

Why I Didn't Serve a Mission

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I TURNED 21 THE SUMMER OF 1989 before my junior year at BYU. The missionary I'd written to had come home, and we had gone our separate ways. I started fall semester with no boyfriend, no engagement ring, and no marital prospects. Naturally, everyone assumed I would go on a mission.

True, I appeared a likely candidate. I thought about going on a mission often. At BYU, if it didn't occur to *you*, it occurred to others who offered ceaseless advice on the subject. I had a reasonably strong testimony. I was a capable Sunday School teacher. I was familiar with gospel subjects and scripture—especially the Bible after having attended a Christian school for six years. I had a flair for the dramatic, which might have come in handy for street contacting, door approaches, and comic relief for beleaguered companions. I had two years of high school Spanish. I had survived the transition from dorms to apartment living, learning to cook, clean up after myself, and negotiate living with three other women. I liked to travel. Why not put in my papers?

I prayed and got my answer. No. Not a thunderous NO—more like a still, small no. It surprised me. Hadn't I been pointed in this direction since singing "I hope they call me on a mission" in Primary? Why would God *not* want me to serve a mission? Was this a vote of no confidence, or did the Almighty have something else in mind for me?

My answer made short work of my more pragmatic concerns about missionary service: I wouldn't have to get up early or live under a regimented time schedule. I wouldn't have to wear dresses, hose, and heels daily or figure out how to ride a bike wearing a skirt. I wouldn't have to suspend my education or figure out how to pay for a mission. I wouldn't have to pit my feminist sensibilities against mission politics or church policies. I wouldn't have to cut myself off from the world—an unrealistic notion, given my journalistic training. Still, my personal concerns didn't change the fact that God had weighed in against the idea of my being a missionary. Nor did I feel called to serve a mission the way some of my peers did.

Not everyone understood this. Thankfully, I didn't get much pressure from my family—my mom and her friends concurred that I'd probably be a good missionary, but didn't press the point. The hard sell came from some of the guys who had been in a freshman orientation group I'd led. Two years later, when they were freshly minted RMs, we had a reunion before school started. The guys encouraged me—some more vigorously than others—to put in my papers and go. It would be the best experience of my life, they assured me. I murmured something non-committal in return, reluctant to own up to or to explain my answer.

The following year, I got a taste of missionary zeal thanks to my summer internship at *The New Era*. The magazine sent me on assignment to Mesa, Arizona, to do a story on the youth guide program at the temple. I spent the weekend attending meetings, observing the youth guides on the job, and interviewing the guides about their experiences in the program. Many were glad they were getting practice teaching principles of the gospel as a stepping-stone to becoming full-time missionaries.

One experience during my visit stood out: after dinner, I went back to the temple grounds to visit the guides who were on duty that night. A monsoon had blown in, so it seemed unlikely anyone would drop by the temple for an outdoor garden tour. One of the young women had "set a date" that night to get a referral from someone she'd taken on a tour of the grounds. In spite of the weather—which was significantly calmer at the temple than elsewhere in the city—a young man appeared at the Visitor's Center and asked to go on a tour. I joined the group at the last stop just as Emily was bearing her testimony and inviting the young man to talk to the missionaries. He agreed and filled out a referral card before he left. The rest of us exploded into hugging and weeping and congratulating—a moment I've never been able to find adequate words to describe. I felt privileged to witness Emily's heartfelt testimony and the young man's receptiveness and desire to know more. Was this the kind of burning bosom experience missionaries had all the time?

The answer is probably no; I acknowledge that I romanticize the missionary experience. Like people who read about other countries but don't travel there themselves, I have a distorted picture of what a mission is actually like. In my mission fantasy, teaching moments and epiphanies happen to potential converts regularly, golden contacts never tarnish, and good, honest, truth-seeking people find the missionaries and vice versa.

In between, there's a lot of hard work, early morning hours, study time, stats to keep up with, competition with other missionaries, mismatched companionships, hunger, hardship, financial difficulty, as well as mental and physical health problems.

I have heard about bike accidents, empty mailboxes, Dear Jane letters, broken appointments, transfers, primitive living conditions, the oc-

casional psycho companion from hell, tension, betrayals, unreasonable demands, overbearing and chauvinistic leaders, the irritation of being "supervised" by 19 year old boys, and the singular injustice of watching someone else (read: male) baptize the people you taught. One friend spoke at a zone conference and said she didn't like the application of sports metaphors to missionary work. Her mission president, who had earlier referred to the zone as "Team Sweden," got up and said she had single-handedly driven the Spirit from the meeting with her remarks. She was in therapy primarily to "undo" the effects of her mission. I have probably heard more horror stories than uplifting ones.

Last summer, I read a friend's book-length mission memoir. Holly had said on many occasions that her mission nearly killed her. As I read the details of her experiences, I finally understood what she meant. I was amazed at her resilience as she dealt with spiritual and physical pain, illness, insomnia, exhaustion, and, at times, the feeling of having been abandoned by God. She finished the course; I fear I would have been on the first plane home. Reading her story made me appreciate how difficult it is for people to talk openly about their experiences when their missions *were not*, in fact, the best two years of their lives. The Mormon community seems less inclined to acknowledge the unpleasantness that can come with the package. People like stories that reinforce their ideas about missions. I've seen people become dismissive, judgmental, defensive, and even hostile when they hear about experiences that *don't* align with their perceptions of what a mission should be like. No wonder there is still a strong taboo against speaking honestly about unhappy or traumatic mission experiences.

The more I have heard about women's missionary experiences, the more I have been convinced that God was right in not encouraging me to undertake a mission. My faith has withstood many storms, but I'm not sure what a mission might have done to my beliefs. For some people, unsuccessful or otherwise stressful missions mark their exit from church activity altogether. It's not unlike my experience of working for the church: when I told friends and relatives I had a summer job with a church magazine, many warned me not to lose my testimony. I didn't understand what they meant until later difficulties made clear to me that they had been right. My relationship with the church was fundamentally altered that summer. Once you've seen behind the curtain, your relationship to the wizard changes.

Although I feel that not serving a mission was the right path for me, there are things I feel I missed out on by not going. I would like to be fluent in a language other than English (again, my romanticism presumed I wouldn't go stateside or to an English speaking mission). My two months as an exchange student in Israel created an appetite for travel and absorbing other cultures. I would like to have put away worldly

things and focused on loving and serving others over an extended period of time. Personal study often takes a back seat to the demands of everyday life; I imagine the depth and breadth of personal spiritual growth that a mission can foster is difficult to achieve on your own time. I admit I envy the camaraderie I saw among women who had worked as missionaries together—they seemed to have a bond that just playing together or rooming together does not forge. At times, I feel selfish for not having gone on a mission; then again, I feel the decision wasn't entirely mine.

I was reminded of this ambivalence about missionary service last May on my way home from a vacation to Thailand. During our layover in Japan, I asked a woman next to me in line how it was that so many people on the flight seemed to know each other. She explained there was a group of 120 Christian evangelists on their way home from a week of handing out Bibles in Thailand, Viet Nam, and Cambodia. She said this was the last revival tour until fall; they don't hand out Bibles during the really hot months. *Oh*, I thought to myself, *you only do God's work when it's temperate?* I felt a sense of pride that Mormon missionaries work year round.

Then she wanted to know if I was Christian (which begat uncomfortable parochial school flashbacks for me). I should have said yes and hoped the line would start moving and cut the conversation short. Instead, I said I had a Master's degree in religious studies and considered myself Christian but knew other Christian groups don't believe Mormons are true Christians. I'd been bracing for an all-out sales pitch, but after I mentioned the M-word, she seemed to lose interest. I was relieved—but also a little disappointed. Was no one going to try to save me from my cultish Mormon upbringing? I wasn't prepared for the indifference that followed.

Before leaving Bangkok, I overheard a woman yelling at two Thai postal workers in the airport over an \$8 phone card she couldn't get to work. She went on and on, and I considered giving her the \$8 if she would shut the hell up. But I wasn't sure whether that would diffuse or just inflame the situation. Initially, I was embarrassed that she so completely embodied the ugly American stereotype. Later, I was incensed to discover she was part of the evangelist group. Is it okay to suspend Christian treatment of others when \$8 is at stake? Do some people behave differently when they're not surrounded by other Christians or when they think no one is looking?

On the flight, many of the evangelists were noisy and rude. They didn't seem aware that some people might want to sleep or watch the movie to kill part of the 20-hour flight to Los Angeles. As the phone card incident had demonstrated, their God-driven errand did not necessarily translate into behavior appropriate to the countries they were visiting.

Of course, such hypocrisies are easy to point out in others. If I had served a mission, would my behavior toward others have been perpetually above reproach? Would there have been times when I transgressed cultural norms or offended the people I was ostensibly there to serve?

It was unsettling to share a flight with the evangelist group. I was painfully aware that I'd spent more money on holiday than most Thai people could earn in a year or more. I'd seen poverty, destitution, prostitution—but what I saw probably only scratched the surface. Passing out Bibles seemed like a nice, feel-good exercise engaged in by individuals who were blind to the more pressing needs of the people they were trying to Christianize. If you're struggling to survive or wondering when you'll eat your next meal, what on earth are you going to do with a Bible? It seemed presumptuous and paternalistic to insist one person's scripture, faith, or deity was the solution to everyone's problems.

There's also an inequality inherent in the exchange—one I've seen present at many a service project: one party assumes he or she knows what is best for someone else, often without asking what the other party really wants or needs. How much of that spiritual/cultural imperialism finds its way into the Mormon missionary experience? If you're sent somewhere with the agenda to teach, convert, and baptize, can this agenda get in the way? Is it possible to love and serve others more wholeheartedly when there's no goal—like baptism—in mind?

Clearly, I'm still wrestling with some of these issues. I sometimes feel I have no tangible way to measure my devotion or my faith. I didn't make sacrifices to serve a mission. I can't point to generations of converts who are church members because of me. I don't have stories that begin with "When I was on my mission. . ." The biggest reason I have now for not serving a mission—visible only in hindsight and as the result of many life experiences—is that I'm not sure I could honestly promote Mormonism as the one true cure-all religion. I don't think I could make my own doubts and questions about Mormonism invisible. As much as I love to study my religious community and discuss religion in general, it feels disingenuous to try to persuade someone else through the doors into *my* chapel.

During the years I've not been on a mission, I've learned, I've grown, I've prayed, cursed, felt joy, and pain, I've faced rejection, faced acceptance, and I've learned there are myriad ways I can serve and love others—whether that serving looks like a mission or not.