

# The Gospel in Communication: A Conversation with Communication Theorist John Durham Peters

Ethan Yorgason

## Introduction

“John Durham Peters may well be the most original thinker in the broad field of communication and media studies in the United States.” So claims Michael Schudson, professor of communication at the University of California, San Diego.<sup>1</sup> Nor is Schudson alone in these sentiments. Peters, who is F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa and president of the Iowa City Third (Young Single Adult) LDS Branch, has achieved acclaim as a scholar and even as something of a public intellectual in recent years for work that untangles knots within basic communication debates. His *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) wrestles with the longing for authentic communication between souls, given the inevitability of communication breakdowns. It became something of an instant classic within communication studies, was translated into multiple languages, and students can even purchase a pre-written review paper about it over the internet—perhaps a sure sign of its status within the field. His more recent *Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) reinigorates the tradition of free speech while questioning its absolutist expressions.

Peters’s work is admired both within and outside of communication studies for its sparkling phraseology, suffusion of religiosity, and refusal to tie itself to scholarly or political trendiness, as well as for its stunning breadth, depth, provocativeness, and originality.<sup>2</sup> In the following inter-

view, conducted in Iowa City in March 2006, Ethan Yorgason explores with John Durham Peters the relationship between his ideas, Mormon thought, and Mormonism.

*Ethan: John, religion permeates your scholarly work, and you are devout in your Mormonism. Yet aside from the essays you wrote a while back for Sunstone and BYU Studies, there's little in your work that draws attention to your Mormonism. When you write—and I'm thinking especially about the books now—are you thinking of a Mormon audience?*

*John: Not particularly. There are little clues and cues for those in the know, but that's true of any audience for any subject. In a discussion of good and evil at the climax of one of the chapters of *Courting the Abyss* I drop in the phrase "opposition in all things." Those who know 2 Nephi 2 will recognize the theological context; those who don't won't have any harm done to them.*

*Ethan: Do you hope that your work gets read by Mormons?*

*John: I think that Mormon audiences will sometimes find extra resonances. I certainly hope they will. I'm always surprised at what people read and what they don't. Last week in Princeton, I spent a lot of time with a group of undergraduates; and after I had mentioned that I was LDS, one of them said, "Yeah . . . I thought I heard a familiar approach to knowledge—that is, that you kind of have a mission and ambition to go gather as much of it as you possibly can, and to bring it in." He said it sounded like everything he's been raised with. He's a Princeton undergrad from somewhere in Utah.*

*Ethan: Do you ever get that recognition out of the blue, without your mentioning something about your LDS allegiance first?*

*John: Not often. I'm pretty open about mentioning it in university settings because I kind of feel like a part of the university's mission is to foster diversity, and so many people are "out" in various ways around the university about their ideological or cultural or political positions; I mean, I figure why not add a little spice to the mix?*

*Ethan: How would you characterize the reception of your books, in terms of the religious content, by university audiences in general?*

*John: Well, *Speaking into the Air* especially has a fairly explicit religious content, chapter 1 focusing on Socrates and Jesus. One of my colleagues said this book had mastered the Protestant voice, a comment much more about how he read the inkblot of the book in terms of his own interests. I re-*

member walking sort of by accident into one of the Spiritual Communication Interest Group sessions of the National Communication Association and discovering much to my embarrassment that I was something of a local hero there. Someone else told me he thought it was the best Christian account of communication ever. So, Christian people inclined to get a Christian reading will find it. I've got some Jewish friends who like it, and there is no doubt that many of the most perceptive students of communication—and of communication breakdown—have been Jewish. That's the case for a number of complicated reasons. But if it's Christian, it's a fairly ecumenical brand, and Chapter 2, after all, treats much of the Christian tradition as "the history of an error." I just got invited to speak at a conference in Cairo this summer about religion and communication with a Muslim scholar, so perhaps we will yet find connections there as well (I hope).

One of my closest colleagues observed that the book is crypto-Mormon in its overall story: Jesus has it right, but Christianity soon goes off the rails by turning communication into a spiritual affair of impossible angelic connection; in early nineteenth-century America, Emerson comes along and restores the good old sense about the fragility of words. Apostasy and restoration. Augustine plays the same role in both my story and the LDS one; Emerson stands in for Joseph Smith.

*Ethan: Do you have any idea if there's more resonance among certain groups ideologically?*

*John: Courting the Abyss* has gotten a nice lease on life thanks to the Muhammad cartoon controversy [in which the prophet Muhammad was condescendingly portrayed in a Danish newspaper, provoking a great uproar among many Muslims worldwide]. In Norway, where I was visiting in January of 2006, I gave some talks and even was interviewed by the Communist newspaper, *Klassekampen*. During the interview, I frankly said I was a Latter-day Saint and that part of my mission in life was to show that believers aren't necessarily stupid—the reporter assured me that he would not publish that comment, and I said please do, and he did—along with the comment encouraging him to publish it! Apparently such openness about religion's intellectual contribution to public life was a bit shocking in Norway, and I even received a grateful email from a Catholic priest there. But ideology is a really interesting question because my politics are sort of those of a radical democrat, I would say, although I think you could spin them in different kinds of directions, right and left. Values conservative, social radical would be the right mix.

*Ethan: How would people label it ideologically? I ask because, at least among the scholars who I think are doing some of the better work in [my discipline of] geography, few are inclined to revisit liberalism, as you do in *Courting the Abyss*.*

*John: That's one of the things that I'm still trying to sort out, because *Courting the Abyss* is very sarcastic in spots about a certain kind of liberalism—something I regret, since conservative talk show hosts have already patented that way of talking and I don't want to sound like them. When I first talked about the book in Norway, I offended some people there because they thought I was defending terrorists and pushing fundamentalists.*

*Ethan: Oh really? I didn't get that impression from the book.*

*John: Yeah. The basic line was if you had anything beside reason as the entrance requirement for the public sphere, then you're just defending people who are violent and know nothing. . . . I was trying to say that it's a more subtle problem, in which what counts as a reason needs be considered, especially if reason is defined as anti-religious. If liberals are to be the voices of a true diversity of ideas, they have to cede monopoly control of the discussion.*

*Ethan: Of course, it's hard for anybody to know exactly what kind of democracy they're promoting at the end of the day.*

*John: Yeah, well, the final hero of the book is Martin Luther King, when he's thinking about global, economic justice, and not just American civil rights justice; the Martin Luther King that is off the radar of official memory in this country, criticizing the war in Vietnam from a combined Christian and radical position. . . . I think that the central question of political theory is building Zion. At the end of *Speaking into the Air*, I don't use the word Zion, but I talk about "a peaceable kingdom," which I think of as another way of saying Zion.*

*Ethan: A lot of *Courting the Abyss* gets at the conditions of democracy and what it means to speak in public. Does that apply to what goes on in the Church?*

*John: Sure.*

*Ethan: We often say the Church is not a democracy.*

*John: Yeah, it isn't. I would say that Mormonism has a very complicated history regarding public space. It's a culture of confidentiality, if not of secrecy. You could draw a history from the concealment of the golden plates, the smashing of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, the silence in Nauvoo about "the Principle," through the code names in the Doctrine and Covenants, the secrecy about temple work or Church finances, to everyday confidentiality about Church callings before someone is sustained.*

We don't talk about certain things. There's just a kind of deep sense of nervousness, or, more positively, caution or care about the sanctity of certain kinds of information or communication. In fact, what the sacred may be is not a particular kind of content, but just the simple fact of not being circulated. And so I see having a temple that is off limits as a cool thing, because it sanctifies and safeguards a certain mode of being, a certain kind of time and space, which is not easy to come by in a world that doesn't suffer from an excess of the sacred.

One reason I got interested in free speech was thinking about LDS debates, *Sunstone* debates in the 1980s, and just kind of getting annoyed at the simple liberalism that some people propounded. I remember one particular essay by Jackson Newell that I found a bit strident and self-righteous in *Dialogue* called—I'm going to get this wrong—"Let Reason Ring from the Foothills."<sup>3</sup> And anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with the geography of the Salt Lake Valley knows that the foothills are not where the temple or Church Office Building is. That's where the University of Utah is. So reason, for him, is ringing from the university. And the university becomes the center of culture and of open debate and of truth. He's a very admirable fellow, a great teacher, and he's always been very nice to me. I, too, teach humanities in a university.

But I basically suspect intellectuals. I distrust our motives. I don't think intellectuals always know what's good, and we like to think we know what's good. To use the Book of Mormon phrase, we often do things because it sustains our craft. Intellectuals want to make sure that people keep arguing and keep reading and keep writing. And that isn't necessarily the best or at least only good way to live. Anyone who's spent any time around universities will know that smart people can say the dumbest things. Some Mormon intellectuals have recreated a simple language—free speech and reason versus authority and the Church—when in fact I'd rather see that what the Church has is something wonderful. I mean, the Church gives an alternative to modernity and to modern liberalism and its empire, which is oozing everywhere, so why call for more of it? . . . [laughs]

I dislike censorship as much as the next guy, but I dislike even more the moral bonus gained by those who denounce censorship. The toxic byproduct of free speech is smugness; and if you claim censorship by the other guy, then you are automatically in the right and you have a moral monopoly and there are a lot of people that will flock to you because you're fighting the big evil church. That's a well-established narrative that goes

back to Enlightenment. The brave publisher faces down the Inquisition by force of quill pen alone, and you have this self-serving, heroic rhetoric. Historically, the attack on religious faith has never been far from the call for free speech.

If what Mormon intellectuals asked of us required something harder to do, rather than easier to do, then I might be convinced that they—that we—were really looking for truth. It's easy for an intellectual to call for more inquiry. But reason, like child care, reverence, music, service, or gardening is only one of many human goods. I sustain a prophet as someone who can say something that is difficult and upsetting and shakes you up a little. I mean, what's the point of having a religion that doesn't require really hard stuff?

*Ethan: Insofar as Mormon studies exists and where it's at, what do you think it should be doing?*

*John:* Such an interesting question. In meeting with Richard Bushman last week, he was saying that he really thinks that we should just let a thousand flowers bloom, that the most important thing is to enrich the tradition, and that scholarship should be trying to elaborate as many interesting things as we possibly can about it. He said something like: "Let's be bold, let's not let the anti-Mormon people scare us off by exploiting these strange little nuggets. Let's be bold and look at Mormon thought and just enrich the tradition." I guess I find that an inspiring vision—that we're sitting on all these riches and should be unafraid to explore them.

*Ethan: Are there any particular questions that you would personally like to see answered or maybe take on yourself some day?*

*John:* I would like to write something on the Mormon media imagination, because Mormonism has always engaged itself with questions of communication; and indeed, based on what I said about public space before, there is a long missionary effort and history of development of media genres and institutions for promoting the Church. Joseph Smith was a *translator*. The Book of Mormon is—we were talking with Richard Bushman again about this—the most self-reflexive book that you could possibly imagine. It's a book about bookness. And it's a book within books: it is positively Borges-like in its labyrinthine self constitution. It has authors who anticipate textual tidbits 1400 years later, and it's just an amazing performance. And Joseph Smith's revelations can be amazing feats of mediation.

*Ethan: I was wondering whether many of the key themes in your book are informed by your Mormonism. The body is one theme I liked in both books, especially*

*your thoughts about the inseparability of what we call the inside and the outside. Is that partly your Mormonism?*

*John:* That is totally my Mormonism.

*Ethan:* *All of it? Completely your Mormonism? Could you have come to it in any other way?*

*John:* Well, you could come to the centrality of the body from a certain kind of feminism, and you can come to it through a certain kind of pragmatism—or Marxism for that matter. And my feminism, inasmuch as any man can claim to have any, is certainly a Mormon feminism, one that was trained by my mother, Carolyn Person, who did research on her great-grandmother Susa Young Gates. My consciousness was formed as a teenager by overhearing all these Mormon women in my living room in suburban Boston discussing how to organize *Exponent II*—remarkable women such as Judy Dushku and Claudia Bushman and my mom and many others. So I always had the sense of the holiness of the body and the holiness of the feminine as one way of thinking. I'm a pragmatist, I would say, philosophically speaking, a kind of an Emersonian pragmatist, and for the pragmatist, mind or consciousness is always a function of life or embodiment or biology.

*Ethan:* *Another theme is finitude. I'm particularly interested in the issue of ethics across space. Speaking into the Air talked about all people as part of one family. How do you deal with finitude, the sense that you can't care about everything? You can't try to solve every problem, but you want to; and in some sense you feel obligated to be aware of problems that are bigger than your sphere.*

*John:* What does Joseph Smith say, that as soon as a man has pure religion, he ranges abroad through the world seeking to do what good he can everywhere? But there certainly is another strand in Mormonism that says, if you want to improve the world, have a good family. This can take the form of a kind of survivalist rejection of involvement in the world, and that's certainly not what I'm calling for. I guess this anti-political strain is more of a general Christian theological idea than a particularly Mormon one.

*Ethan:* *In one of my classes at Brigham Young University-Hawai'i, I want to do something on the geographical scales of Mormon ethics. My initial impulse is to discuss an LDS cultural tendency to be really active within the Church at improving our own place, all the while not being aware that colonialism happens, that capitalism is wreaking its destruction, global warming, and whatever else happens at larger geographical scales. What would you say about how we can deal with the various scales?*

*John:* Well, it seems that there are elements within LDS theology of an obligation to the planet, the idea that the Earth is alive, that it, too, is subject to the ordinances of baptism by water and fire, that we owe a certain respect to it, that Adam and Eve's dominion over the earth was not mastery. I think Doctrine and Covenants 49 has some really cool verses, where it is not meet that one man possess that above another wherefore the whole world lieth in sin. And I think what's really interesting is that this verse comes in the context of the discussion of meat-eating. . . . And you can read it, as I tend to do, as a kind of "diet for a small planet."

But obviously the agenda of large-scale social questions is not only environmental. When you talk about social justice issues, Mormons tend to not be good about structural evil. We are very much a culture of personal evil. This is something that Richard Bushman noted about *Speaking into the Air*. He wondered if my point about the impossibility of communication was connected with the strain of radical individualism in Mormon theology—that is, that we're all separate intelligences that have always existed so that, in communication, we can at best kind of rub sparks off each other but can never fuse. And I hadn't seen that, but I thought that it was interesting.

But we do tend to be granular in our social efforts. What's our biggest scale unit for ethics? It tends to be the ward, yourself, your family, the people you home teach, the community. Go ye into the world. Mormons would sooner work with IBM and the CIA than criticize the corporation or the state.

*Ethan:* Although when it comes to certain social issues . . .

*John:* Yeah, but those things are almost always non-structural ones. They're always framed as moral issues, choice issues. They always have to do with sex.

*Ethan:* Yeah. That's right.

*John:* I think, here again, who am I to say that the Church isn't right? It's just great to have something that's fighting against the grain of modernity. The last forty or eighty years you've seen this huge shift toward sex as the key sign of self-expression and self-emancipation, though [French historian and philosopher Michel] Foucault would want to place it in a longer historical context. That's certainly part of our era and our moment, and maybe there are good things that come with that, but why not have an alternative?

*Ethan:* Another issue: the contrast between dialogue and dissemination, in



which you argue that the priority usually given to dialogue over dissemination is misplaced.

*John:* I have a friend who says that, when he reads my stuff, he hears me still as on a mission, that I write in such a way that I'm trying to persuade and pull people in. Maybe that is true, but one of the chief tropes that we European missionaries had to use, I don't know if you used it in Sweden, but since we saw such a meager harvest, we were always talking to ourselves about sowing seeds for later harvest [laughs].

*Ethan:* That's interesting. We used that trope, but I hadn't thought of the connection to communication in that way.

*John:* I think a good bit of the basic and ironic vision of communication in *Speaking into the Air* must come from my missionary experiences, specifically the experience of teaching memorized discussions, in which so-called dialogue is really a form of cloaked dissemination. I had a greenie who was caught red-handed by a couple of savvy investigators—he couldn't really say a word in Dutch but then he rattled off the Joseph Smith story verbatim with its preposterously fancy vocabulary. *Speaking into the Air* is a response to the modern ethic of communication that implies that spontaneous and original is always best: I mean, there was a lot of soul-transforming stuff in the discussions, so why quibble whether the messenger is able to supply what the sociologist Erving Goffman called "fresh talk"? In any case, *Preach My Gospel*<sup>4</sup> is a welcome shift to a more dialogical model of missionary work.

*Ethan:* Politically, you emphasize the radical center. Do you think there's a radical center in the Church?

*John:* Yeah. I don't know where it is, but I thought the best analysis of recent Church intellectual politics came in the first volume of Orson Scott Card's Book of Mormon pastiche series called *Memory of Earth*. In this novel, you basically have three political parties. You have the fascist thugs, who are kind of brutalizing the city with a masked police force, and you've got the international cosmopolitans who basically don't care about the city and want to be out doing what's cool and whatever's happening abroad. And then there's this sort of obscure group—no one really knows who they are and Card called them the Party of the City. And it seems to have a lot of women in it, for one thing, and this is the group that really holds on to the values. And it kind of struck me that that was the scene in contemporary Mormonism. You have some authoritarians around who want to keep order and legislate against things like wearing sandals in church. And you've

got the kind of cosmopolitan intellectuals who want to make things safe for the world, and then you've got the Party of the City who quietly and invisibly are centered on the true principles.

So who would be the Party of the City? They would be the humble people who home teach, who do temple work, who raise children. . . . I think there's a lot of people like that. I don't know if it's the radical center in the same way that I mean it in the book. In *Courting the Abyss*, the radical center would be someone who allows for a kind of spiritual order to the universe but who also sees the injustice of the world and wants to do something about it.

*Ethan: Who'll stand up for it with their body.*

*John:* Yeah, exactly. The whole thing about witnessing is putting your body on the line. In *Courting the Abyss* I talk about a triumvirate of options today: the rational liberals, the fundamentalists, and the postmodern hospitality people. It doesn't quite line up with Orson Scott Card's triad but there are some similarities. I basically try—this is the thing that initially offended my Norwegian hosts—to keep the fundamentalists from always being stuck with the crappy end of the stick, and the other two from always thinking that they're so righteous. I actually kind of regret the use of the word fundamentalist, because there are a lot of non-religious fundamentalists and a lot of religious non-fundamentalists, and only some American Protestants actually call themselves “fundamentalists” anyway.

*Ethan: Right.*

*John:* That's the reason why the Apostle Paul ends up being a kind of hero, because he's rational, he's a deep believer, and he also recognizes otherness. So he inhabits all three of those positions but is also beyond them.

*Ethan: Yeah, as long as you're bringing him up, how would you present this to Mormon audiences: Paul's idea that “for myself, I'm not necessarily bound by the law, but for others who feel bound by the law, I respect their view and their field of vision.” This is a very different Paul than most Mormons would feel comfortable with, I'd guess.*

*John:* This is actually a deeply Mormon Paul, one who combines deep devotion with respect for reason and care for the other; he is believing, modern, and neighborly all at once. It seems to me that Paul's argument is that, if you have higher knowledge, you should prove it by your higher kindness, rather than by exposing or insulting or belittling people. So, I think Paul kind of gives a mission for the intellectual, the task of understanding those who are not intellectuals. He talks about those who have *gnosis* (knowledge),

the Gnostics. What are the Gnostics supposed to do? They're supposed to respect the narrower field of vision of the other.

*Ethan: Does that mean that you accept what the other has and don't try to ask them to stretch themselves?*

*John: Well, why should just I ask them to stretch themselves if they're not asking me to stretch myself? I may have knowledge, but what's that worth if I don't have love?*

*Ethan: Well, we all ask ourselves to stretch. I don't know, don't we ask others to stretch?*

*John: I mean, we're probably supposed to, aren't we? To expound and preach and exhort and so on? But too often, intellectuals assume that it's our job to ask others to stretch and open their mind.*

*Ethan: Well, in some cases we get paid for it.*

*John: Good point. And we professors want to teach people to think critically. But how do you teach someone to stretch their mind except by stretching your mind yourself? And the best way to stretch your mind yourself is sometimes to stretch your mind into a smaller box. [laughs] And see how I've let condescension into the idea that it is a *smaller* box—maybe it's just a different one. I don't know. . . . If it's not a mutual enterprise—this is going to sound like dialogue instead of dissemination—but why should it just be a one-way thing? We all know that the best teachers are those who are vulnerable, those who are ignorant, who really want to know. The best teacher is the best learner. So the most tolerant person should be the one who most recognizes their own bigotry. So ensuring the program of liberal openness requires liberals, as John Stuart Mill said, to be open towards bigots.*

On the other hand, something that I've made my peace with a long time ago is that I believe in proselyting. There are people who think proselyting is offensive and wrong and bad and colonial. It can be all those things, but also I've got no problem with trying to persuade people. I think everybody's trying to persuade—every word or deed has an effect somewhere on a mind, heart, or body. So, this isn't a static picture where you just kind of admire the splendid blindness of some other creature and say, "Oh, how lovely." But, I mean God is the only one who can condescend, or should be able to.

*Ethan: In addition to the body itself, I'm also curious about all these bodily issues that run through your books: laughter, death, pain, violence, love and care, sympathy and its impossibility.*

*John:* Did you ever read my thing on bowels published in *BYU Studies* in '99?<sup>5</sup> That's probably the most explicit place I try to deal with the bodily aspect of Mormon theology and of the Atonement—picking the most abused and gross of all body parts. What do the viscera have to do with virtue? No one thinks that bowels are romantic, but why is “bowels of mercy” such a powerful phrase? The bowels turn out to offer a back-door revelation of the meaning of the atonement . . . I also think bodies are pretty wonderful . . . not pretty wonderful, just wonderful. What is the best argument for why God has a body? Because how could the Supreme Being not possess the most beautiful thing in the universe?

*Ethan:* *How does your philosophical pragmatism relate to your Mormonism?*

*John:* William James's pragmatism resonates for me because it combines skepticism about our ability to know for sure with the idea that we produce truth by our actions—very much the moral of Alma 32. James makes the so-called postmodernist insight about the sliding sands of our knowledge into something useful for faith and action. A risky universe does not disable us; it calls us to action. A second key pragmatist idea for me is that of the “community of interpretation.” I guess my fundamental maxim is that you choose your community first, and then you choose your ideas second. Some people say that they are driven from the Church because they can't believe things, but I'm convinced that it's really just because they want to either act a certain way or hang out with a certain kind of people. And so I think the question is deciding who you want to belong to and who you want to talk with and how you want to live first.

Third, I adore the notion of “evolutionary love” by the pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce, which offers a cosmology of growing perfection and eternal fruitfulness. For him, as for Mormon theology, divinity and dynamism are not opposed.

*Ethan:* *Courting the Abyss makes a big deal about the riskiness involved with free speech. Those who champion free speech are literally courting the abyss.*

*John:* I think Joseph Smith authorizes the idea of courting the abyss, and maybe I got the image of the abyss from the Liberty Jail letter where he calls on the human mind, in essence, to stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity. There is something about certain strands of Mormonism that authorize courting the abyss as a kind of education. Certainly many humanities professors at BYU in the later 1970s when I was there said something like that. Those were exciting times . . . After class once I quoted to

Ed Geary B. H. Roberts's complaint about the "sewer air" of modern literature, as we had just read *The Heart of Darkness* in his class. And he says, "Well, look what Marlow says. He says that task is to breathe the stench of dead hippo meat without being corrupted. That's what reading literature teaches you how to do."

*Ethan: We inoculate ourselves?*

*John:* Yeah. Certainly we have abyss redeemers in Mormonism, including liberal humanities professors, and then you have abyss avoiders. We have lots of people who simply stay away from it. And who's to say that they're any dumber?

*Ethan: What does the Danish cartoon controversy tell us? How do we respond as people who are both religiously minded and also, at least a good many of us, somewhat partial to the free speech tradition?*

*John:* I think that the world of value is internally contradictory. You can't have all your values at once. This is finitude. And that to hold up one value at the expense of all other values is sophomoric. Often times that's what you get with certain kinds of journalists and free speech crusaders. They stand for what one wag called "free speech über alles." [laughs] . . . One of my former students teaching at NYU made a really interesting geographical point. He said that it's about the globalization of sovereignty, and the question is how you control a cultural property when it becomes globalized. Once upon a time the image of Muhammad could be controlled by Muslim caliphs or nations but now when there are Muslims in Denmark, how do you control that?

Another point is that Christianity is the religion of irony, as the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said. The whole Western tradition loves to court the abyss. In Homer, the Bible, Dante, Milton, Dostoyevsky, Rimbaud, you name it: a whole literary tradition says you can pass a season in hell and it'll make you better. And the whole Christian tradition represents its god in a state of extreme agony, with spilt blood and in the state of being killed. That's a pretty ironic thing. When you look at the crucifixion, you're supposed to recognize transcendence over death and over sin, but the actual surface picture is of an apparently mortal human being who's bloody and torn and bruised. That kind of ironic way of looking at the world—that you can represent the divine in its most degraded state and think it a sign of triumph—seems to have little resonance in the Muslim tradition. (Obviously the LDS tradition isn't that big on crucifixion scenes, but it has an appreciation for ironic redemption.)

*Ethan: Justice and mercy: in Speaking into the Air, toward the end . . .*

*John: Good catch. Alma 42:15.*

*Ethan: Loving one another, treating one another with justice and mercy is more important than communicating with each other. I don't know if you want to try to define what you mean by justice and mercy. Do you think we tend to pair these concepts and talk about them in relation to one another more than other Christians do?*

*John: Yeah. I think that Alma 42 gives you that kind of ready-made theological opposition. What I meant there is that justice has to do with blindness and generality, and so according to justice you treat everybody the same. You just treat everybody as a person pure and simple. Mercy is a very different kind of principle where you treat someone not as a person but as Ethan, in all of their particulars. In a just society, you have to have both the blind general indifference to persons and a very specific approach to persons.*

True love also, however, has a kind of indifference to it because you love your children regardless of what they do. Your love is absolutely unaffected, unmodified by anything your kids are going to do. Obviously lots of things in your relationship can be affected and modified by what they do, but your love is invariant, just as true justice would have to always consider the particulars of the case, without cut and dried rules. So love and justice actually turn out to trade places. A judge is supposed to have judgment about particulars and love is supposed to be immovable. So this whole opposition of justice and mercy starts to break down, once you look at it.

I also think it's cool that in Alma 42 they're treated in gendered terms. Here it is: Alma 42:24: "For behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own." In some sense my take on justice and mercy is also an argument for the reconciliation of male and female. *Speaking into the Air* ends in this reconciliation, with an allusion to "the milk and sperm of humankindness" from *Moby Dick*, in that absolutely far out and amazing scene in its chapter 94, "A Squeeze of the Hand."

*Ethan: You talk in Speaking into the Air as well about similarities between love and faith, if I remember right, about love being a kind of hope requiring leaps, rather than a melting of souls into one another. Is that right?*

*John: I think that's an improvement on your part. I wish I had said that. . . . No, but I like that a lot.*

*Ethan: "The moment a lover can answer that objection [why he fell in love with one person among countless possibilities] he is eo ipso not a lover; and if a be-*

liever can answer that objection, he is *eo ipso* not a believer" (Speaking into the Air, 134).

*John:* This is a quotation from Kierkegaard. I'm trying to define zones of acting with integrity that are not reducible to rationality. The structural similarity of love and faith lies in the primacy of commitment, something singular and faithful, over rationality, something plural and faithless.

*Ethan:* You spend a lot of time in *Speaking into the Air* discussing the impossibility of the union of souls. . . . How would you characterize conversion, or the work of the Spirit in the LDS sense, in terms of that?

*John:* I think conversion, or the work of the Spirit, works precisely in the way that communication with another person does. With other people and the Spirit, time and effort and love and care and attention are the things that forge meanings. The spirit does not always signal with matter-of-fact clarity—in Romans, Paul refers to its "groanings"—but then neither do we, and neither do most of the most moving and meaningful things in our lives such as music, art, clouds, spouses, and children. Just as we risk misunderstanding everyday interaction by making the telegraph our model of communication, so we set ourselves up for failure if we expect the Spirit to be a kind of divine telepathy. It is something more primal, moving, groaning, singing, pushing, lifting, caressing.

*Ethan:* On pages 265–66 toward the end of *Speaking into the Air*, you discuss William James's concealed fraud. (During a demonstration on physiology, James manipulated the image on the projection screen after he realized that the turtle heart was not responding and pulsating as it should have been.) Why should we consider the performing of such an untruth as the better path than admitting that the demonstration wasn't working right?

*John:* It's the same point about Paul and the meat sacrificed to idols: to attend more to the communicative well-being of the other rather than to yourself. If James had stood up and said, "Oh, no, the turtle heart's dead, I'm just faking it," he would've deprived the whole audience there of a good lesson about physiology. So he bore his private duty, the private burden of knowing that there is some fraud here, for the sake of the edification of people he cared about. Except that fraud is too negative a term, since it suggests that there is intentional fudging of an indisputable truth. In communication, some truths are transactional.

*Ethan:* How can you be confident that you know the needs of the other in any communication situation?

*John:* You can't. It's guesswork, but in James's structured situation,

people were there because they wanted to learn something about physiology. And in a Church setting, people are there because they want, in part, reassurance that they made a good choice to show up there. I often think about our forms of testimony bearing, and about why we make “I know” such a central term, when the question really is, “How do you live?” So, should you adhere to some kind of internal standard of truth and integrity and say, “Well, I don’t really know, because ‘knowing’ isn’t the right word, and I don’t really know anything”? It’s kind of easy to recognize once you have a couple of philosophy classes under your belt just how tenuous knowledge of anything is. So do you honor your supposed internal integrity? Well maybe; maybe that’s integrity and maybe that’s just prissy selfishness when you could be serving people by getting up there and saying “I know the church is true,” when what you mean by that is “I have felt the Spirit moving and plan to stay committed to the Church the rest of my life and be a good home teacher and be the most upstanding Latter-day Saint I can be.” Maybe we should say that in church. Maybe we should get up and say, “I’m never going to leave, and I’m committed to lead the best life I can within the Church context.” Maybe that’d be more powerful. I don’t know.

*Ethan: This is certainly one thing I have never worked out to my own satisfaction.*

*John:* I sometimes wish we had a more supple vocabulary for statements of belonging, and the relation of truth to covenant and belonging; and maybe my point here about putting the edification of others before semantic rigor may be a very conservative way of preserving the status quo. But it is clear, obviously, that your private epistemological hygiene can be just a kind of narcissistic thing as well: “I’m going to be true to what my philosophy professors taught me rather than care about the people you’re actually dealing with in church.” Here again, it’s a vote about who you associate with.

*Ethan: So in that sense we need to probably shape the words to the different audiences?*

*John:* Yeah. That’s the question about Paul. Paul clearly confesses his adaptation to diverse audiences in 1 Corinthians 9. I am not endorsing the fudging of facts, and Mormonism is a religion that takes historicity and truth very seriously. Knowledge is a religious duty for us, and truth is knowledge of things as they are, as they were, and as they are to come. Here you see that knowledge is of different orders. Knowledge of things as they are—it’s a sunny day today—is not the same kind of thing as knowledge, say,



of God's existence. Even in the most rigorous science, as Peirce argues, there is a social or community dimension to truth. Our faith deserves a richer conception of truth than the either/or logic we sometimes hear—that the Book of Mormon, for instance, is either true or fake. Recognizing that we enact truth in our deeds is not the easy way out: it only ups the ethical responsibility.

*Ethan: What would you see as the role for intellectuals in the Church?*

*John:* I think the role for the intellectual in the Church would be to lead in terms of Christian service. I don't like the model of the loyal opposition. Church is not parliament. I don't like the model of the intellectual as beacon unto the world. I think we are, like most people, selfish and self-serving and defensive of our craft. I think that Lowell Bennion had the right answer. You know, that if you really want to philosophize, go out and paint houses for the elderly. Instead of excommunicating dissidents, why not call them on a mission to Africa and have them dig wells or teach parents there how to keep their kids from getting diarrhea or something. [laughs] I don't know; I think intellectuals can help clear away the traps that the inquiring young will fall into. A simple-minded conception of true and false, such as that retailed by the hard-boiled culture of modern science, is not religiously productive.

So I guess I'm giving a kind of pragmatist line again—what the philosopher does clears the brush off conceptual problems and keeps people from getting themselves metaphysically entangled in insoluble dilemmas. Intellectuals should also be more savvy about global issues and community issues and political-structural issues. I'm not sure that a critical voice in the wilderness is as good as a kind of humble servant would be, a community servant. I really believe that, though I'm not very good at doing it, if I'm honest with myself.

*Ethan: One last question: Jesus and Paul are among the heroes of your first two books. Will we see Joseph Smith showing up as a hero in a future book?*

*John:* For me to write about Joseph Smith adequately would require a completely different kind of book than what I've done so far. We'll have to see what the future has in its womb.

### Notes

1. Schudson's assessment comes from an email to Ethan Yorgason, June 21, 2006.
2. Reviews of Peters's books yield additional acclaim. Paddy Scannell asserts that "*Speaking into the Air* is, quite simply, the most original and thought

provoking book on communication I have read.” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2004): 93. Joan Hemels would make *Speaking into the Air* “compulsory reading for every . . . student of communication science.” *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences* 38, no. 4 (2002): 428. On the back cover of *Courting the Abyss*, John Keane, of the University of Westminster’s Centre for the Study of Democracy, calls the book “the best scholarly book on free speech in more than a generation.” Of course, some reviews of Peters’s work are more glowing than others, but virtually all reviewers find Peters’s ideas well worth wrestling with.

3. L. Jackson Newell, “An Echo from the Foothills: To Marshall the Forces of Reason,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 26–34.

4. “*Preach My Gospel*”: *A Guide to Missionary Service* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004).

5. John Durham Peters, “Bowels of Mercy,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 4 (1999): 27–41.