

What I Would Be If I Weren't a Mormon

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When I first asked myself the question in the title, I was wondering specifically what religion I would participate in if I weren't Mormon. I soon tangled myself up in questions about what it means to "be" anything: I "am" a woman, a Mormon, an American, a docent at a public garden, a master gardener, a Relief Society counselor, a mother, a person who likes to cook—we all "are" many things. It is impossible for me to speculate on what I would be if I weren't female. It is interesting, but probably impossible, to speculate on who I would be if "I" had been born into a different family. Mormons believe some part of their "I-ness" is immutable, but it is very hard to know what that part might be, conditioned and entangled as we all are by the genetic code that makes the corporeal us, and then by the social interaction of families, or lack of families.

Some of us identify ourselves by the work we do. I think there is a difference between saying, "I teach" school, aerobics, or hang gliding, and, "I am a teacher," or between "I write" books, advertising copy, limericks, or letters, and "I am a writer." One is an activity one is involved in, while the other implies a deep identity with the process of that activity. I have that deeper identity with being a Mormon. It isn't like a club I have joined that I can leave when my interest flags. I don't believe I could settle into another religion, so why am I writing this essay anyway? For a fifth-generation Mormon, starting on my mother's side of the family with William Clayton, there is a cultural, historical, and familial component to being a Mormon that would never go away for me, although it seems possible for others with the same lengthy heritage to leave the faith. Over the years, I have tried on various other religious ideas and identities. It is their attractions and distractions that I want to compare.

Taking part in a religion involves the teachings of that religion, which have to do with the nature of the divine, the nature of the universe and one's place in it, and usually with moral precepts that teach what right conduct looks like. The teachings of a religion are denominational; in fact, they define the term. Taking part in a religion also involves taking part in the community created by people who all believe the same thing. Just believing the same thing doesn't make a community congenial, however. People have been known to shop for a congregation they feel comfortable with, choosing from several who all believe the same things. Congenial communities form around things other than religions: politics, reading books, playing sports, and so forth.

And then there is the matter of spiritual experiences. "Spiritual" is a difficult term. For my purposes it means a feeling that one has connected with something greater than oneself or that one has received insight from some entity beyond oneself. I am differentiating it from feeling strong emotion, however exalted, or from insight. Spiritual experiences are not denominational, nor are they the property of any one community.

Spiritual experiences within the context of one denomination or another convince a person of its truth, but people report spiritual experiences that have nothing to do with participation in a religion. Spiritual experiences are completely personal, and because of that, there is no arguing with them; you cannot pass judgment on the validity of someone's spiritual experience. This is a long way of saying that examining my thoughts about other religions has to do sometimes with looking at other belief systems and sometimes with seeking more intense spiritual connections or sometimes with looking at the places other people have found spiritual connection. As I have stated, I am completely comfortable with the Mormon community; I feel that I understand it. That is the element of my religion that would be the hardest to replace.

Being a Catholic

I wonder if a lot of girls who aren't Catholic go through a Catholic stage, the way they go through a horse stage. I remember saying emphatically to somebody when I was young that, if I weren't a Mormon, I would be a Catholic. But what I knew of Catholicism came from books and movies; I don't think I was acquainted with a single Catholic growing up in Salt Lake City. I am sure I was attracted by all the wrong things: the stained-glass windows, the altars, the candles, the rosaries, the proces-

sions, the music, its longevity. And of course, nuns. I suppose it was the habit. Maybe it was a proto-feminist desire to identify with an unusual “profession.” In early adolescence, I read Kathryn Hulme’s *The Nun’s Story*, and I also read Rumer Godden’s *In This House of Brede*, which cured me of the romance of some earlier reading, specifically *The White Ladies of Worcester* by Florence L. Barclay. This novel (it belonged to my grandmother) was completely improbable but wildly romantic. (It has taken the perspective of age to see that the point of the story was that marriage to a man is better than marriage to God. I looked the author up; she was the wife of an English clergyman.) Now I realize that while I probably could adjust to poverty, chastity, and obedience, I couldn’t adjust to boredom and confinement. I am not suited for the contemplative life, and I need to be outdoors. I could probably be an adequate fruit-cake-making nun if it were somehow forced on me.

In Primary when we talked about the first Article of Faith, it was pointed out to me that other Christians believe that God the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are one entity, while Mormons believe the obvious other—that they are three beings, and that Joseph Smith has corrected the world on that point. The underlying tone was: “Silly them.” Scriptures that supported the Mormon view were duly pointed out. I have since learned that the simple definition of God in the Nicene Creed was not simply arrived at, and I see that the simple sentence of the first article is a gauntlet thrown down, but in a cagey way since Joseph Smith wasn’t specific in the first article about what he meant. The three-in-one, ineffable, mysterious God of traditional Christianity creates some logical problems, but so does the Mormon Godhead of three members, two of which (at least) have a face and a body. Now I would only say, to anyone, that it’s hard to define God. Probably no one has it exactly right. I am comfortable believing what I grew up with.

Recently I have attended mass in what I take to be an average family parish. I like the way greeting and speaking to the people around you whom you don’t know is incorporated into the service. I see parents with children trying to get them to pay attention the way parents in my ward do. In this parish, they don’t keep the money part out of sight. The basket came ’round for donations, and the priest openly spoke about how the fund-raising was going. That was a little jarring; Mormons more indirectly take care of such matters in bishopric and quorum meetings. I can see the attraction of a familiar routine and a familiar ritual. I can sense how com-

forting it could be to feel part of such an ancient church. For me, however, the way the priest and the altar boys dress—as people did in the Middle Ages, only using polyester—seems stagey. Seeing the size 12 Nikes and the frayed bottoms of jeans poke out under the altar boys' robes steals the magic. But at least the boys are participating; lots of lay people—male and female, young and old—had a part in the mass.

The mass I attended was a first communion. Various scriptures were read at various points, and I was trying hard to see what thread bound the choices together, but I couldn't. There seemed to be something going on that I couldn't grasp. Even if I ignore purgatory, limbo (now no longer a doctrine, I have heard), transubstantiation, and praying to saints, I can't find a toehold in their theology or their mysticism. I am aware that Catholics and Mormons share the idea that an ordained clergy must administer saving ordinances and that there is one inspired man (a pope in one case, a prophet in the other) who speaks for God to direct the Church and the world. The Mormon priesthood is more democratic, since it is available to all males. Mormons also incorporate a central idea from Protestant religions—the importance of scripture as a guide.

Protestants Lumped Together

When I was a kid, Debbie, my best friend across the street, was Episcopalian. I went to church with her once at St. Mark's Cathedral in downtown Salt Lake. Once again, I loved the beauty of the church even as I was a little confused about the Episcopalians having a cathedral. I learned about Protestantism through the study of history, specifically when the Reformation was covered. The Reformation made sense to me: the corruption of the popes and the clergy, the way they tried to keep the scriptures away from common people. I think I would have been with the half of Europe that was saying "Death to the Pope" rather than "Down with Luther."

One way to look at Protestantism is to say that they believe people can come to God on their own through what they find in the Bible, and not through a priesthood and sacraments. The story of the reformers who translated the Bible into vernacular languages was—and still is—an inspiring one to me. While the struggle was exciting, some of the personalities were not: John Calvin wasn't someone I could put an arm around, nor was John Knox, nor Henry VIII, nor, when you get to America, was Jonathan Edwards. I kind of like John and Charles Wesley.

The problem with allowing people to find their own meaning in the scriptures is that they will find their own meaning in the scriptures. Protestants are constantly splintering, founding churches that rectify the perceived inaccuracies of the former church. It's hard not to see Joseph Smith and Mormonism as part of the same process. Mormons believe God reveals himself in written scripture; they also believe in personal revelation. Isn't it interesting that Mormons accept at the same time the idea of central authority, like the Catholics, and the idea of salvation driven by a direct experience with God, like the Protestants? Mormons solve the contradiction there by saying that true personal revelation will inevitably support the idea of restored authority and prophetic leadership. That puts Mormons in the position of denying the validity of any revelation that doesn't support their leaders' claims, which is awkward to say the least. I am drawn to the aspect of Mormonism that emphasizes personal choice and responsibility for personal choice. I rely on the idea that scriptures are the word of God as filtered through fallible humans, not the inerrant word of God. "As translated correctly" broadly applied is my fallback position for scriptural dilemmas, and I'm glad I have it. With strictly Mormon scriptures, I have to read selectively and hope for "continuing revelation" when I disagree.

My personal experience with Protestant religions is not extensive. Debbie's grandmother died, and for some reason I attended the funeral with her. I don't remember how old I was, but I was younger than eleven. I can remember how dark the room was, and how impersonal the service seemed. It wasn't as though I was a connoisseur of funerals: The only one I had attended earlier was for my own grandmother when I was eight, but I remember one speaker saying that my grandmother was always a peacemaker. I can't remember a single personal remark about Debbie's grandmother.

My children attended a Lutheran grade school—Missouri Synod Lutheran, which is conservative. (When the public schools were in disarray with strikes and contention over a busing program, we simply opted out for a few years.) Everyone was pleasant enough, although I always felt that, as a Mormon, I was suspect. My kids learned a lot about Martin Luther and probably more about the depravity of man than they got at our church. I don't think too much else rubbed off on them or on me. Protestants and Catholics together have a way of intoning rather than offering

their prayers that I can't get used to. I also can't get used to a prayer that sounds like a written speech.

My next-door neighbor goes to the biggest Presbyterian church in the area. This church has an extensive youth program; they have various "missions" that go to build schools in Mexico or start schools for disadvantaged kids in our community. They have near-professional music. In the summer, once a week they allow a farmer's market to be held in their parking lot. This year they allowed the city to use their parking lot for the annual hazardous waste drop-off, where citizens can recycle for free all kinds of materials that shouldn't go into the landfill. Their current pastor is a good speaker and, I gather, is found inspirational. There are various subgroups that meet during the week. My neighbor and his wife have taught a Bible study class for years. At one time it was for women in the church who were divorced or single for some other reason.

My neighbor is very proud of his church and has reason to be. I get the impression that the life of his church is not necessarily in the Sunday meeting. Its life is in all the other things that go on outside that meeting, but that meeting brings them together once a week. My neighbor and I have talked religion some. He is devoted to Christ; and as we have discussed neighborhood problems, he has pointed out the ways in which what he was saying wasn't "Christlike." So why don't I want to make this Presbyterian Church my "church home" as my neighbor puts it? I have to say that it is the vague feeling that they are not "my people." They don't have my vocabulary.

The Far East Nearby

For six or seven years, I met once a week in a meditation group. I was at a spiritual impasse: my energetic efforts to do everything right wasn't leading to the connection to the divine that was promised to the obedient. Feeling that I wasn't a powerful communicator through prayer, I thought I would try a new technique. I was—and am—not a very good meditator, although one of the frustrations with the process was that it is impossible to say when you are "there." There is no way to compare my meditation with yours to see which is "right." Finally accepting that I was the final arbiter of the success of my meditation made it easier to quit something before I got an "A" in it. It's a process taught through metaphor: "Quiet your mind," "the unity of all being is in the space between your thoughts," "breathe out your negative thoughts." Undoubtedly I did-

n't work hard enough at meditating on my own. As a group we chanted, which, once in a while, was mesmerizing. I acquired enough facility that sitting in the correct posture for an hour was not so uncomfortable that it was all I thought about. As an exercise in concentration, it was instructive to see how little I had. It did teach me to pay attention to where my body is tight. The emphasis on breath, the centrality of breath, the effect of breathing in a certain way, is something I continue to think about. At first, I thought it was bizarre to be constantly monitoring breathing, which is something we do automatically. But it is undoubtedly true that when you don't breathe, you die.

Meditating never became a spiritually renewing practice for me. It never changed my life. As with most things in life, there are the gifted, the talented, and the hopeless. I think I was a mediocre meditator. If I had met with what felt like success, I might have persisted longer; but once the structure of the group was gone, I rarely tried it anymore. Nowadays meditation is taught in many contexts. In a medical context, for example, it is taught to help people with intractable pain or to help manage stress to correct hypertension. It is taught as a nonreligious means to experience a feeling of peace and calm. I was learning mediation from someone who studied Tibetan Buddhism, one of the many branches of Buddhism, which, I have since learned, emphasizes the more esoteric interpretations of the Buddha's teaching.

Besides meditating, we read various books on Tibetan Buddhism and discussed them. One was the life of a female Tibetan saint, Yeshe Tsogyal. She was born a princess but had always striven after spiritual things. Her unsympathetic family married her twice to men who were either brutal or dismissive, and finally she was given to a third husband, Lord Padmasamghave, who freed her to follow a spiritual path. She began a life of seeking for insight and ultimately became a buddha herself, disciplining herself with fasts and meditation. It is said that, when she was born, a spring of pure water burst forth and formed a lake, which later became a pilgrimage site for those who worship her. At one point, she was left alone in a cave where the demons of her mind took the forms of devils and tormented her, but she remained steadfast in her meditation. The experience is likened to Christ's forty days in the wilderness. As I read this, I realized I couldn't take the story literally and also realized that the Bible would be equally a hard sell for someone from a completely different culture.

Buddhism is diverse, with no body of doctrine defined to which one must assent to call oneself a Buddhist. Buddha taught that each person could find the truth within himself or herself, but there have always been teachers and preachers to show the way. Some ideas seem consistent among Buddhists. We discussed at length the Buddhist idea that life is hard and that we suffer because of our attachment to things that change and are temporary. It was easy to see the trouble that attachment to wealth or fame or beauty could cause, but are your children, spouse, and friends included in the things you shouldn't be attached to? If a person isn't prepared to renounce everything, to define and stay away from inappropriate cravings is pretty difficult. Wanting something, wanting to do something—that's what gets most of us through the day, choosing one thing rather than another.

Besides there is this undertone of passiveness in how one deals with a less than perfect world that bothers me. To say, "Life is difficult and there is injustice. That will never change, so let us school ourselves not to react to it," is less congenial to me than to say, "Life is difficult and there is injustice. What do we do to change that?" The point of perfect balance—eating only what we need and possessing the minimum for a modest lifestyle—is appealing. Proper speech, proper action, proper livelihood—"proper" defined as that which has compassion rather than greed or something else as its motivation—that is appealing as well. One could easily incorporate these teachings into almost any denomination, including Mormonism, if one chose.

The idea that our lives today are a result of choices made in a previous life, and that we are doomed to endless incarnations until we have become "perfect" at not craving anything was interesting, but I found I wanted to retain my consciousness of being "me." I didn't want to be ignorant of what I used to be. To think that everyone and everything was once someone or something else—it's dizzying. It implies that no one fresh ever comes into the world.

The idea that there is an oversoul that we are part of, that part of this oversoul has been somehow extruded into our physical body, and that we rejoin this great oversoul once we are dead—I never could buy it. One becomes part of this oversoul when one is finally liberated from all cravings. It can't be proved logically, and it didn't appeal to me emotionally or attract me as a metaphor. Through meditation one is supposed to get a sense of this one-ness, but it never did happen to me. There is a joke that is supposed

to illustrate Buddhism. A Buddhist monk goes up to a hotdog vendor and says, “Make me one with everything. And keep the change.” The vendor replies, “Change comes from within.” I do think change comes from within, but I guess I don’t want to be one with everything.

Dreams

In this meditation group, we also discussed dreams. We wrote them down, related them, and tried to find meaning in them. This activity was tangential to learning to meditate, but dreams for many people and for many religious cultures have been a way to receive communication from God. I was willing to consider dreams as an untapped spiritual resource in my life.

After diligently doing it for a while, I concluded that, first of all, it’s hard to remember dreams. Second, I concluded that, while a dream would sometimes illustrate my emotional state, sometimes with more cleverness and wit than my waking brain could, my dreams were never prophetic nor did they provide direction. I could look at a dream and say to myself, “Clearly this dream is about insecurity. Why am I dreaming about this right now?” Sometimes I could come up with a connection between the dream and what was going on in my waking life, but more often I couldn’t.

We also analyzed these dreams using Carl Jung’s universal archetypes. I can’t really believe that there are universal archetypes. I can’t believe that things in dreams—windows, flying, automobiles—can possibly symbolize the same thing in all cultures. I have the same trouble with Richard Dawkins’s idea of a “meme,” articulated in his widely read book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). A meme is supposed to be a unit of cultural information that moves from one mind to another and that can be transmitted vertically through generations. An example is the “monotheism meme.” Catch phrases, tunes, or twists of fashion that spread rapidly in a culture are supposed to be other examples of memes. For that kind of transmission to be possible, the archetypes or memes would have to be part of the structure of the brain, it seems to me. When the structure is found, call me and I will reconsider. But at this point, I have eliminated dreams as a source of spiritual connection, at least for me.

The Arts

Lots of people like to go to museums on Sunday. Sunday is a day off

when they have time to do it, but I have often thought it is also connected with the idea that Sunday is set aside as a day for worship. If a person doesn't have a church to go to, going to a museum might also be a way of connecting with something "higher." So I have considered whether the arts couldn't be my religion. Could my response to them be a spiritual experience? I have studied art and literature and music some, so why not?

The way some people can, out of their own minds, bring something new into the world is mysterious to me, and I deeply respect it. It amazes me, in fact. I don't feel inclined to worship it, however, and I don't worship artists. I respect people who expand the gifts they are born with, and I am deeply appreciative. The contemplation of beautiful objects, or the journey into a world of someone's creation, is never time wasted for me. That humans can create almost balances out their destruction and stupidity. But I think worship of the artist constitutes idolatry and leaning on the arm of flesh. I agree with that scriptural indictment. A person has to get used to the fact that the artists who produce objects that can be inspirational or comforting to us are often not what we could call evolved human beings. Their lives are often chaotic; their relationships with other people are frequently destructive; they often suffer from depression and addictions. Not too many saintly, well-adjusted people are also significant creative artists.

So what do I call it when a work of art provokes a powerful response from me? What do I call it when music or art can make me tearful or feel elevated? I have eliminated worshipping the human being who makes the art, without eliminating respect for that human. The experience isn't a property of the work of art, because not everyone will respond to it. Rather, I bring a context to my viewing or listening that is constructed from what's in my head and what I have experienced, plus some kind of neural firing that is facilitated by what—the Holy Ghost? Who knows? I do know for myself that these experiences are unpredictable and personal—and that it wouldn't be possible for me to construct a life around seeking those experiences. Artists and musicians don't live on a constant spiritual high; their lives can be humdrum, too.

Nature

A church-going person has probably heard, in the church context, some disparaging remark about the person who says on Sunday he worships God on the golf course. Hiking guides will often remark on whether

the trail is well-used, warning the prospective hiker that he or she might not be alone. Nature lovers want solitude to experience whatever they have gone into nature to find—which I think is a kind of religious experience. I have to consider whether I could join the nondenominational church of nature worship. And I can't, at least not in a formal way.

Time spent outside, in my garden, or hiking, or exercising, does more to soothe my spirit than prayer, scripture study, or temple attendance. Left to themselves, the processes of nature create beauty. The fact that humans can appreciate and crave beauty is one of the arguments against sociobiology. What is the evolutionary advantage of appreciating beauty in a sunset or landscape? Appreciation isn't worship. Nature isn't an entity. When I see a bumper sticker, "Pagan and Proud," or hear recordings of Wiccans gathered to chant, I really can't understand worshipping the earth, the wind, or fire. I don't feel a kinship with them. I could not, with a straight face, dress up, go into the woods, and invoke nature. Like other mantras of the New Age, such as "follow your bliss" or "everything happens for a reason," I find nature worship annoying and poorly thought out. I don't understand what they are trying to make happen. One cannot propitiate nature. I cannot think that the earth, sky, fire, and water have any sense of our love or appreciation.

Another thing that needs to be thought through is how scientific knowledge changes nature worship. When a person knows what causes thunder and lightning (the thermal cells, the exchange of energy, the imbalance of the ions), it's pretty hard to see something to worship behind it. One can be amazed at and respectful of the power of a storm; one can be humbled to think that humans have no ability to change these forces, but these forces are impersonal. To worship them doesn't connect us to them; there is nothing there to connect with.

Where Does This Leave Me?

The final question for me is: If I hadn't been born a Mormon, would I have chosen it? At this point in my life, I am either a Mormon or I don't identify myself with any group. I haven't found anything I would rather "be." The winter 2006 issue of *Dialogue* printed an article about succession in the Community of Christ (formerly Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). Almost in passing, the author, William D. Russell, states that, in the 1960s when he taught at Graceland University, the Community of Christ school, no one in the Religion Department

wanted to teach the Book of Mormon/Doctrine and Covenants course and that “none of the faculty members at that time had even read the Book of Mormon.” Later, he quoted W. Grant McMurray, president of the Community of Christ for eight-plus years, beginning in 1996. In 2003, McMurray told the Mormon History Association that he believed Joseph Smith was “brilliant and visionary, probably a religious genius” but that he (McMurray) also believed Joseph was “deeply flawed, with profound human weaknesses, inconsistencies, and short-comings.”¹ Unexpectedly I felt sad about that; and in thinking about my impression of the church they have become, my unedited thought was: “Why do they bother? In what way are they different from any Christian church, except in perhaps having autonomy from a much larger organization?” I find I treasure what is different about my church—in its origin and in its teachings.

My Mormonism is a sort of Wild West Mormonism; it's the cheery Mormonism that says individuals make choices and mistakes, grow from them, move toward being better, and move toward more clarification about what's important. The Christian context was a given for Joseph Smith. All his ideas developed within that context, and I suppose that is true for me. I am respectful of the idea of atonement while not completely understanding how it is supposed to work or, frankly, why it is necessary, since people can change their lives for the better (repent) without going through what we would call a repentance process or believing that it's impossible without Christ. I spend my time thinking about how to be a more Christlike person rather than in worshipping Christ.

If I accept the premise that there is a God, that all human beings past and present are his children, and that he cares about them, I would have to conclude that he cares less about what they believe than he cares that they believe *something*. Why wouldn't it be a simple matter for God to reveal himself to everyone in the same way? Obviously he doesn't, so I have to conclude that unity of belief isn't what he is after. I also think that the fully evolved product of all the religions that have endured looks the same. A fully evolved Christian or Muslim or Buddhist would be peaceable and compassionate, understanding and tolerant. So, I conclude, maybe fully evolved people are what God is after, by many routes.

If I had been born a Presbyterian or something else, would I have converted to the Mormon Church? I'm not sure. If I had felt a sense of community in a Presbyterian church, I probably would have stayed with it.

I know this about myself: I don't make big changes easily and I am happiest as part of a community. As a young person I yearned to feel I was communicating with something beyond myself. I wanted—and I still want—the hope for the afterlife I grew up with to be true. I want my life to have the meaning Mormon theology says it does.

On the other hand, I am pragmatic and logical (mostly) and of a cheerful and even disposition. I have to make a lot of excuses for God; I constantly cut him slack. I have elbowed my way into a comfortable spot in Mormonism, which is farther to the left than my ward members suspect. I am discreet about where I stand. I feel as if I am equal parts in the community and an observer of it. I like being in a position to watch people's lives unfold, to watch their children grow, to take part in supporting them in their troubles. I really like the way that constant association with people I don't find congenial makes me appreciate them and see their worth. I like listening to their testimonies, and I don't doubt that the spiritual experiences they relate are "true." I appreciate being part of a group of people who are trying to do better and be better.

But if I were somehow released from being a Mormon, or if I were somewhere Mormons weren't, I think I would worship with the Quakers. I like the pacifism and the social activism. I would like to spend time working for the people who are living instead of the people who have died. I would like the time I spend in Church and on Church-related matters, to be spent, in a Church context, on matters like environmental amelioration or social justice. It's an excuse to say I don't have time to spend on those things in my present Church; but in fact, I don't feel that I do. Depending on what calling I have, two to five hours a week outside of the Sunday block can be spent on Church matters. That's quite a bit.

Since I am not unhappy in the Church and since changing would not be worth the trouble to me, I will stay where I am. But if Quakers still meet in rooms full of light that symbolize the light of the Spirit, and if they still sit silent until someone is moved to speak, I would really like that.

Note

1. William D. Russell, "Grant McMurray and the Succession Crisis in the Community of Christ," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 33, 40.