

Driving to Heaven

Tara Washburn Christensen

Cory and I more or less live in the cab of a long-haul semi. We have a house in Indiana, but we don't make it home very often. It's not unusual for two months to pass between visits home. There are a lot of problems connected with living most of your life in an 8'6"x13' box. When we first started driving, I was shocked to learn how quickly our tempers flared, and how often the thought of divorce came to mind. After two months, I was ready to never see him again; but we fought it all through. Another problem was that, after we had been driving for a couple of years, Cory developed diabetes and, under regulations governing long-distance hauling, could no longer drive. For many months, I drove alone. Now Cory rides with me, so at least we are together.

Another problem has been keeping active in the Church. I believe in strict obedience to the principles of the gospel. Obviously, trucking has meant no home or visiting teaching, no callings of any sort, no sacrament meetings, no closeness with ward members. Cory and I have been compelled not only to work on Sunday, but to buy food and fuel. It has been impossible to keep our job while still being strictly obedient. For a while, I feared my lack of meeting attendance would lead me to true inactivity—that is, I feared I might get where I didn't care about missing church. As for Cory, he had joined the Church at seventeen and still found some ways of his old life appealing—occasionally desiring to return, but fighting that desire.

This essay is partly about how I came to be the kind of person I am. But mostly it about how I feel about God and my religion and about how Cory and I have worked out a way to worship and serve the Lord while driving truck seven days a week. We feel we are staying close to the Lord and following His ways and doing His will.

* * *

I grew up in Snowflake, a small Mormon town in northeastern Arizona. My family was a big one. I had ten brothers and sisters. I came along in the next-to-last position—a place where it seemed pretty easy to get lost and go unnoticed. Surrounded by people, I seemed to exist in a black hole of loneliness through much of my childhood. I was depressed most of the time.

I felt that I wasn't supposed to be lonely and depressed, and I went out of my way to conceal my feelings. I knew that I was supposed to have a testimony; and I thought that, if you had a testimony, you wouldn't feel the way I did. The gospel was the central focus of our home while we were growing up. My mother was always the one to engage us in gospel discussions. I, being more like my taciturn father, preferred to keep my deepest thoughts and feelings to myself. It was hard for me to find words for them, and I was simply afraid of or didn't understand some of them.

I felt like a hypocrite, having the appearance, rather than the actuality, of a direct relationship with the Lord—a relationship I truly desired but didn't know where to begin to find. It seems to me there was a kind of desperation in my pretense to a testimony. No persona, no dissembled personality, seemed too extreme for me to adopt if circumstances required it. It seemed to me that failing to dissemble, failing to appear confident of having a testimony, would confirm a terrible fear. What if the great black vastness was proof that there was no God and I had no "spirit" inside of me?

This was in stark contrast to everything around me at church, among my friends, and particularly at home. For example, my mother's favorite scripture, 2 Nephi 25:26, was plastered on the bathroom wall and her bedroom door, and occasionally it found its way to other walls in the house. "And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins." I truly desired to know to what source I could look for the remission of my sins. As I said, I wanted a direct relationship with the Lord—I just didn't know where to begin to find it. More on that later.

* * *

People ask me how I can stand driving a long-haul semi seven days a week. That's a good question. One of the reasons I can stand it is that I can think and feel while I drive. I think about my friends and my loved

ones and about my childhood. I think particularly about my religion. And I experience deep feelings about all of them.

When I was young, my family would take road-trips on a regular basis: It was always to see other family members. My mother had a restless spirit and needed to travel somewhere every couple of months. We would go for long trips to northern California, Washington, Ohio, and Louisiana in the summer. During the school year, we took short trips to Mesa or Page in Arizona or to places in Utah. I remember lying on my back between the driver's and passenger's seats in our van while my mother was quoting "The Highwayman" to us. She had an arsenal of close to thirty poems she had memorized for when singing together wouldn't keep us from fighting. To this day I have never looked at a printed word of "The Highwayman" or "The Children's Hour," but I can quote both of them almost in their entirety with very few errors.

The drive was always the boring part of the journey to me when I was very young. But as I got older and the car got smaller and less crowded, I began to change my attitude toward these trips. As a teenager I went on a lot of bus trips with my high school classes, especially in the spring time. There were volleyball games, choir trips, jazz band trips, and orchestra trips. My classmates were my own age, yet not my own age. I could never get into talking about boys, hair, make-up, dances, etc. I liked boys, I enjoyed dances, and I detested make-up. That was about as much as I had to say on the subject. What I loved to do during those many hours in bus and van was to watch in pensive silence as the countryside rolled past my window in ever-changing colors and shapes. The beauty of nature pulled me out of myself and filled me with tranquil feelings. In nature I had a heart. Otherwise, as I say above, I was just an empty shell, feeling alone even among people.

When I was seventeen, I went to girls' camp for the last time. I remember sitting out in the woods with my journal in the middle of the afternoon. There was peace, not only surrounding me, but within me. I began to wonder why nature calmed my severe moods. I wrote: "Nature is so sublime. Always it can soothe my fears and heal my loneliness. Why is this so? Why, when His disciples were afraid for their lives, did the Savior calm the sea—yet He leaves the storm raging in my heart? I see, as I sit on this log, a world of order, yet of chaos. The chaos brings balance to the order, but there is no order inside to bring balance to the chaos within me. Nature is *strictly* obedient, if the Lord wishes a storm to cease, it does so in-

stantly. If He wishes a tree to wither and die because it bears no fruit, it happens before the words can sink into the understanding of those hearing. Obedience without question.” And with that insight, strict obedience became my religion—the letter of the law to the last dot. Yet the emptiness remained, and my obedience turned out to be a part-time affair.

After my first year of college I moved to Mesa for the summer. I was nineteen and yearned to receive my endowments. I discussed the possibility with my bishop, telling him that I not only wanted to go to the temple but that I wanted to do it the following week. For some reason, this detour of protocol did not bother him, and he agreed to give me a recommend. Three days later my stake president said, “I would like to see you take the temple preparation class first, but I will leave it up to you.” I decided to stick with my plan.

The next day was Monday. I was just sitting down to dinner with my grandmother, older brother, and his wife, when the phone rang. It was very bad news. My mother had cancer. It was colon cancer, and according to the prognosis she wouldn’t last long.

Tuesday morning my mother and father and a handful of my siblings and their spouses sat with me in the Mesa Temple. I was worried a little about the ceremony after all the comments of “Don’t worry, it’s weird at first, but you’ll get used to it.” Surprisingly, I found myself in a mood of serenity that I had previously experienced only in nature. The same quieting peace that I felt in the woods permeated the walls of the temple, and I felt I was home. There was no black hole in my heart, no need to stretch the truth to get a desired response. It was a healing experience. For the first time in my life, the Lord was there and He was enough.

However, only two weeks and four days after that healing experience, my mother died. It was a Saturday. I sat on the ground outside our house in Snowflake in the middle of the night and looked into the sky, searching for peace. I admit that my mother’s death rocked my faith. It didn’t make sense for this to happen. I *had* felt the presence of God in the temple, and it had filled my heart. But a new ache, deeper and more terrifying than anything I had experienced before, had replaced it. The young seedling of faith in me began to feel like a barren, shriveled twig. It was as if I assumed that a testimony made a person immune to the shocks and deprivations of mortality.

This time, though, I knew I shared my grief and loneliness with others. I took a semester off from school and stayed home to help my father

and younger brother. Solace came for both Dad and me in the temple. At least once a week we got up early, made breakfast, and left for Mesa after making sure my brother was up and getting ready for school. Neither Dad nor I said much while we drove. Again the familiar miles would pass, and I would find myself as lost in my thoughts as he was in his. But I think our weekly trips to Mesa kept us both on this side of a complete emotional breakdown. The Lord was still there for me.

* * *

I met Cory while doing a session in the Mesa Temple. We were married in the Salt Lake Temple because of our great respect for it. Then we settled down to married life, confronting the necessity that both of us had to hold jobs to survive.

We got into truck driving because, after two years of marriage and no children, we were still working overlapping opposite shifts and literally saw each other only on Sundays. One day, while on my lunch break, I noticed an ad for truck drivers. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. It made good money, and I could see my husband every day.

So off we went to driving school in Denver. The first day there, I was shocked at the vulgar and lewd comments made by others in our class. I sat there till I could no longer stand it, then I politely asked the man doing most of the talking to stop. His reply was, "If what I'm saying bothers you, you're in the wrong business. You better either get used to it or get another job." I believe I still have a bruise on my chin—seven years later—from my jaw hitting the floor.

We had already invested \$12,000 to get our licenses, and we couldn't just turn away and forget that much money. So we forged on, each day trying to ignore the barrage of obscenities and rudeness. After three very long months of training, we were finally in a truck and on the road. As I said earlier, the confined space of a truck cab tested our marriage, but eventually we made up our minds to make it succeed.

We now found ourselves in a career that demanded weeks at a time without seeing home—and without participating in Church meetings or callings. It was a time of spiritual and emotional upheaval, and our physical needs were changing dramatically. Before the first year was over, we had both put on considerable weight. Two years of driving left us more or less physically broken down. We decided to go home and do something else. Less than six months after going home, we were back in the truck,

but this time we were a little wiser. We decided there were a lot of things we could do to control our environment.

My husband received permission to bless the sacrament when we were unable to attend meetings somewhere. We get the sacrament talk topics and prepare talks for each Sunday. We study the priesthood/Relief Society manual for our class time and the designated scriptures for Sunday School. We take our lesson for Monday home evening either from the current month's *Ensign* or from a portion of *Preach My Gospel*. During the week we listen to conference addresses on CD and to the scriptures. I have my study time each day—time to write in my journal and review in more detail scriptures that may have stood out to me while we listened to them. I have discovered that my environment is what I make it. My life, it seems, has reversed itself. I am not as physically fit now as I wish I were, but I feel so deeply—more than I ever have—a true relationship with God.

After my husband was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, we adapted. I drive, and he rides along with me most of the time. It's definitely not traditional, but it works for us. He helps me where he can, and we have time that we never had before when we were running "team." As a team, with both of us driving, the truck stopped for only two hours or less every day. The rest of the time we were driving from coast to coast as quickly as we could. It was not uncommon for us to drive 6,500 miles per week. In such a life it was very hard to have any time that was relaxing or enjoyable, let alone time to exercise and do the things we needed to. Now, as a solo driver, I am required to take a ten-hour break after driving no more than eleven hours in a fourteen-hour period. It makes life very nice. We have time for exercise every day and for personal and couple study. I have time to research and write. We almost always end up in New Mexico or Arizona on the Sabbath, our favorite stopping point being a rest area just west of Flagstaff where we can find a secluded spot in the pines.

While driving our truck, I am surrounded by the grandeur of God's creations. I have experienced an earthquake in California, tornadoes in Tennessee and Indiana, and a freezing rain in Texas that left two inches of ice on our truck. I have driven toward the East Coast while watching the sun rise over the trees in Georgia; and I have been awed by the magnificence of desert vistas as the sun sets below them, leaving the sky awash in brilliant colors. I've watched terrific storms with thunder, lightning, and driving rain (the noise being drowned out by blaring tornado sirens) push across the sky as though someone were scraping off a canvas with a

straight-edged ruler. Behind the line of black billowing clouds is a clear expanse with an unfathomable, impressive display of brilliant stars. The immediacy of the sky's swing from the dark and oppressive to the clear and inspiring leaves me hardly knowing how to react to its magnificence.

Once the storm or scene displayed before me has taken my breath away, it passes. As it does, I realize again how beautiful, yet frightening, are all of God's acts. In that same instant, I am filled with wonder for the majestic power by which nature's fury is controlled. My own pitiful insignificance is made just as clear—my utter helplessness when faced by the same storms that, with one word, the Savior can turn away.

Although I am much less than any of the glorious displays of nature I have seen, the God of the universe takes the time to show me He is mindful of me and knows who I am. I have seen his power move my truck out of harm's way on many occasions. Following are only two of them.

One wintry day in Minnesota we had to delay unexpectedly when our truck overheated for no good reason—on a flat stretch of road in the middle of the winter. Three hours later, driving across a bridge on the loop around St. Paul and Minneapolis during a light dusting of snow, our truck jackknifed, forcing me to spin around and drive in the wrong direction to keep my trailer from going over the bridge. If we hadn't been delayed by the inexplicable overheating of our truck, our mishap would have occurred in heavy traffic leaving a football game, sweeping a lot of cars with us. As it was, the bridge was empty. I attribute that to the Lord.

Once on Highway 2 in Nebraska, I was enjoying the rarity of a windless drive. It seems there is nearly always wind in Nebraska and Wyoming, which might have posed a problem on this particular drive because we had a very light load, about 11,000 pounds compared to a regular load of about 45,000. When it is windy, a lightly loaded trailer is much more dangerous. I have seen more than a few trucks blown over on the side of the road because of wind gusts. Also, on this rare windless day, traffic was light because it was fairly early on a Sunday morning. Accordingly, I was more relaxed and off my guard than usual.

When I started to climb a hill, I suddenly felt a sideways motion, as if someone had just picked up my truck and set it about three more feet to the right, across the stripe and onto the shoulder. As I looked around to see what had happened, I saw a little car trying to pass me. I slowed down and let it around me quickly. It pulled off and I noticed that it had a flat tire. I pulled over to help because I saw that the driver was a woman of at

least sixty. While I helped her change her tire, she commented on my having moved over for her. Puzzled because I hadn't steered the truck from its lane, I asked her what she meant, and she said, "Well, you moved over on the side of the road just before my tire popped and my car went right into where your trailer had been not a moment before. How did you know to move over?" I have only one explanation. The Lord moved my truck three feet to the side so that woman's car would not dodge under my trailer when her tire blew.

I am grateful that the Lord takes notice of me. Driving truck, I have truly come to know Him and to feel close to Him. I am learning what it feels like to have my heart and not just my mind centered on the gospel. Outwardly I may appear inactive, but inwardly I am more active than I have ever been in my life. I can worship the Lord anywhere, even from a stop among the pines in Arizona.

Before my experience as a truck driver, I would never have thought that such a career was what I needed to heal me and open me to the Lord. It would have seemed a sure way to distance myself from him and end up on a path I didn't want to follow. I have found that peace I was searching for, the peace I felt in nature and the temple. I have found a true relationship with the Lord. Now the tranquility is always there, for it comes from within, and I don't have to look outside of myself for peace. It is there, and that tells me He is there, too.

Here I sit behind the steering wheel of an eighteen-wheeler, firmer in my convictions, more certain of the reality of God, and filled by feelings for the gospel. And I think I'll just keep on driving to heaven.