

# A *Dialogue* Retrospective

*Allen Dale Roberts*

LOOKING BACK AT *DIALOGUE* from a perspective of six years seems to me a lot like looking at my six-year-old child and wondering how she grew so fast and unpredictably, while pondering where the time went. It really does seem like just a short time ago that Marti Bradley and I took the baton from Mary Kay and Ross Peterson at the reception honoring their five-year stint as editors (Winter 1987-Winter 1992). I recall the mixed expectations I had back then—part familiarity due to my own five years of *Dialogue* experience with Jack and Linda Newell and Lavina Fielding Anderson, and part newness and a sense of optimism that we, too, had something unique and important to contribute. It was a sort of self-calling, supported more tenuously than we might have liked due to a complex and extended selection process. Still, once the “mantle” had descended, with it came a sense of responsibility to the trust that had been given to us. At the same time, we believed that as the LDS church itself was changing as it grew, *Dialogue*, too, needed to grow and move forward.

One issue we addressed early on was if *Dialogue* should be mainly an interpreter or reflector of church life and culture or if it should serve a larger role in trying to improve the Mormon experience by providing constructive criticism and advocating progressive change. Some among our group felt it might be inappropriate to move away from a strictly academic, juried approach, patterned after university periodicals whose role it is to inform dispassionately with evidence, logic, and plenty of footnotes. I enjoy good theological discourse and history pieces as much as anyone, and they remain the cornerstones of *Dialogue's* literary foundation, but ours is a social gospel of interacting people, personally moved by ideas, sometimes lofty, sometimes otherwise. The dialogue about how ideas influence us to various courses of action lies not in the domain of scholarship alone. The interplay between humans and their religions is expressed as well, though differently, in poetry, fiction, essays, and the visual arts, all of which are important venues in *Dialogue*. They give to the mind companionship of heart and soul. It remains my view that *Dialogue* should include multiple visions, vehicles, and voices for carrying out our

mission: the independent exploration of Mormon culture and the examination of "the relevance of religion to secular life." As the narrowing of the spectrum of Mormon orthodoxy continues, we must reaffirm our thirty-three-year-old mission statement which "encourages a variety of viewpoints."

Thus I have seen in *Dialogue* a place for the discussion of any subject which helps us to bring our "faith into dialogue with the larger stream of world religious thought and with human experience as a whole ... " To me, this means it is as legitimate and valuable to devote pages to observations on spiritual abuse, the temple experience, or homosexuality in a Mormon context, as it is to discuss Joseph Smith, church growth in foreign countries, or Mormon megatrends for the twenty-first century.

Not only is variety of subject needed, but diversity of voice and format is also worthwhile. The heartfelt passion of an essay's advocacy is as insightful in its way as the brilliance of a new insight on a problematic scripture or a well-documented revision of an error in history. I am pleased that *Dialogue* has been both a soulmate and a watch dog of the church, just as *Commonweal* has been a force for good in the Roman Catholic tradition. So I am still convinced that the seven pieces, mostly essays, in our first issue (Spring 1993) made an important, if not "breakthrough," contribution to Mormon thought. We lost some readers, including a few charter subscribers (apparently more because of the cover art than the articles), but gained many more new readers. The greatest loss was experienced by the authors who paid a high price for their courage. Of the seven, three have been excommunicated, two have been on probation, one has become "less active" (read, lapsed), and the last, Richard Poll of "Liahona-Iron Rod" fame, has passed on to a hopefully more loving, tolerant, and inclusive existence.

We decided to take on the work of editing *Dialogue* because we respect and deeply value the journal and its key role in the community of Saints. Our primary goal from the first was to maintain its tradition of excellence. The present masthead shows the organizational structure has remained about the same, although most of the names have changed in an effort to bring "fresh blood" to the body. Comparing the "Contents" page today with one, say, ten years ago, also reveals little change in format or venues. Wanting to improve on a good thing and inspired by the untimely death of a promising young scholar, Steven Molen, we determined to include in each issue at least one article or story by a young writer. Our Spring 1997 issue was devoted almost entirely to the writings of thoughtful young Mormons. To better serve readers interested in serious theological analysis, we added a new, regular feature called "Scriptural Studies," edited by Mark D. Thomas. The popular "From the Pulpit" title disappeared, but the essays which once appeared under this heading were

simply relocated under the long-standing title "Articles and Essays" to eliminate confusing redundancy. As always, the Letters, Fiction, Poetry, Reviews, Contributors, and About the Artist sections are found in each issue, along with occasional Notes and Comments. Having just reviewed the titles of all of the articles we've published since 1993, my (admittedly subjective but not uninformed) appraisal is that *Dialogue* during this period has been as strong as it has been at any previous time. Following the wisdom of our predecessors, we have avoided writing our own editorials, excepting this farewell and our introduction, "The Times—They Are A' Changin'," in our first issue.

Longtime readers of *Dialogue* will have noticed that the last twenty-four issues of the journal have come out regularly without missing any issues, in large part because of the managing editorship of Gary J. Bergera. *Dialogue's* size also has increased with the average issue running about 200 pages and some exceeding 300 pages. This we somehow did despite just one small price increase, only the journal's third in more than three decades. For these advances we are indebted to our loyal readers and generous donors who support the journal's vision in invisible but tangible ways.

Our commitment to publishing fine art in each issue has remained constant. We have introduced new, previously unpublished painters, sculptors, and photographers, and have brought the work of already well-established artists to our covers and pages for the first time. The art has ranged from realism to experimental and avant garde work, bringing new messages and fresh voices, just as we have sought to do with the written word. We are pleased that donor generosity allows us to continue to give cash awards to the authors of the "Best of *Dialogue*" articles, fiction, and poetry each year. It was also a privilege to have been the means for publishing former *Dialogue* editor Mary Lythgoe Bradford's award-winning biography of Lowell Bennion, bringing it off the press just a few months before his death. In addition, we have appreciated the kindness of Elbert Peck of *Sunstone* for allowing *Dialogue* to host several sessions and panel discussions in various symposia over the last six years.

On an even more personal note, I suspect that the handing off of the *Dialogue* baton to a new team of editors will mark the end of my own twenty-four years' work in independent Mormon periodical and book publishing and editing. This near quarter-century has been a richly satisfying chapter in my life, and I feel gratitude and a lingering sense of spiritual kinship with my many colleagues at *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, Signature Books, the *Journal of Mormon History*, and the Mormon Alliance. I appreciate especially my co-editor and co-workers at *Dialogue* who, through our six years, have shared willingly in our ups and downs. Nothing can compensate the loss of no longer working closely with Marti Bradley and

Gary Bergera on this enterprise. Marti's thoughtfulness and humanity have given us balance, wisdom, and caring; Gary's craftsmanship and commitment to process have given us professionalism and consistency.

I join with Marti in expressing how much we greatly miss those *Dialogue* luminaries who have left us. They cannot be replaced but they will be remembered thanks, in part, to the fine works they left us. I suppose we cannot know how any of the journal's writings specifically impact individual members or the church at large. My sense is that the church is better today because of *Dialogue*, not just because of its writings on blacks and priesthood, presidential succession, the temple experience, the problems of proselyting, women's issues, or religious abuse, but also because it is a symbiotic relationship, even if both parties may be reluctant to admit it.

I have little advice to offer the new editors, Neal and Rebecca Chandler. One suggestion is to publish another index covering all of the issues since the Twenty-Year Index was done. Second, you may want to conduct another readership survey to reestablish contact with the journal's readers and to reappraise what is relevant for *Dialoguers* today. Most importantly, stay true to *Dialogue's* mission statement and keep a real dialogue going in *Dialogue*.