

# Essay for June 9, 1998

*Margaret Blair Young*

TODAY IS JUNE 9, 1998. I have been forty-three for two days. My father, Robert Wallace Blair, is teaching spring term; he will retire when the term ends after thirty-four years as a linguistics professor at BYU. One of my most important mentors, Eugene England, retired from the English department this past April.

Twenty years ago on this day, I was in Mexico City. Very much my father's daughter, I had learned some Russian, but was now working in Spanish, teaching literacy via the Book of Mormon with a wonderful English professor named Dorothy Hansen. I was writing some of the lessons and trying hard to be a good writer though, to be honest, I was pretty lousy. Still, I was sure I had some writing talent. There was no proof of this; I certainly hadn't published a thing, but I was sure it was in me somewhere.

We were five college coeds and Dorothy, and we were doing a remarkable project: Teaching Isaiah to barefoot, illiterate Indian women, who would bring fresh tamales to our lessons.

"What do you think this means?" we would ask, directing our students to Moroni 10:31: "And awake and arise from the dust and put on thy beautiful garments." Why does Moroni include this scripture from Isaiah? What "beautiful garments" is he referring to?

"*Pues hermana,*" an Indian sister answered once, "*pienso que se refiere al templo.*" "I think it refers to the temple."

I was amazed at the insights these unlettered, long-braided women had. In their simplicity, they could understand things that intellectual *gringos* often complicated beyond comprehension. How I loved writing and giving those lessons! How I loved those Indians!

We were picking up keys to a chapel, I think, when we went to the bishop's house on June 9, 1978. It was the bishop's wife who told us the news, weeping: "*El profeta ha recibido una revelación! Todos los hombres dignos pueden recibir el sacerdocio—ni importa el color de piel. Todos! Incluso los negros!*"

The prophet had received a revelation: All worthy males might now receive the priesthood, regardless of race. This meant the black race too.

I remember closing my eyes and saying simply to God: "Thank you." The issue mattered deeply to me. It had for years.

Some of the most dominant images of my childhood come in black and white. I must have been six years old when I heard my father talking about getting chased by someone or a group of someones at Indiana University (where Dad was getting his master's degree). That would have been 1961. It was a brief incident with no repercussions; I doubt Dad even remembers it. But for a six-year-old girl, it was a stark image: her invulnerable father getting chased by people who apparently wanted to hurt him. The reason for the chase: Dad was a Mormon. I associate this memory with the Civil Rights movement, though I can't be sure the "chase" was connected to it.

The next most prominent image from my childhood is circa 1963, not long before President Kennedy's assassination. My Mormon friends, Darlene and Diane Midgley, and I are playing in Hoosier Courts, picking wild chives to line our "fort" (a little space between some lilac bushes). A black girl approaches, her hair all tight braids. There is an innertube swing hung between nearby willows, and we swing on it. An argument of some sort ensues. One of us (not me!) hits the black girl, who howls.

Somebody must have tattled, for Dad was there almost immediately, wearing a face I had never seen him wear. As I picture it now, his face seems halfway between rage and agony. He is, for a moment, speechless.

We Blair kids always knew when Dad meant business. The business he meant now was more serious than anything I had ever before registered from his expressions. He finally asked the guilty party—in a voice that seemed burnt to a thread, "Did you hit this girl?"

Too scared to lie, the guilty one nodded.

Dad was close to tears, his face still that unfamiliar, livid one. When he finally found his voice, and it arrived very strong: "You will never hurt a Negro child. You will NEVER hurt a Negro child."

He left, taking very big steps. The incident was over.

Another night, I remember inviting that same black child home for a piece of cake, then saying to Dad afterwards, "I like her. She's nice." Just to be sure he knew that I would never hit her.

They say children are color blind, unaware of races. I was not. I knew very well that this child was black and that, because I was Mormon, her blackness meant something. I didn't quite understand what that something was.

The next year, we moved to Chicago. My teacher at Murray Elementary in the Hyde Park district was the very white, very old Mrs. Reif, al-

ways overdressed—often wearing a camel-colored gown with a gold sequin dickie. On the first day of class, Mrs. Reif asked us all to introduce ourselves by stating our name and (I swear!) our religion. By the time it was my turn, it was clear there were no other Mormons in the class. I was shy about admitting my religion, but after some prodding, whispered, “Mormon.” Mrs. Reif laughed and said, “Really! I thought we got rid of the Mormons in Illinois!”

There were two black boys in my class. (In those days, the word was “Negroes.”) They seemed to be always getting into trouble. I recall watching Mrs. Reif standing the two of them before the rest of us and berating them. I recall it vividly even now. One boy was fat, the other lanky, both hanging their heads and trying not to giggle. But I knew there was something wrong in what my teacher was doing. I don’t believe I’m exaggerating my eight-year-old reaction: “Why is Mrs. Reif picking on them just because they’re Negroes?” Instinctively, I knew their treatment was a racial issue, not a behavioral one. It was one of those luminous moments where an unexpected truth becomes undeniably clear—as when you realize your parents don’t actually know everything or that even a child can die. It was startling to realize—in one bright moment—that my teacher was doing something wrong.

My parents didn’t talk much about Civil Rights to us kids though certainly the topic was in the papers and on the t.v. news. I knew the name Martin Luther King and that he had led a march of black people in Washington, D.C., but little more than that. Still, I was becoming aware of racism just because of where I was and what was happening around me.

At this time, my father was working with Mayan Indians, several of whom lived with us over the years, or at least visited with some frequency. I saw Dad’s friendly interaction with these short, brown-skinned, beardless men; heard all of them (including Dad) speak words I couldn’t understand—not because they were difficult, but because they were a different language. I knew it was a good thing to speak different languages because I saw Dad studying various grammars. Our shelves were filled with two kinds of books: Books on Mormonism and books on languages. I knew that Dad could shift into a vocabulary which only brown-skinned people understood and that this was something I should be proud of.

That was my early childhood, spent in Bloomington, Indiana, and Chicago, Illinois, with one summer in Yucatan. When Dad was hired at B.Y.U., I came to all-white Provo, joining the last month of Mrs. Champions’s fourth grade class at Wasatch Elementary. There were two good days in my new class, and then, with no warning, I was completely ostracized. It was weeks later that a classmate relented and told me why the class had taken up this “fight” against me. (“Fight” was her word.) She

gave me a two-page list of my unlikeable characteristics. For one thing: I talked funny (Chicago accent?). For another: I had red hair, which most people just plain didn't like. And, of course, there was much more, but for a full month no one in my class spoke to me. Even in my primary class, my fellow "Gaynotes" would always arrange the chairs so mine was separate.

That year, I quit talking much to anyone but my family. I may be wrong, but I'm personally convinced that the emotional trauma was serious enough to affect me physically. I don't think it's a coincidence that shortly after returning to Provo, my eyesight became very poor. (I am now legally blind without glasses or contacts—the only one in my family with this problem.) I truly believe my whole physical and emotional system was so shocked by my treatment that it started turning me blind—maybe as a ploy to get attention or to prod compassion from my persecutors.

Was my own "segregation" because of my appearance and accent another way I was sensitized to racism? It may well have been. I know now that I was precociously aware of racial issues when I began my first year of L.D.S. seminary.

My seminary teacher, whom I won't name, was in his late fifties or early sixties. A former bishop with a full head of silver hair that made you think, "Prophet!," he was gifted in theatrics and could imitate a diabolical laugh well enough to give us ninth-graders the willies. He liked to tell stories about angels and near-death experiences or sentimental tales ala *Especially for Mormons*. Once, in a marvelously understated performance, he announced that he had received a letter from the First Presidency that morning: the time had come, he stated soberly, for the Saints to return to Missouri. By the afternoon, "the Russians will have bombed out all highways, so we'll have to take handcars." He went on like this for a half hour before saying, "Aren't you glad this isn't true? But don't you want to be prepared for the day when it IS true?" During another class period, he read us an oath from The Knights of Columbus, testifying that his own life would be in danger if the Catholics knew he had this document, but we needed to understand just how dangerous the Catholics were. He also claimed that if a person was righteous for many years, the devil would finally just give up on him and quit tempting. "By the time you reach my age," he announced, "the devil knows you won't yield, so he pretty much leaves you alone."

Brother X knew the Book of Mormon well, quizzed us on the meaning of each symbol in Lehi's vision with a well-drawn picture of a tree and a skyscraper where we were to fill in the blanks. He bore a testimony that seemed sincere, but still Oscar-worthy. He knew just how to use the theatrical pause, just which words to emphasize, when to whisper, when to shout.

And he used the term “nigger” without any hesitation at all.

It was stunning to me. No one had ever told me we didn’t use that word; I just knew we didn’t. And here was this man, my very dramatic Book of Mormon instructor, a church authority as far as I was concerned, dropping it like common punctuation.

Near the end of the year, Brother X asked us to evaluate him as a teacher. “Now I truly want you to be honest,” he said, passing out the evaluation forms. “If there’s anything better I can do as a seminary teacher, I want to do it! And don’t sign your names—this is all anonymous.” He smiled righteously, reminding us and the devil, no doubt, that he was beyond temptation. Maybe even beyond criticism.

Silly me. I thought he actually wanted our evaluations. So I wrote what I really thought, in these words, which I remember verbatim: “I think you sometimes say things which could incite racial prejudice.”

The next class period Brother X was somber. He had the evaluations in his hand. “I want to read you one of these,” he said. “And I know who wrote it.” He fixed me with a cold squint, then read my words. I didn’t flinch.

“You little Utah kids,” he sneered, slapping the evaluations to his desk and employing a dramatic pause worthy of Charlton Heston. “You have no idea what it’s like to work with niggers. Well let me tell you, I’ve worked with them, and I tell to you with all the power of my soul, the nigger IS inferior. There’s a reason God doesn’t want the nigger to have the priesthood.”

Strong words. I wonder if my face showed the same rage my father’s had when he said, “You will *never* hurt a Negro child!” For I knew at age thirteen that what this religion teacher was telling me was absolutely wrong. I knew he was absolutely wrong for saying it. I knew the “testimony” he had just born was absolutely false.

I went home and told my father what had happened. Dad was likewise enraged. The next year, I told another seminary teacher—and this one I will name: Don Black—what had happened and admitted I wasn’t sure I wanted to attend seminary. Brother Black demanded I tell him who had said that terrible, untrue, racist thing, and I told. Shaking his head, Brother Black said, “I have prayed next to Alan Cherry and felt like a babe in arms.”

I knew who Alan Cherry was, of course—the courageous, black author of *It’s You and Me, Lord* and (for me equally important) a member of the rock band “The Sons of Mosiah,” a group of Mormons (including the gorgeous Dave Zandanati and the really cute Richie Ellsworth) who sang songs about Jesus and repentance with a drumbeat good enough to dance to. I knew Alan Cherry was a deeply spiritual man, and I knew he was deeply cool, too.

I never fully recovered from my first seminary teacher's misbegotten testimony. I finally dropped out of the seminary program, and here I am, all these years later, writing about the experience on the anniversary of the date the priesthood was extended to all worthy males—certainly including Alan Cherry.

I have often wondered if Brother X remembers the day he bore his testimony to my class that blacks were inferior. I have wondered how he responded to the revelation of June 9, 1978.<sup>1</sup> I have pondered his idea that after many righteous years, a man has earned freedom from temptation, and I've wondered if he ever grasped his self-deception, if he ever realized that the most dangerous, most tenuous place of all is an enclosed system where all things are set and known—or pretend to be so. If opposition has ceased and self-examination has ceased, then growth has ceased. The inertia invited by a desire for absolute certitude and closure is either the setting for the second law of thermodynamics—the tendency towards chaos—or it is simply death. I have wondered if my seminary teacher ever understood that the gospel is not an enclosed system, but the opening of all systems through divinely prescribed keys, that the moment we box up anyone—including ourselves—is the moment we become slaves.

Another piece of my own history bears mention here. The summer before my conversation with Don Black, Dad trained Peace Corps volunteers set for Brazil. The training happened in Alta, Utah, and I—with my college-aged friend Judy—went there with him. I served as a bus-girl. There, a black man, a potential Peace Corps volunteer, confronted my father about the Mormon priesthood policy. Knowing my father for the generous, loving person he is, the man said, "You surely can't support that policy!" I heard my father, with pain and faith, answer clearly: "I support that policy." The black man threw a tantrum, culminating with the repeated shout, "You've never been a slave! You've never been a slave!"

When I finally began publishing stories, I wrote up this memory and titled it "Outsiders." As a retrospective side note, the editors who accepted it for *Dialogue* were Ruth and Robert Reese, close friends of Gene England's and later missionaries who served with my father when he presided over the Baltic States mission.

"Outsiders" is fiction. My protagonist, a "Utah Mormon," has never known any black people. My own father, unlike my narrator's, served his mission to Finland, not Brazil. And in real life, I never kissed Ernie the dishwasher.

As a coming of age story, "Outsiders" doesn't reveal what finally

---

1. Though the revelation was given on June 8, it wasn't announced until June 9.

happened to the black man—or to my narrator’s father. The true history is this: The man who shouted, “You’ve never been a slave!” was not allowed to go to Brazil because of that tantrum, which a psychologist determined to be a manifestation of emotional instability. And Dad, after receiving many Peace Corp contracts for Indian languages, had his grants abruptly stopped because (according to my mother) “he represented B.Y.U. and the church.”

I was seventeen years old when I read Lester Bush’s comprehensive treatise on the history of the black priesthood policy, published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.<sup>2</sup> I found it enlightening and troubling. Afterwards, I read my very first Eugene England essay “The Mormon Cross”<sup>3</sup>—his response to the Bush article—and liked his idea that the policy was in fact a test of faith—not just for black Mormons, but even more for white Mormons.

I have since heard Gene discuss the policy as “the lesser law.” Just as the ancient Israelites weren’t worthy of the whole law from Sinai and so received the lesser law, we Latter-Day Saints, because of our prejudices, weren’t worthy of the fully inclusive priesthood, which the Lord surely wanted to give us.

I like that idea. It vindicates us to a great extent, but I don’t totally buy it. My own faith includes room for fallibility even in ecclesiastical leaders. I personally find Brigham Young’s definitive statement on the policy born more of his time than of inspiration:

How long is that race to endure the dreadful curse? . . . That curse will remain upon them and they never can hold the priesthood or share in it until all the other descendants of Adam have received the promises and enjoyed the blessings of the priesthood and the keys thereof.<sup>4</sup>

That quote is quite similar to other leaders of other churches during that same time. For example, Reverend Samuel Seabury, a New Englander like Brigham Young, writes this on the eve on the Civil War (1861) in an effort to get his fellow Northerners to leave the South and southern slavery alone:

I desire it may be considered that children . . . follow the condition of their parents as, for example . . . that the natives of New England are not savages, like the aboriginal Indians, but . . . an enlightened, civilized, and Christian people, after the fashion of their Puritan forefathers. . . . The posterity of

---

2. Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (spring 1973): 11-68.

3. Eugene England, “The Mormon Cross,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (spring 1973): 78-86.

4. *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 7, 290-1, quoted in Stephen G. Taggart, *Mormonism’s Negro Policy* (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1970), 71.

Abraham inherited, by this Divine providence, the privileges which their father's faith had earned for them, as well as for himself; and the descendants of Ham have been born to the curse pronounced on their progenitor. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Reverend Seabury explains that slavery is, as the title of his book suggests, "justified by the law of nature," that a slave is made for servitude, that it would be as unjust to deprive the master of his slave's lifelong service as it would be to deprive:

the man of the subjection and service naturally due to him from the woman . . . It would be inexpedient, because it would subvert the foundation of that order which is essential to the peace and happiness of human society, and which Nature has laid in the physical and mental superiority of the man.<sup>6</sup>

Even slaves themselves explained their situation by the same tradition Brigham Young grew up with, as this quote from *Lay My Burden Down*, a folk history of slavery as told by former slaves themselves, indicates:

God gave religion to Adam and took it away from Adam and gave it to Noah, and you know, Noah had three sons, and when Noah got drunk on wine, one of his sons laughed at him, and the other two took a sheet and walked backwards and threw it over Noah. Noah told the one who laughed, "You children will be hewers of wood and drawers of water for the other two children, and they will be known by their hair and their skin being dark." So, Miss, there we are, and that is the way God meant us to be. We have always had to follow the white folks and do what we saw them do, and that's all there is to it. You just can't get away from what the lord said.<sup>7</sup>

It's hardly surprising that a religious leader in nineteenth century America would echo such well-accepted thoughts in his own theology. It is rather surprising that the first Mormon leader, Joseph Smith, was as radically anti-racist as he was. It's true, he also used the "servant of servants" motif during the Missouri years when the church was suspected of agitating slaves and inviting Blacks into Missouri—contrary to the Missouri Compromise. But Joseph Smith's position evolved. In the 1840s and especially during his presidential campaign, he said some remarkably egalitarian things:

Change their situation with the whites, and [the blacks] would be like them.

---

5. Rev. Samuel Seabury, *American Slavery Distinguished from the Slavery of English Theorists and Justified by the Law of Nature* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1861), 127.

6. *Ibid.*, 78.

7. B. A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), 15.



They have souls, and are subjects of salvation. Go into Cincinnati or any city and find an educated negro, who rides in his carriage, and you will see a man who has risen by the powers of his own mind to his exalted state of respectability. The slaves in Washington are more refined than many in high places, and the black boys will take the shine off many of those they brush and wait on.<sup>8</sup>

If we follow the progression of Joseph's Smith's ideas on slavery, we certainly see his direction towards full acceptance of all God's children. Brother Joseph prophesied that "People from every land and from every nation, the polished European, the degraded Hottentot, and the shivering Laplander—persons of every tongue and of every color shall with us worship the Lord of Hosts in his Holy temple."<sup>9</sup> This, of course, didn't happen for a very long time.

Perhaps Gene England is right that the priesthood ban for blacks was "a lesser law." But if so, it was certainly our slavery, not the black man's, which made us unworthy of the greater law. The slavery of prejudice, of permitted hatred, is slavery of the heart and is more damaging than any literal chain. The Israelites—even on the path to their "Promised Land"—built Egyptian gods, never understanding the freedom the true God had for them. They knew no other way. They knew no other God, for they had not walked far enough with Him. They had not left their slavery far enough behind.

Certainly we are capable of similar idolatry, similarly false traditions. We may not understand the freedom God intends for us, a freedom wherein we hold our own educated consciences, never surrendering them to ungodly, culturally myopic customs. In the promised land God offers us, we are liberated to view all men and women in the light of their eternal promise, and as we do, to understand our own light and promise as well. Indeed, the land becomes "promised" because each inhabitant is "promised."

The same year I read Lester Bush's article, I read the book which probably destined me to study literature (after trying five other majors). The book was *The Brothers Karamazov*, focusing especially on "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" in which an inquisitor holds the Savior himself captive, assuring Him that the very people who had just knelt at His feet would—at the slightest gesture from the inquisitor—heap up embers and burn Him to death.<sup>10</sup> He tells Christ, "Thou didst think too highly of

---

8. Quoted in Dennis L. Lythgoe, "Negro Slavery and Mormon Doctrine," *Western Humanities Review* 21 (1967): 330.

9. Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1978), 4:213.

10. Feodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 135.

men, for they are slaves . . . and who can rule men if not he who holds their conscience . . . in his hands?"<sup>11</sup>

Dostoevsky's indirect observation that we humans are all too willing to surrender our consciences to our leaders—political or ecclesiastical—is not far afield from Brigham Young's:

I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by Him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken that influence they could give to their leaders, did they know for themselves, by the revelations of Jesus, that they are led in the right way. Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates, or not.<sup>12</sup>

Joseph Smith said something quite similar. He never suggested that Mormon people should cease following prophetic leadership, but that "*depending on the prophet*" [emphasis mine] would result in "darken[ing] in their minds, in consequence of neglecting the duties devolving upon themselves. . . ." <sup>13</sup>

For myself, I will not state either that I believe the priesthood policy was inspired or that it was uninspired. I do know that God never renounced his position as Father of all his children. If the policy was a trial of faith, I wonder if that trial is as much for my generation as for the previous one. Can we of this generation read racist statements of our former prophets or general authorities and forgive them? Can I forgive my seminary teacher? As a temple worker, I have presented women of many races and languages at the veil. I have felt nothing but love for them. Could I help a woman I knew to be a racist and love her as I do these other sisters? Could I stand in a prayer circle with the man who once bore his testimony to me that blacks were inferior? This is my own cross and is perhaps as heavy as the one Gene referred to in the first essay of his I read.

So now it's June 9, 1998, and I'm forty-three. I have been writing and publishing for nearly a decade. I'm certainly not famous, but there are small groups of people who seem to value my work—largely because of Eugene England and his encouragement not only to Mormon writers, but to Mormon readers. I can't fully articulate how it feels to have arrived at

---

11. *Ibid.*, 133.

12. *Journal of Discourses*, 9:150.

13. Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church*, 5:19.

this date and this place with Gene two months gone from the BYU English department. The race issue has had particular importance to him, and thus to his students. Gene is not replaceable. But I hope whoever teaches Mormon literature—at any university or college—will have the same convictions he does: that the best Mormon literature—and it must become more multi-cultural—can, with its expansive vision, open our hearts to our brothers and sisters and help us understand and love them better.

And my father in two weeks will leave the BYU department he founded and chaired. This is another time-marker I find hard to pass. I have inherited wonderful things from Dad, whom I automatically associate with his BYU office where his bookshelves are still filled (just as I remember from my childhood) with texts on various languages—some authored by Dad—and books on Mormonism. It is Dad's example and the gift of languages, which I and some of my siblings have received from him, that have made my life as full as it is.

Now, twenty years after the priesthood revelation, as these two very important men in my life retire, I feel myself being thrust from a nest. Perhaps it's no coincidence that I am beginning what is surely the most presumptuous project I have ever done. Let's see if I can fly with this one! I don't anticipate finishing it for at least three years, perhaps five. I am writing a historical novel about black pioneers. Darius Gray, the current president of "Genesis" (a church-sponsored group for black Mormons and their friends), is my very insightful editor. President Gray and I feel very strongly about our work. We want black members to know that there were blacks with us from the very beginning of the church, that they played key roles, and that—despite past policies—they matter in our history and not just as footnotes to "the priesthood ban." We plan to take the novel (or perhaps novel trilogy) through Darius's genealogy, from his ancestor Louis Gray, who was a slave near Independence, Missouri, at the time the Saints were expelled, up through 1992 when Darius attended a meeting in the upper room of the Salt Lake Temple to honor those pioneers who had built it. When at that meeting the congregation was invited to think of those builders, Darius's mind went to Elijah Abel, who had worked on the Kirtland, the Nauvoo, and the Salt Lake temples though he was never allowed temple blessings beyond the washing and anointing he received in Kirtland.

As a fiction writer, guided by Darius Gray's insights, I am free to imagine and fill in the spaces between the historical facts in Elijah Abel's life. Who was this man, who, despite being denied temple blessings, finished his life by filling a third mission for the church? Elijah came home sick from that mission and died two weeks later. Who were Jane Manning James, Green Flake, and Samuel Chambers? Wonderful historians

and sociologists like Ron Coleman, Dennis Lythgoe, Newell Bringhurst, Lester Bush, Armaund Mauss, Henry Wolfinger, and William Hartley have given us vital facts about these people. Through Bringhurst's work, for example, we know not only that Elijah Abel was ordained an elder in 1836 and a seventy shortly thereafter, but that he was called by Joseph Smith to be Nauvoo's first undertaker.<sup>14</sup> We know that he sat at the death bed of Father Smith, who had given him his patriarchal blessing, which stated "thou has been ordained an Elder. . . . Thou shalt be made equal to thy brethren . . . and thy robes glittering."<sup>15</sup> But whereas a historian might be restricted to "just the facts, ma'am," a fiction writer may imagine the stories between the facts.

I have been imagining what it must have been like for Elijah Abel, a descendant of slaves and likely a former slave himself who escaped via the underground railroad,<sup>16</sup> to serve as an undertaker for all the white people of Nauvoo. At first I wondered why a trained carpenter, such as he was, would be called to be an undertaker. When I read about funeral customs of the day, it became obvious: in the first half of the nineteenth century, undertakers were principally coffin makers. Common ads of the day read: "Carpenter/Upholsterer/Undertaker." So this black carpenter was called to deal with his white fellow-Mormons in their most vulnerable moments. There would be no pretensions in his white "customers," no insistence on master/servant protocol. Surely such things would have become ridiculously trivial and meaningless as Elijah guided them through the details of burying a loved one. I quote from the current draft of my novel, as yet untitled:

So here he was: Elder Elijah Abel, black man, carpenter for a temple of God, former minister of the Mormon gospel, now called by the prophet to carve out coffins from pitch pine because God said.

It was babies first—those that didn't make it out of the womb breathing, and those that caught the whoop before their cheeks got fat. Then it was the old women and old men. Come July, with the steady hum of the mosquitos down the swampland and the pulsing jeers of the cicadas, it was everybody dying.

Elijah didn't have to do the laying out; the midwives did that most often—almost always when it was a woman dead. Sister Sessions was the best. She'd get the body cleaned up even under the fingernails, dress it in good clothes, get coins on the eyelids to keep them shut, tie a cloth around the face

---

14. Newell G. Bringhurst, "Elijah Abel and the Changing Status of Blacks Within Mormonism," in *Neither White nor Black*, eds. Lester E. Bush, Jr., and Armand L. Mauss (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1984), 133.

15. Quoted in Richard Van Wagoner and Steven Walker, *A Book of Mormons* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1982), 2.

16. Lester E. Bush, Jr., "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine," 33.

to keep the mouth closed, and everything would be set by the time Elijah arrived with his wagon, hauling a coffin so new there'd still be sawdust in the corners. He'd pick the body up, lay it in its box, then—alongside the family men—carry it first to the sitting room (if the family had one) where mourners could weep over the corpse and snip off mementos of hair before it was nailed shut, then to the grove, finally to the grave.

He didn't know most of the people he confined, so their deaths didn't melt or wreck him. He simply stood back and watched grief settle into the mourners' face lines. Death was the ultimate slavery, that was it. A living, breathing soul became a thing to get boxed up, not even human anymore. And he, Elijah, was supervising the process: measuring the cadaver, cutting the wood, putting the box together with strong nails to withstand the weight of centuries. He was the carpenter measuring out the division point—brothers divided from sisters, husbands from wives, children from parents. He took the money for his pains and theirs, and watched the white folk become one mass of weeping humanity, hardly any distinctions between them: all dressed in black, all teary.

And, though a historian would be restricted, there's nothing which keeps a fiction writer from imagining Elijah Abel in his later travels, happening upon an articulate former slave who is delivering a rousing, abolitionist discourse. Elijah and this man were historical contemporaries in Maryland. As I picture it, Elijah would know the orator as Fred Bailey. But Fred Bailey has received a new name, one disassociated from his master (Bailey) and, hence, from slavery itself. Fred Bailey's name has become Frederick Douglass. Think of what a new name would mean to a slave, whose name often changed according to who owned him!

Jane Manning James may have pondered this. While laundering Joseph Smith's clothes in Nauvoo, she "found Brother Joseph's robes."<sup>17</sup> As she says:

I looked at them and wondered, I had never seen any before, and I pondered over them and thought about them so earnestly that the spirit made manifest to me that they pertained to the new name that is given the saints that the world knows not of.<sup>18</sup>

To the descendant of slaves, a "new name" would have great significance. Jane must have longed for a "new name" and to wear "robes" like Brother Joseph's. But these were blessings she would not receive in her lifetime.

---

17. Quoted in Henry Wolfinger, "A Test of Faith: Jane Elizabeth James and the Origins of the Utah Black Community," *Social Accommodation in Utah*, ed. Clark S. Knowlton, American West Occasional Papers (Salt Lake City, Utah: 1975), 153.

18. *Ibid.*, 154.

Jane's relentless pleas to church authorities for her temple blessings are heart-wrenching. Her first letter to John Taylor, after reminding him that this is the fullness of times where all nations are to be blessed, asks, "Is there no blessing for me?"<sup>19</sup> The query comes as part of a run-on sentence; the letter has many spelling and punctuation errors and was probably not written by Jane herself, but dictated, inasmuch as Jane could not write and often signed her name with an "X."<sup>20</sup> Yet there sits that poignant question, full of biblical resonance, echoing Esau's cry to his father on learning that his brother has apparently cheated him of his father's blessing: "He took away my birthright, and behold, now he hath taken away my blessing. . . . Hast thou not reserved a blessing for me?" (Gen. 27:36). As the daughter of a slave, Jane had indeed had her birthright taken away. Would the church she loved and had sacrificed for (she came across the plains in one of the first pioneer companies) now withhold its full blessings as well?

There is much, much for a fiction writer to play with here. And I'm very aware that among the many men and women who have influenced and blessed me so that I can play in this way, two important ones are at a departure point. Surely I would not have become as aware of racial issues, as open to other cultures and peoples as I am, had I not been raised by a man who made it his life's work to find ways to open himself up to, and to communicate with, people unlike himself—often illiterate, usually brown, almost always very poor.

And I have been blessed to be Gene England's student, friend, and colleague. My English professor husband, Bruce, introduced me to him shortly after our marriage, telling me, "You're going to just love this man! He writes the most wonderful essays!" At the time, I wasn't aware that it was Gene's essay I had read at age seventeen in my search for answers to this very difficult priesthood problem.

My husband was right. I love Gene England and cherish the influence he has had on my life from long before I met him.

I had the honor of being the last visiting writer in the last BYU English class Gene taught—Mormon literature, of course. I finished my presentation with the scripture I came to love twenty years ago in Mexico, and which illiterate Indian women helped me understand:

And awake and arise from the dust, O Jerusalem; yea, and put on thy beautiful garments, O daughter of Zion; and strengthen thy stakes and enlarge thy borders forever, that thou mayst be no more confounded, that the covenants of the eternal father, which he hath made unto thee, O house of Israel, may be fulfilled (Moro. 10:31).

---

19. *Ibid.*, 148.

20. *Ibid.*, 127.

Afterwards, there was a line of students wanting to know where I had found that scripture. I was surprised. Didn't everybody know that one? Why, it was a concluding scripture of the whole Book of Mormon!

And Moroni couldn't have concluded the book better. It's a good way to conclude an essay, too.

"Awake and arise from the dust, O Jerusalem!" Leave worldly accumulations, the dust that settles through inertia and death, the meaningless—or even wicked—traditions that take up heartspace and hoard sunbeams. Leave behind whatever sullies the shine of a holy anointment.

"Yea, and put on thy beautiful garments, O daughter of Zion." Go to the temple. Dress yourself in power and love to receive a blessing in one hand and to give a blessing with another until you are endowed with power such that you can claim your unimaginably full inheritance with both your hands and all your soul. Learn the eternal promises for you and for all men and women: resurrection, continuation, progress. Forever.

"And strengthen thy stakes and enlarge thy borders forever." To other skin colors. To other nations. To Godhood. Let no mortal line separate you from what God would have you be. Create no border in your own life which would keep your heart from receiving others. Present yourself at the border—or we may say the veil—of another land or people. Extend a hand of faith and fellowship, believing in the goodness, even the godliness, of the hand that takes yours. Magnify your vision of your fellow beings, and shrink not—not from them, nor from your own possibilities. There is no one here who cannot bless you with further light and knowledge.

"That thou mayest no more be confounded." Be free from the slavery of mind and heart. Retain your name and all the good it signifies, but receive a new name as well which has nothing to do with any slavery hidden in your family traditions or perceptions. Be free from the idols of Egypt where you were in bondage. Be free, and thank God almighty that you are free at last.

That was how I answered the news of June 9, 1978, and that is how I answer it again twenty years later: "Thank you, God."