

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### *Shall I Go or Shall I Stay?*

Gail Turley Houston's essay, "My Belief" (38, no. 4 [Winter 2005]: 114-22) and Heidi Hart's story of leaving the Church ("Householding: A Quaker-Mormon Marriage," *ibid.*, 141-52) resonated with me on several levels. My wife and I have experienced many of the same epiphanies and feelings. But so far, at least, our journey has gone in a somewhat different direction.

We were both raised Catholic, but I had left organized religion and vacillated between agnosticism and atheism. But I am a very right-brained, "feeling" male, and those feelings always spoke to me of a God and a purpose to my life. Those feelings led me to join the LDS Church in 1978. So did my wife. We were both married to others at that time. It has been my observation that the majority of converts do tend to be the intuitive, right-brained types (more women than men join as converts) who allow their feelings to override any practical, logical obstacles they may face in choosing to be baptized. Nothing wrong with that.

Ironically, that may be precisely the reason that the Church does not retain more converts. Many spiritual, intuitive people find themselves smothered by the rules and procedures imposed on them by the left-brained, literal-minded, control-oriented male hierarchy that runs this church.

Eventually, I came to the conclusion that, as in all other churches, the flowing gowns and transcendent layers of eternal truths which were its genesis

have been replaced by the rigid "armor of God" with all the dogmatic stiffness and inflexibility that image evokes. I came to reject most of Mormon doctrine, favoring instead the view espoused by Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth*. Truth and the "keys" to salvation do not reside in any organization, but in our understanding of the divine. (Joseph Smith had that part right!) Our beliefs have evolved to the point where my wife and I believe we need go to no man or woman to be absolved of any offense. No man or woman, by virtue of having a title or office conferred upon him or her, has the authority, wisdom, or inspiration to tell us what we are or where we are or are not worthy to go, to do, or to participate in.

Neither can anyone tell us what we must or must not believe, whom we may or may not pray to, or whom anyone else may or may not intimately love. We place as much value on a blessing, message, prayer, or prophecy from a spiritual woman or man of any faith (or no faith) as from a man who just happens to hold the priesthood in this church.

I told our bishop all that and was threatened with a disciplinary council for "apostasy." "Hey, I'm not preaching this to anyone," I said, "and I have a right to my private beliefs." I quoted Joseph Smith. The stake president decided to leave me alone. Nevertheless, I was offended. We stopped attending.

We attended some Unity and Unitarian Universalist churches, which seem to have a theology somewhat

similar to Heidi's Quakers. We loved them with their tolerance for all, lack of rigid doctrine, spontaneous meetings, and openness for all beliefs.

I have some observations about the differences between those "right-brained" organizations and the Latter-day Saints. There is a complete difference in the gender dynamics. I can imagine how that must have resonated with someone like Heidi. Pastors were female. Most of the auxiliaries were headed by women. That was just fine with me. I needed a vacation from serving in bishoprics, high councils, branch presidencies (yes, I was all of those), etc. I was tired of feeling that I was not working hard enough. Great! Here the women do it all, and I can just sit back and enjoy their spirit! Inasmuch as I am a great admirer of women and their capabilities, I had no problem with that.

In every LDS branch or ward I have moved into, I was quickly given high callings and responsibilities. Here, it was my wife who was asked to serve on leadership committees and even to help conduct their meetings—not surprising, considering her intelligence, spirituality, and eloquence.

I will admit to some thoughts of "Hey, what about me?" But I can now understand what many highly competent LDS women must feel watching others (men) of lesser capabilities (not the case with my wife) called to the positions of authority and responsibility primarily because of their gender.

Their meetings were great, with folk singing, inspirational speakers from a variety of spiritual backgrounds, diversity, gays, transsexuals, etc. Very refreshing.

So why do we still retain LDS membership, remain active, tithe, and outwardly conform to the behavior expected of us? (Except for refusing to subject ourselves to temple recommend interviews, we do "behave" naturally like good Latter-day Saints.) I have been asked that question many times. Hidden beneath the suit of armor of Mormonism lie many great and profound eternal truths found in few other places. We are raising our four children in it (adding a healthy dose of "don't believe everything they tell you") because this is more than just a church or religion.

It is a culture and way of life much like what "Jewishness" is to non-practicing Jews. It is traditions, a system of values including integrity, education, and thinking ("the glory of God is intelligence"), a work ethic, service to others, family loyalty, and more. It contains some of the most wonderful people we have ever met, and it does more good in the world, "pound for pound," than any other organization we know of. In short, we love this danged church and the people in it, with all their warts and pimples, the occasional misogyny, and the pompous self-righteousness. We want to give our children the full "Mormon experience" so that they can come to their own decisions, at the appropriate time, about whether they choose to be a part of it.

I have seen many inactive families whose children cannot fairly evaluate the Church because it is so foreign to them that they do not feel comfortable around other Latter-day Saints. We want our children to be able to decide

for themselves, without recrimination or guilt, with a complete knowledge of all the positives that the Church has to offer as well as the negative aspects.

Mormonism gets in your blood. We stayed, in part, because we could see past the myths and into the deeper meanings in the teachings. Our good friends "loved" us back in. We also consider ourselves to have a "mission" to interject "commercials" when the opportunity presents itself (and we are often asked to give sacrament meeting talks without censorship) about the unconditional love of God (comments from General Authorities notwithstanding), tolerance for LGBTs, the oneness of all life, and the presence of God in everyone, regardless of their beliefs or lack thereof. I think we live in an exceptional branch, and the leadership knows in their hearts that we are right. Sometimes change works its way up from the bottom to the top.

In fact, I was asked to give a talk January 15, 2006, and based it on Frances Lee Menlove's "The Road to Emmaus" (*Sunstone* 138, [September 2005]: 11-13). It was received fantastically well.

Lest anyone wonder, it was not just me, the male, who brought us back to LDS activity. I just wanted to visit our old ward once in awhile to see old friends. However, they quickly gave my wife a calling in Young Women, and our sixteen-year-old girls were fellow-shipped mercilessly. They renewed friendships. We came again and again. Now one daughter wants to go to Brigham Young University and marry in the temple!

When I said to my wife, "Let's go back to Unity or UU," she responded,

"No way! I have to teach one of the girls' classes, and you have to come because I'm not going to suffer through sacrament meeting alone. Look what you got us into by wanting to visit!"

So here we are. We have reached a pleasant sort of "truce." We act like orthodox members and are treated (more or less) like that. We see the great good beneath (or above) the myths.

It's not a bad life. The best part is that my wife and I share the marvelous experience of walking nearly lockstep down the same spiritual path. No coercion, no disputes. We just happen to be on nearly identical wave lengths. It adds such a dimension of love and closeness. Our hearts go out to couples who struggle with divergent paths.

Please do not use my name, for fear of embarrassing my children.

*Name Withheld*

### *Praise for Ford*

*Dialogue* is of only passing interest to me. As the years have gone by, the predilection of writers for delving into vague concepts, always with a heavy dose of pedantry, has dulled my interest. But when an article comes along like the one by Clyde D. Ford on religious/philosophical doctrines at the time Joseph Smith did his work, it keeps my interest above water ("Lehi on the Great Issues: Book of Mormon Theology in Early Nineteenth Century Perspective" 38, No. 4 [Winter 2005]: 75-96).

I happen to be one who rejects the notion that Joseph Smith is the author

(or the sole author anyway), of the Book of Mormon. But I am also skeptical of "the Church's" position (and, of course, it follows on Joseph Smith's) regarding authorship, and I say this while conceding that, so far as I am aware, no credible explanation for a substantial portion of the book has emerged. Of course, this is a point cited endlessly by Church defenders as proof of the book's authenticity.

In reading Dr. Ford's excellent article, it struck me he was on one of the best tracks to scrutinize the concepts (including, of course, the theology) presented in the Book of Mormon. Thus, the expansion of his effort is something I would like to see him and/or others pursue. It would also be interesting to see someone compare the theology in ten or twelve of the doctrinally significant sections of the Doctrine and Covenants with then-extant theological premises.

John D. Rice  
Cincinnati, Ohio

### A Neutered Dialogue?

I have read and re-read Nathan Oman's admonishment to *Dialogue's* board of directors ("Open Letter to the *Dialogue* Board," 38, no. 4 [Winter 2005]: 227) with interest, amusement, and even bewilderment.

Oman essentially asks the *Dialogue* board to save the journal by killing it.

Surely converting *Dialogue* into yet another venue that would pass muster with the Church's correlation committee would put the journal in its grave. A plethora of publications promotes "codified" messages about the Church.

*Dialogue's* purpose is not one of overt testimony building; but the manner in which *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, and other intellectual inquiries are conducted within the safe haven of committed Mormonism rescues faltering testimonies.

Among other current responsibilities, I teach the Gospel Principles class for new converts. The Brethren have directed that Church classes, including Melchizedek Priesthood, Relief Society, and Gospel Doctrine are not appropriate forums for many of the questions and discussions that are addressed by *Sunstone* and *Dialogue*. When I teach or speak in church, I respect their authority and try not to stray from the Brethren's desires.

However, the indisputable fact of the matter is that many Church members have both a spiritual and intellectual need to go beyond the simplified approach of our official lessons and to explore some issues beyond what is appropriate in Church-sponsored classes. It has been my experience that understanding a principle or matter intellectually strengthens my faith. Since the Brethren have made no room for intellectual study of the gospel in classes taught during the three-hour Sunday meeting block, there is an unfulfilled need that can be met only through such venues as *Dialogue*.

While I certainly hope that my testimony would have been strong enough to carry me through, I cannot in honesty state that it wouldn't have failed somewhere along the way were it not for the good fortune of meeting and coming under the influence of

faithful intellectuals such as those who write and edit *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*.

To put it quite simply, Oman's suggestions would doom *Dialogue* as we know it, as we need it, and as we love it. Improvements can and should be made in *Dialogue*, but none of them are compatible with Oman's view of a neutered journal.

Oman's concern about the marginalization of *Dialogue* authors and readers would be better directed to those who foster negative perceptions of legitimate, faithful, intellectual inquiry.

Terence L. Day  
Pullman, Washington

## RESPONSES TO OMAN

*Editor's note:* The comments below by Jeremy Grimshaw and Kevin Barney, which also respond to Nathan Oman's "An Open Letter to the Dialogue Board," were posted on the Times & Seasons weblog (<http://www.timesandseasons.org/index.php?p=2510>) on August 11, 2005, and are published here with their permission.

### *More of a Novelty*

I thought I'd weigh in, since I recently published in *Dialogue* ("Music of a 'More Exalted Sphere': The Sonic Cosmology of La Monte Young," 38, no. 1 [Spring 2005]: 1-35) while navigating the academic job market. Among the faculty at the institution where I was completing graduate studies, as well as at the schools where I interviewed, the Mormon-ness of my *Dialogue* article didn't seem to be a liability—more of a novelty, really. Most

scholars were surprised to learn of the relatively nascent field of Mormon studies and seemed rather intrigued by the idea.

Of course "the Mormon candidate" isn't a very compelling shtick in and of itself. I suspect that my *Dialogue* article complemented my other publications/papers in journals and venues directly related to my field (musicology) but wouldn't have carried much weight on its own. I got the impression that, in an academic climate in which "interdisciplinarity" is a buzzword, listing the *Dialogue* article among my publications demonstrated an ability to extricate my work from the shop talk of my field and present it to an alternate audience.

This may or may not speak broadly to the point Nathan raised about whether it is worth it for emerging scholars to go to the effort to publish in *Dialogue*. In my case, I adapted work I had published elsewhere, simplifying/laymanizing the more discipline-specific aspects on the one hand and, on the other, making the Mormon stuff more extensive and nuanced. In other words, I didn't have to do an entire article's worth of additional research; rather, I had to reformulate, repackage, and rewrite my work in order to speak to an audience ostensibly interested in the topic for entirely different reasons than fellow scholars in my field would be. So, in my case, it was definitely worth it to add another line to my publications list and, I suppose, add another interdisciplinary feather to my cap. However, if I hadn't already established a publication record in musicology jour-

nals and venues, it probably wouldn't have been wise to take time away from those areas.

Of course, I can't say the extent to which the *Dialogue* publication in and of itself influenced my eventual hire, but I did feel it added something unique to my resume and served to complement rather than detract from credentials more directly affiliated with my field.

One other point: I echo Jan Shipps, Harold Bloom, and others in wishing that more scholars of the arts and literature would explore Mormon culture. This is not just a personal academic preference. Since the particularities of artistic style are more broadly perceived as a matter of taste and less a matter of moral rightness or wrongness, discussions of Mormon cultural expression, I think, are less prone to divisive polarities like conservative/liberal or orthodox/heterodox, and thus less prone to perpetuating the problems Nathan observes in the pages of *Dialogue*.

Jeremy Grimshaw  
Granville, Ohio

### Three Times Published

I have subscribed to *Dialogue* since my first real post-college job when I could afford it (1985), and before that I would read the back issues in the Institute at the University of Illinois (back in the good old days when Institutes were allowed to subscribe) or in the UoI's graduate library, which had a full collection.

Although by most Mormon standards, I'm a flaming liberal, I suppose by *Dialogue* standards (and certainly by

Sunstone standards) I'm either a moderate or maybe even somewhat conservative (since I am indeed a believer).

I've published three articles in *Dialogue*: "Reflections on the Documentary Hypothesis," 33, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 57-99; "Joseph Smith's Emendation of the Hebrew Genesis 1:1," 30, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 103-35; and "The Joseph Smith Translation and Ancient Texts of the Bible," 19, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 85-102. The most recent one (on the documentary hypothesis) was one that the editors actively sought me out to write; it was not my idea. They wanted to get a believer's perspective on it, and they got one. I was pretty darned impressed that they went to the trouble and made the effort to get me to write it.

I also publish a lot with FARMS and am on the board of FAIR. So my participation in *Dialogue* may be a small sampling of what Nathan is hoping for. Admittedly I'm a lawyer, not an academic, so I don't have the pressures of tenure committees that so many here seem to be worried about.

I remember being somewhat shocked at the professional sacrifices Bob Rees made in order to edit the journal, for which he got basically no academic credit or support. In my naivete I had assumed that *Dialogue* was recognized as a journal of academic value.

I love the tone of the *Times & Seasons* weblog, and I think that if some of the participants here would start writing for *Dialogue*, it would make a significant difference. I know, for example, that *Times & Seasons* blogger Kristine Haglund Harris has recently

published in *Dialogue* ("Who Shall Sing If Not the Children?": Primary Songbooks, 1880-1989," 37, no. 4 [Winter 2004]: 90-127). It is certainly a trend that I would like to see continue and accelerate.

Yes, there have occasionally been critical articles, but they don't bother me as they seem to others. I have the capacity to let such things roll off my back, which perhaps explains why I am able to immerse myself in LDS apologetics and yet maintain both faith and a sense of equanimity about such things

I think getting the back issues online at the University of Utah was a very im-

portant development. Most people have no idea what treasures lurk in those back issues. I would highly recommend some browsing through the collection to get a sense of what's there. Having been a regular reader of *Dialogue* over the years has been of tremendous value in my apologetics work when I am called upon to answer some difficult question for a Church member who is struggling with some challenging faith issue.

Anyhow, I am a fan of *Dialogue* and wish it much success in the future.

Kevin Barney  
Hoffman Estates, Illinois

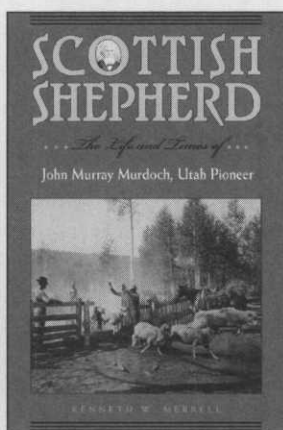


## Scottish Shepherd

### The Life and Times of John Murray Murdoch, Utah Pioneer

Kenneth W. Merrell

John Murray Murdoch was an American immigrant. In Utah he participated in the military preparations and maneuvers against the United States Army in the 1857 Utah War; he helped to settle the Wasatch County area and became one of the first elected officials of the county; and he established the first sheep cooperative in Wasatch County, and helped to establish the sheep ranching industry in Utah. It is the "everyman" aspect of John Murdoch's life that makes his story so compelling.

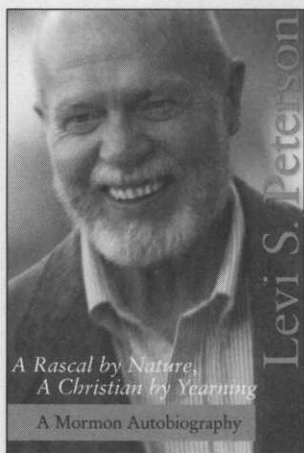


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### A Mormon Autobiography

Levi S. Peterson



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*"I will introduce myself with a few facts. I was born and raised in Snowflake, a Mormon town in northern Arizona. I have lived most of my adult life in the cities of the American West. Although I consider myself a religious person, I know very little about God. At first I intended this book to be about wilderness, but as I wrote it, it became an autobiography with many themes. Among these themes are wilderness, my vexed and vexing relationship with Mormonism, my moral and emotional qualities, and my family." So begins the autobiography of educator and author Levi S. Peterson.*



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