

## My Belief

Gail Turley Houston

In 1831 at the same time that Joseph Smith was receiving visions and establishing a new church because no contemporary religion was true—they had all become dead relics with no prophecy in them—Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle wrote his famous *Sartor Resartus*, a complex, visionary text declaring much the same thing. Carlyle's metaphor for this reformation was to be found in the title *Sartor Resartus*, a phrase meaning "the tailor retailed." Suggesting that political, social, philosophical, and religious systems are exterior frameworks that represent unmediated truth, Carlyle argues that, because these institutional systems are the outer forms, or "clothing," of transcendent reality, such systems inevitably fall away from the original truth they were meant to signify.

In other words, Christianity, or any belief system, was like a beautiful, powerfully symbolic piece of clothing when it was first established; but after years of rote, ritual, and bureaucracy, it had become so tattered as to be almost useless. At that point, it was time for reformation, for the cloth to be retailed, so that the eternal meaning that it manifested would become apparent (apparel) again.

Carlyle was considered one of the great sages of the Victorian period because, metaphorically, he was a tailor who was powerfully retailing the language used to describe belief. Finding Christianity of the early nineteenth century exhausted of its deep spiritual meaning, he looked at the world (the garment of God) and produced visionary language to revi-

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talize Victorian spirituality. Describing his main character, Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, as experiencing "The Everlasting No," a devastating period in which "the loss of his religious Belief was the loss of everything," Carlyle figures an escape from suicidal despair into "The Everlasting Yea."<sup>1</sup>

In the chapter on "The Everlasting Yea," Carlyle's alter-ego acknowledges that "the Mythos of the Christian Religion looks not in the eighteenth century as it did in the eighth," but he goes on to assert that this condition makes it even more necessary to "embody the divine Spirit of that Religion in a new Mythos, in a new vehicle and vesture, that our Souls, otherwise too like perishing, may live." Furthermore, Teufelsdröckh realizes that, even though the nineteenth century was nineteen centuries removed from the presence of Christ on the earth, there was still a "perennial continuance of Inspiration."<sup>2</sup>

Carlyle's new "Mythos" includes the powerful concept of Natural Supernaturalism: why, he wondered, did we keep asking for miracles or signs of God in the modern world when all we had to do was look at the world around us—at Nature—to see God in every manifestation. And they *were* to be considered spiritual manifestations in Carlyle's unsystematic system. Nature was a living, breathing sign of God, with its living water and living earth, sky, animals, plants, etc. Thus, Professor Teufelsdröckh "first becomes a seer" when he "has looked fixedly on Existence, till, one after the other, its earthly hulls and garnitures have all melted away; and now, to his rapt vision, the interior celestial Holy of Holies lies disclosed."<sup>3</sup> Attuned to the "infinite depth" and "infinite expansion" of Nature and reality, Teufelsdröckh obtains through Natural Supernaturalism the power to "*transcend* the sphere of blind Custom, and so become Transcendental."<sup>4</sup>

In my fifth decade of life, I have realized that for me Mormonism has become a cloth in tatters that must be retailored. That does not mean that it is without merit; indeed, it means that the gospel of Jesus Christ as artic-

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1. Thomas Carlyle, *A Carlyle Reader: Selections from the Writings of Thomas Carlyle*, edited by G. B. Tennyson (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 236.

2. *Ibid.*, 258.

3. *Ibid.*, 300–301.

4. *Ibid.*, 303; emphasis Carlyle's.

ulated by the LDS Church has so much merit and has proven itself against the test of time so often that it must be reincarnated, reformed, and retailored, ironically, to maintain its universal Word. No longer living water nor a protective garment, it has taken on so many worldly, human-created accretions that the essence of Christ is all but hidden.

The height of the Church Office Building, towering as it does over the Salt Lake Temple, is indicative to me of this need for retailoring: there is more bureaucracy to the Church now than there is spirituality; there are more Marthas than there are Marys; there is more rote and ritual than there is profound, holy connection to God. The sheer number of bureaucratic layers and jobs represented by the many stories of the building and the many bureaucratic job profiles in the building indicates to me that corporate sensibilities now trump the spiritual nurturing that the faithful so yearn to receive.

Remembering the times I have been spiritually filled, I know that wisdom is wisdom whoever says it. Prophecy is prophecy whoever speaks it; a visionary is visionary whatever position she speaks from; a blessing is a blessing whoever pronounces or enacts it. Even the least of us, even I, have claim to hear God's voice.

Trying to become a seer of the holy in the mundane, I have learned, with Teufelsdröckh, to understand that daily life holds an "infinite depth" and "infinite expanse" if I will but have the eyes to see the sacred there. And as I seek the exquisite knowledge of God in my daily encounters with other persons, the natural world, or even the very unnatural institutions of the modern society in which I live, it is as though God reveals the Savior to me in these encounters and I am quite literally succored through these seemingly "customary" meetings to enter the field of the transcendent. I am struck more and more by the daily awareness that every minute of my life is a site of the holy, whether I am waiting in a boring line, writing a memo, or conversing about work matters with a colleague: that each moment, because God has created it and all life, can be a site for my encounter with the sacred. The Holy Spirit has taught me to be infinitely reverent before the tiny bird whose yellow throat trills out its song, an experience which stirs so much gratitude in me to God for the very beingness of this seemingly trivial entity.

It is difficult to articulate my joy in the beingness of God's creations, but a few examples might illustrate the transformation.

Recently, I was engaged in a fascinating conversation with a gradu-

ate student about her dissertation, a study of the theories and strategies informing radical, leftist groups opposed to globalization. She included in this study her own first-hand experiences as a participant in mass protests. To all appearances not a "spiritual" person, this student became a seer to me as she described her deep moral commitment to saving Mother Earth. Describing her involvement in the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization, she suddenly moved into a different mode of expression, noting that she wasn't sure how to write about a particular event during that protest, a moment that she considered to be a most amazing experience of her life. In her mind, writing academically about this experience would not do it justice, and she admitted that she did not yet have a language for putting it into her dissertation even though it was central to her study.

As she explained, at the literal crossroads comprised of a busy six-way intersection in downtown Seattle, the protestors stood, barring members of the WTO from traversing the opposite road leading to the convention site. Meanwhile, coming up the other road to meet the protestors were legions of Seattle police officers. When the militarized police in their ominous riot gear threatened to disperse the thousands of protestors by discharging tear-gas into their midst, the protestors were unsure which road to take, as it were. As my student described it, there really wasn't a leader among them directing their actions; and so at this point the protestors had no one to turn to who could provide a single, organized plan for response to the heavily armed, menacing police. Nevertheless, at the moment the police officers raised their rifles to shoot the tear gas into the crowd and perhaps produce mass hysteria, without any preconceived strategy the protestors spontaneously knelt on the ground as a unified body and began repeating in unison the mantra of "OHM" (part of an Eastern religious chant). In the face of this completely unorchestrated peaceful response, within minutes the police withdrew without firing one pellet. As my student finished telling of this experience, the Spirit of God was aflame within me, and I knew that something spiritual had happened to me—that this student had given me a gift I have not yet fully absorbed because of its "infinite depth." As she described the event, our souls recognized their sisterhood, and God immersed me in the profound yearnings for good felt by a group of people who, in times past, I might have viewed as strange or secular.

On another occasion, I was driving to work listening to National

Public Radio as white noise and thinking about all the many tasks I had to accomplish at school that day. Suddenly the voice of the speaker seemed to demand my spiritual attention, and I entered a kind of cocoon in which it was just me and the radio speaker sharing his story. The voice on the radio talked about how a forest ranger in 1912 became one of the first American environmentalists. Fulfilling the policy of the national government at the time, this forest ranger carried a rifle so he could kill wolves on sight. On one occasion, deep in the uncharted territory of primal mountain peaks and after days of being out in wildest Nature with just two other rangers, he espied some wolf pups, then immediately afterwards the mother wolf, who was there to protect her offspring. Following policy, he lifted his rifle and first shot the pups and then the mother wolf. He then went to investigate his downed prey. The pups were dead. But as he looked into the green, fiery eyes of the dying she-wolf, there he saw the eternity of God. When I heard this, I felt as though the ranger, gazing into the flames of the dying wolf's eyes, understood for the first time that she and her pups had been a part of the living garment of God. The speaker concluded his story unexpectedly: with the piercing howl of the wolf. That primal "amen" struck me to the heart, and I wept uncontrollably, hoping that my own love for the garment of God might some day be expressed to God face to face in such an unmediated, pure fashion. At the end of this visionary moment, I also knew that I had been led by the Holy Spirit to encounter the "infinite expanse" of Nature and the transcendent behind it through the story of the forest ranger and the mother wolf.

A third epiphany came recently in the midst of a discussion at lunch with a visiting professor from the Canary Islands who wanted to talk about how to institute a Women Studies Program at her university. Out of nowhere, we suddenly entered that cocoon, as I like to call it, in which two people, often strangers, commune in a sacred way about their deepest beliefs. When this happens, I can almost feel a gauzy, warm aura enveloping the other communicant and me as our spirits seem to be drawn upward to a higher sphere.

In this case, my colleague told me that, when her son was born, there was a lot of pressure from her family to christen the baby in the Catholic Church. However, she and her husband felt that they just could not do a traditional Catholic blessing for their baby son because the tradition had become so rote and ritualistic. They thought a great deal about it and finally decided instead to create their own christening ceremony by inviting

friends and family to one of their most beloved places, the seashore. Though their guests were all traditional Catholics, none of them objected to the couple's ceremony. The young father and mother brought toys and other personal items as gifts for their baby, as well as to indicate gratitude to a God who could give them so much joy. Each person in the circle of blessing, made up of men and women, spoke his or her love and blessings to the child. In my friend's words, uttered in the midst of our mundane work day as we walked back to the campus, I knew that I was hearing about a retailored form of spirituality that was trying to get back to the original, glorious garment of God. As she described the blessing, it was almost as though I could touch that retailored garment—and it was touching me, for my own spirit felt electrified, elated, pure.

I have come to believe that LDS sacrament, Sunday School, Relief Society, and priesthood meetings as well as Mormon prayers have all but become ritual, with rote responses required of the laity to catechisms drawn up by male leaders who have added their own cultural and political dressings to the garment of God.

This change in my spiritual life has been occurring since I was fired from BYU in 1996. Though I did not receive unanimous approval from the BYU English Department or the College of Humanities when I applied for tenure after six years at the Church's flagship university, the majority of my colleagues voted in favor of my application. Given the expectations of my department, my scholarship was excellent. My dissertation on Charles Dickens had been published by a reputable university press strong in Dickens studies, and I had written a number of articles that had been published in major scholarly venues. My teaching was also above average: Student evaluations put me in the top 8 percent of teachers at BYU. I enjoyed teaching, and many of my students went on to become fine university scholars and teachers.

At most credible universities, when an assistant professor receives a vote of approval from the majority of her department and college peers, it is virtually assured that she will receive tenure from the university, the assumption being that the department and college have the best understanding of what is considered excellent scholarship and teaching in the candidate's particular field. For a university committee, provost, or president to overturn the positive evaluations of the candidate's department and college peers would be highly suspect and unusual. But that is what happened when my application for tenure went to the next level for ap-



proval. The university committee, provost, and president rejected my application for tenure after focusing heavily on my feminism and their perceived attitude that I was a heretic. I still do not know what was going on behind the scenes that caused the administration to interpret me thus. The following statements were included in the letter informing me that I was being fired from BYU:

You have made public statements, orally and in writing, that approvingly and positively describe the practice of praying to Heavenly Mother as well as Heavenly Father. Your public affirmations of this practice contradict fundamental Church doctrine that we should pray only to Heavenly Father. . . .

In addition, you have engaged in a pattern of publicly contradicting fundamental Church doctrine and deliberately attacking the Church. . . .

We feel that not only have these activities failed to strengthen the moral vigor of the university, they have enervated its very fiber.<sup>5</sup>

In my appeal of the negative decision, I rebutted these charges with long written statements that attempted to explain my rather complicated, impassioned spiritual belief. These statements are part of the public record in the age of the internet and blogs, and I still maintain the “testimony” these statements lay out. What has been difficult for me to resolve—indeed, what has become more rather than less painful to me since then—is that I have not been able to find a rational or spiritual reason for the subsequent actions of BYU and the Church in regards to my Church participation. Indeed, I cannot be reconciled to the university’s actions after they essentially “excommunicated” me from BYU. For at the same time that I was being fired from BYU, the university made no effort to stop me from teaching my last class there. I had to wonder, then: Was I really so “enervating”? If so, why did they let me contaminate these vulnerable students? Likewise, during and after the time that BYU very publicly stated its reasons for firing me (heretical beliefs and the enervation of an entire university), Church leaders in my ward continued to have me teach Sunday School or Primary to the youth, the most vulnerable of the membership, and those for whom quite commonly Church leaders say they want the best teachers. Here again, I wondered: If I am a heretic, then why

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5. James D. Gordon, Associate Academic Vice President; Randall L. Jones, Dean of Humanities; and C. J. Fox, English Department Chair, Letter to Gail T. Houston, June 5, 1996.

did the bishop receive inspiration to have me teach among the humblest and most vulnerable of the flock? Furthermore, after leaving BYU and Utah, I wondered how the stake president, area president, and on up (if we truly believe in the hierarchical line of prophetic authority) could approve of further callings among the youth.

For myself, though I was having a crisis of faith in the Church because of its participation in such hypocrisy, my faith was purer, more attached to the garment of God *because* I was teaching the youth, those who were just learning to taste the pure and living water, who were just learning to put on the garment of God. And every lesson was a prophecy to me, not because I was necessarily prophetic, but because the people I was teaching were children through whom I could once again see the gospel through pure, innocent, new eyes. I did not need the male authority figures to tell me what was truth; I was directly rubbing elbows with it as I mingled with the children in Primary every week.

We have become jaded in our ritualized acceptance that priesthood is male and a thing or a product and that blessings can only come through this mantle of male authority. I now know differently. Blessings are not pronounced exclusively upon the bowed heads of the laity by men who lay their hands upon us. God's powerful, spiritual, life-changing blessings occur more often than not without this ritual. The mother who carries her child in her womb for nine months daily blesses the child with nourishment, with song, with her very personhood and its holy meaning. The friend who listens in our time of desperation, the stranger who smiles at us when we are on the verge of suicide or in the depths of depression, the acquaintance who repeats a story or tells us about an event that stuns us with spiritual meaning, the cat that puts out her paw to us when we are ready to lose patience with a bratty child, these are all very real, very material blessings that do not require the Church's hierarchical validation because they are not a product—a blessing pronounced at a specific time and place by men with authority.

The blessings I have received from my female relatives and female friends and colleagues are so intuitive, so time intensive (they spend so much time and lavish such care on my every need), so attuned to me as an individual, so full of unconditional and abiding love that they far outweigh the brief products (blessings) given to me by men in authority who never thereafter spent any time or effort on blessing me with their presence, daily concern, or listening ear. Aside from a handful of kind and lov-



ing men in my life, truly, it has mainly been the women in my life who have had God's authority to bless me; and they, in real, material fact, have carried the priesthood, not as a patriarchal emblem of their power over me, but as the literal garment of God that uplifts everyone around them in a continuing, lifelong process. The patriarchal order is no order of God if it can conceive of offering blessings only as products from men in authority who disappear from one's life the minute that "blessing" is pronounced. It is something like the notion of a man being a "father" if he merely sires a child as opposed to the idea that a "father" is a parent who emotionally and spiritually nourishes—blesses—the child on an intimate daily basis throughout the child's life.

So now I am recreating the garment of God, retailoring my spiritual clothing every day of my life rather than waiting to go to church once a week to be ritually dressed in the same uniform as everyone else and which I have always been assigned there—even though I have grown out of it or even though it might be a winter garment and I am living through a summer of unprecedented heat. It is more difficult to live my spiritual life this way; there are no signs to the outside world, to my husband, daughters, family, friends, or acquaintances that I am an "active" member of some church. My spiritual life is made up now of Natural Supernaturalism, of blessings given to me every day of my life by strangers in my midst whom I encounter during the course of my day, by the radio show or TV show I listen to, by the child or sister or husband who says something that is manna to my needs, by the biblical verse that speaks directly to my soul. And I pray every day that I might provide such a blessing to those I meet or work with, that I might be a savior in small or large ways to those around me.

This is the garment of God, the living water, the Bread of Life that clothes, nourishes, and feeds me now. The Mormon Church of my youth gave me wings to fly in spirit to my heavenly home, but the Church of my adulthood clipped those wings and asked me never to speak of my visions. When I soar, I know that my childhood Church first taught me to do so, and I have given up the one to hold on to the other, for whither God leads me, there I go.