocked a childhood that had been lost to me earlier. I've had a sense of accelerated discovery that has been both thrilling and at times unnerving, both gratifying and dangerous. Many divorced men that I know temporarily go through something similar to what I did. But this abundant life has continued, in fact has intensified even more since I became involved with my current wife. My old life of coloring within the lines of the institutional church never returned, and I have never regretted it.

This is not to say that I have not experienced pain, and that I do not continue to mourn a great loss. I am no longer on the inside of family conversation which inevitably turns toward the codified terminology and assumptions of the Gospel with a capital, Mormon "G." Both my father and my mother who is a fierce defender of her husband as well as my siblings and my Latter-day Saint friends appear hurt by my new openness about the template of the church which, riveted in place over our lives, had suddenly appeared problematic to me, and a cause of much of my disillusionment with life, rather than its panacea, its sacred, untouched center. I touched that holy center with a sweaty, human hand, and it crumpled before me.

In my parents' mind, this story likely reads as the story of a child who has lost his testimony, who fell to the powers of Satan. They may

still view it as their job to wait patiently for me to return to their idea of the fold. It is my job to learn to live without their respect, which they cannot give me, at least publicly, and probably not privately since they seem sincere about their beliefs. This is my cross to bear, as it were. I try to appreciate their expressions of love to me even though so many of those expressions have hurt me in the past. Their love does not include respect for me and for my decisions in life.

In turn I like to think my parents appreciate my love for them, but what I think they need from me is conformity to the Gospel-with-a-capital-Mormon-"G" principles. Maybe I'm wrong. This is not something we can productively discuss together. For sure, both parties have been wounded by my decision to change the rules which we all lived by—at least on the surface—for many years.

The second seminal event in my spiritual life of late was my viewing of a play with Mormon themes and characters called *Angels in America.* As both a part-time theater critic and a full-time flight attendant for a major airline, I have the opportunity to see and sometimes review theater from all over the country and sometimes overseas. At the prompting of a theater critic from the *New York Times* who has been somewhat of a mentor to me, I flew to the National Theatre in London to see *Millennium Approaches,* the first part of Tony Kushner's seven-hour drama, subtitled *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes.*

The play is about two New York City couples, one gay and one Mormon—the latter, recently transplanted from Utah—who are both in crisis: the gay couple, because one of the men, Prior, is dying of AIDS, and the Mormon couple, because husband Joe, a lawyer in a federal court, is a closeted homosexual. It turns out that Prior's lover, Louis, who works in the same court as Joe, cannot face his lover's dying of AIDS and so with guilt abandons him. Eventually Louis hooks up with Joe, who is in the midst of dealing with his own troubled sexuality. Joe's wife, Harper, spends much of her time spiraling off into Valium-induced hallucinations, while Joe's alarmed mother, Hannah, who lives in Salt Lake City, sells her house and moves to New York to "save" her son from himself.

By the end of this wildly theatrical, often comical revisionist view of Ronald Reagan's America and the disaster of AIDS, Prior is himself hearing and seeing things—a golden book which drops out of the sky, and a haunting voice from beyond. At the end of the first half of *Angels in America,* Prior is writhing in delirium on his bed when an angel crashes through his ceiling, announcing that Prior is a prophet and that a great work is about to begin.

There I was, by myself in a London theater, experiencing Mormon characters and Mormon iconography in a play written by a Jewish agnos-

tic from Brooklyn. And I was captivated. In fact, as the small theater shook with deafening sounds, and the stage became littered with falling plaster and wires and the angel burst through the floor-to-ceiling backdrop, I wept. I didn't understand what I was feeling. I wondered if I could still love this thing that had hurt me so terribly.

The world had to wait for over a year before Mr. Kushner, in the second half of *Angels in America,* entitled *Perestroika,* would attempt to bring to closure what one critic would eventually call the "biggest cliffhanger in Broadway history." In this second half Mormonism plays an even greater role than in the first as the two couples, now split apart, pair up with others, Joe with Louis in sexual and ideological explorations; Harper with her mother-in-law, Hannah, who by now works in the LDS visitor's center near Lincoln Center; and Prior with both his nurse and friend Belize and, of course, the angel who, suspended in air, lectures him on his new role as prophet.

The Angel, hovering above Prior's bed, turns out to be neither angel of death nor eleventh-hour savior of the dying man, not a messenger of unification, but of stasis. It seems that God, tired of humanity's relentless impulse for change, left heaven on the day of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906. The Angel has called the new prophet in hopes that he can undo the damage on earth, and convince the world to turn back, to stop moving so that God will return to Heaven and all will be well ... or at least as before. "HOBBLE YOURSELVES!" thunders the Angel, condemning the migration of people across the land. "There is no Zion Save Where You Are!"

A virtual-reality Urim and Thummin, a holy book, a visitor's center pioneer diorama which comes to life, heaven with a quorum of heavenly beings, and myriad other things all retreat into the mystical and theatrically-driven *Perestroika.* At one point Louis's guilt about leaving Prior finally gets to him and he talks about leaving Joe and returning to his forsaken lover. As they stand on the beach on a freezing winter afternoon, Joe undresses. "I'm flayed," he says peeling off the top of his temple garments, his religious "skin." "I could give up anything," he adds.

I will not tell you how *Angels in America* ends. But I can tell you that my response to it after seeing three different versions of it, from London to Los Angeles, was revelatory.[1] My identity as a Mormon, once completely fused to that of my family which was in turn fused to the church and all its effects, was beginning to come into its own. Separated from the cloying dogma of a family, church, and culture all rolled indistinguishably into one mass, I could finally resonate with my heritage and my be-

1. The show was subsequently staged by the Salt Lake Acting Company in its 1995-96 season, directed by Nancy Borgenicht and Allen Nevins. See my article, "'Angels' in Utah," *American Theatre Magazine,* Mar. 1996, 49.

lief. I believe that, as with the laws of physics, one has to maintain a distance from something if he or she is going to resonate with it.

For me, it took a Jewish playwright to snap Mormonism off its self-important stem and position it on the playing field of the world next to sexual politics, American law, the gay aesthetic, disease, drug abuse, hallucinations, and mystical experience. Suddenly the angel Moroni, albeit a postmodern, female version of the angel Moroni, was grappling—literally as well as figuratively—with everything warm-blooded, human, and real in my life and the lives of nearly every American. And so were Joe, and Harper, and Joe's mother Hannah. These were real Mormons, like me. Torn, confused, passionate and spiritual, sexual, judgmental, judged, myopic, visionary, weak and strong.

And too, even though the politics of the LDS church are disparaged by Kushner in his play, I was proud of Mormonism—its tradition of golden books, and angels, of pioneer treks across the plains, of Mormon mothers who just might leave their homes in Zion to mid-wife the approaching Millennium with all its requisite fear and promise.

Angels in America helped me to understand that I was more Mormon than ever before, but that distinctions were slowly forming that would eventually be reflected in the way I talked about Mormonism. *Active* members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were suddenly just a segment, in fact far less than 50 percent of the subculture known as Mormons. Mormonism cuts the widest swath possible, embracing orthodox, neo-orthodox, RLDS, active, less active, inactive, liberal, reform-oriented, dissident, anti, fundamentalist, Latter-day Sometimes Saint (to use Carolyn Campbell's phrase), and, yes, even Jack.

To tell someone—a homosexual, a "so-called" scholar, a feminist, or others—that they are not Mormon because they do not "preach the orthodox religion" is like telling a Jew that she is no longer a Jew because she has acquired a taste for pork. In this sense Harold Bloom is right when in *The American Religion* he says that Mormons are not just a sect, but a race of people.

One day while I was working as a flight attendant on a flight from Salt Lake to Portland, Oregon, I served a man whom I thought I recognized. When I asked how I might know him, he asked if I was a member of the church. I automatically said yes. He identified himself as Ted E. Brewerton, a seventy, in the church hierarchy. Three rows later I thought to myself that I wished I had said to Elder Brewerton that I was a Mormon, but that my membership in "the church" had become irrelevant. I ended up writing that sentiment in a letter to the general authority and received a kindly response, but that in itself is another story.

Another general authority figures in my third and final seminal moment of my spiritual life for the past three years. But first, I need to digress.

My current wife is Episcopalian. I met Cheryl on my mission when I was living an hour north of Portland, Maine, in the tiny lakeside village of Raymond which is most famous for the boyhood home of another soul addled by religious fundamentalism, Nathaniel Hawthorne. How Cheryl and I hooked up together after my mission and marriage to my first wife is yet another story. But the point is that Cheryl belongs to St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Salt Lake, and I attend with her relatively often. In fact, sometimes I attend without her. St. Paul's became a resting point for me when I had no one from my own church whom I could talk to. That is the travesty of those who find themselves coloring outside LDS lines which have for the past several years become more and more precise and closer and closer together: there is no ecclesiastical chute or ladder available to non-mainstream Latter-day Saints except what some have euphemistically called "Courts of Love," especially if one takes one's box of Crayolas over the line, as I did, willingly and without regret.

St. Paul's was different from the LDS wards and stakes that I had experienced. The way I see it, the point at which Episcopalianism touches the individual is as interpretive and broad, as inclusive and abstract as its services are ritualistic and formal—in short, liturgical. The clergy and people of St. Paul's were not interested in proselyting a Mormon in crisis. The priests, however, did spend relatively long hours, sometimes at my panicked moments late at night, counseling with me not as a potential convert, but as a Mormon.

A number of things at St. Paul's were shockingly different from my ward experience. For example, during the mass one day, the congregation *celebrated* the life of a pacifist Episcopalian bishop from Salt Lake who years earlier was terminated as such because he had opposed World War I. Furthermore, though affiliated with a national church, St. Paul's has extraordinary autonomy. Given that the largest number of signers of the Declaration of Independence were Anglican, of which the American Episcopal Church is a descendent, the political structure of the church had in fact served as a democratic model for the U.S. government. Needless to say, my first year at St. Paul's prompted me to resonate with a recognition coded by some of my gay friends using the line from *The Wizard of Oz:* "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

We certainly were not in Mormonism anymore, and, to be true, I fell in love with the religion and considered formally joining. But I couldn't. In the fashion of Sterling McMurrin, the self-proclaimed pious heretic, I was too much a Mormon and would probably remain one forever. But I did attend St. Paul's, and one Sunday morning shortly after the Septem-

ber purges of 1993, I attended the 8:00 a.m. mass by myself. God does move in mysterious ways, I believe, for as I sat listening to announcements before communion, I learned that John Fowler, an LDS general authority, would be speaking at the Rector's Forum immediately after the service, and that he had agreed to entertain questions about the recent excommunications of LDS intellectuals which, at the time, I had found especially infuriating.

I went to the forum, my heart pounding. I was about to kiss the monster on the nose. Elder Fowler was a young, kind, generous man who made it through one other question before I asked mine. My voice cracked under the emotion of telling him that I had never before been so embarrassed in my life to be a Mormon. The parish hall, where the meeting was taking place, seemed to be completely still. I spoke for a few minutes, reminding him of what I loved about the church and what was now discouraging to me. For the first time I was having a conversation with a representative of the LDS church hierarchy in front of an audience of non-Mormons.

Though Elder Fowler gave me the party line about the authority of the LDS church resting in three and twelve men respectively, the moment was a powerful reminder of the necessity of the individual to speak freely, to be willing to publicly dissent from the church and the church authorities. I was also struck with how, being in an open, public forum, the exchange with Elder Fowler—with an audience of non-believers in the Gospel with a capital Mormon "G"—was different. There was no subtext of shame. There was no True Believer grit jamming the conversational joints. Understanding was the primary concern, not strong-arming, not intimidation, not scorn. There was no condescension. It was wonderful.

Afterwards we talked frankly with each other in low voices, while the milling, coffee-indulging crowd looked on. He told me that I could think or believe or not believe anything I wanted to about the church and its policies—anything at all—but he advised me not to go public with it. I assured him that I most assuredly would go public, hopefully with the kindness and compassion that he had shown me in front of a bunch of very curious Episcopalians.

I know from these three moments that I must never again feel intimidated by LDS dogma and what has tragically become its oppressive brokers. Both my manifesto to my father and the public act of *Angels in America* created a critical distance for me from the LDS church. My marriage to an Episcopalian also created blessed breathing room so that I could stand back and assess my religion and faith from a different vantage point. The corporate LDS church will respond to our voices and

opinions only IF there is a public audience such as there was at St. Paul's during the Rector's Forum. I am convinced that Elder Fowler would not have agreed to speak at such a gathering had he and his superiors not felt that it would be an opportunity to buttress the public image of the church.

Perhaps we should track down the brethren in their various ecumenical duties just as they, reportedly, have tracked others down through the Strengthening Church Members committee. As a theater critic, I know how much a stage set can detract from or enhance a play. What would seem to many as an innocuous space—the Parish Hall at St. Paul's—with a crucifix at one end of the hall and a steaming coffee pot near the other can make a big difference when trying to communicate with an LDS church official.

Mormons are demographically, ideologically, and otherwise very different from one another. Some have one wife; others have more than one; some ordain women to the priesthood; others do not. Even within the LDS church membership, Mormons differ from each other. Some believe in the infallibility of the prophets and apostles; some claim that they don't but act as if they do; some are pro-choice; some are pro-life; some suck down an occasional beer; others find Diet Coke offensive; some wear the temple garment so faithfully that they only take sponge baths (or so I'm told); while others wear them at their convenience; some have been excommunicated; some have not. But with few exceptions Mormons within the LDS church are different *in silence.*

"Some day they would be strong enough to afford dissenters," says the narrator of Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua,* referring to the fledgling new movement of Mormonism. "—[But] now salvation lay only in complete and disciplined togetherness. 'Except ye are one, ye are not mine.'" I would like to suggest that perhaps unlike the Mormons in the late nineteenth century, we can afford dissenters today. It's time. And whether the church hierarchy officially acknowledges such Mormons and their varied responses to their tradition and faith will become increasingly immaterial.

It seems that the general authorities must maintain the illusion of conformity among its members and among its upper quorums if they are to maintain control of the church, of Mormonism, and more importantly of their public images. Resistance to that control, public resistance, is required, even if it doesn't seem to make a difference at the time. I believe some day that it will make a difference and in a magnitude that, like the stunningly sudden deflation of the Soviet Union, will astonish and frighten us. "Never doubt that a small group," said anthropologist Margaret Mead, "of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

I for one am not as interested in changing the corporate church as I am in exploding the notion of what it means to be Mormon. There is a difference between being a Mormon and a member of the LDS church; the former embraces the latter. But I also feel that because the church is very sensitive to the public persona of Latter-day Saints as a people, that ecclesiastical reform will undoubtedly follow those Mormons who live their lives abundantly and honestly, with a firm conviction that the religious life is a negotiation between people and between the individual and his or her God, and that the Gospel with a capital Mormon "G" is just one party to the talks.

Postscript: 1997

Resigning one's membership in the LDS church is about giving up control, the same control that dissident Mormons have been asking the church to relinquish. In December 1996, when I initiated my own resignation (the beginning of a maddeningly protracted action that has still to be completed), I realized that I was giving up control of my public image to people who had mattered to me for my entire life, including my family. I didn't know if I was doing the right thing. I still don't know if I've done the right thing. It was an act of faith for me, an act approached with some trembling and the hope that my resignation was motivated by love—to myself and to the religion of my childhood and the tradition of my choice.

For many, the LDS church is a social system which fuses the souls of its members to their families and then to its own corporate entity animated by strict obedience to authority. That is why, for all the years that I was a Latter-day Saint, I felt personally diminished whenever the church was publicly diminished by detractors, many of whom, I suppose, are not unlike I am now. I had no soul except that of my family/church—which was one and the same thing. That is why I could not leave until recently. One doesn't volunteer to abandon one's soul.

After years of struggling with this volatile fusion of individual/family/church, it came to me one day, very simply, and in a raw but hallowed space I had eked out for what I hoped would be the re-emergence of my soul, that I was not rejecting my family, my heritage, or my Mormon-ness by formally leaving the church. My resignation was what it was: a protest over the vaulting fundamentalism and rampant fear that, in my view, has turned a valid church of Jesus Christ into little more than a totalitarian system.

What is left for me after resigning from the church is Mormon ethnicity, an idea that only an agnostic infatuee of Joseph Smith at Yale University seems to be taking seriously right now. What does an ethnic

Mormon do? Like ethnic Judaism, I suppose, it's all up for grabs, which portends real problems, one of which is that no one has control—or, rather, the seeming control—over how society perceives Mormonism. Personally I have found that having left the church I am now free to find my own way to love my family. I have also found that in my new space I have learned to value and even emulate the many personal qualities of my parents whose personnae, now liberated from the fusion of individual / family / church, are free to reflect other light from other sources and from other angles.

Finally, if an ethnic Mormon is a writer, as I fancy myself, then he or she writes about what it means to be a Mormon for the purposes of "outing" his or her people into the larger society, much as Chaim Potok outed the Hasidim through his coming-of-age novels. The ethnic Mormon who writes believes that his or her people need to be a part of the conversation that the rest of the world routinely participates in. Why? Because they are human beings ... who happen to be Mormon.