At the Cannery

Phyllis Barber

By myself, I'm driving east on I–70, just out of Denver. I'm looking for silos. I'm also listening to jazzmeister Herbie Hancock on his new tribute-to-Joni-Mitchell CD, *River. You gotta love that Herbie*, I'm thinking. Tina Turner's singing "Edith and the Kingpin," something about victims of typewriters and how the band sounds like typewriters. I laugh. I'm one of those victims who's emerging out of my cave where I write every day to volunteer at the Aurora Cannery, a division of LDS Welfare Services.

Flat roof. American flag. Silos with catwalks against a gem-blue sky. I notice a network of antennae. Probably for shortwave radio/emergency communication with all of Colorado as well as Salt Lake City. When Tina sings her last word, I turn off the radio, then realize I'm fifteen minutes early. I smile at the inverted irony that I'd been fifteen minutes late a few weeks ago when arriving at another welfare project in Salt Lake City, a soap factory.

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I'd called my friend Virginia from Denver to tell her I'd be visiting Salt Lake for a few days and could we get together? She suggested we do something besides lunch, something more like our normal life together when I'd been her neighbor. "I've already signed up for a day at the cannery when you'll be here," she said. "Do you want to come along?" "Yes," I said. "That would be good. Like old times."

She and I arrived at 9:15 rather than 9:00 A.M., however. We'd been looking for 526 So. Denver Street, but addresses in the city were usually given in grid terms. We'd driven nervously up and down several streets until we sighted the telltale tan bricks of an industrial-looking building in an otherwise residential area. We were definitely tardy campers when we walked inside the glass door of Deseret Soap & Detergent. Still, we were laughing, full of

spring sunshine and exuberance, friends reunited for a few hours. An imposing man with the name "Larry" embroidered on his blue jumpsuit greeted us. I suspected he'd been in charge for a lot of years, the way he rolled his eyes at the dilettante volunteers who'd entered his domain without the serious intent to match his. He pointed to a sign: "No jewelry allowed, no watches, no cell phones or purses." He pointed to a row of lockers.

"Are you ready?" He tapped his foot.

"Almost." Both suddenly aflutter, we hurriedly stuffed our purses in the lockers, then pinned the keys to our t-shirts. We followed Larry, who padded down the concrete hall on gummy soles. He opened a heavy door and ushered us into his sacred temple of soap—a huge Star Wars-looking warehouse where gargantuan stainless steel contraptions hummed songs of metal on the move and filled boxes of laundry detergent with powder before sealing the cardboard. Solidified ribbons of newly poured soap rolled past on a conveyor belt before being guillotined into rectangles. Everything moved in concert in this factory of moving parts and mechanical arms.

"You'll be working with shampoo today," Larry said.

He assigned Virginia a job taping cardboard boxes with a super-sized tape machine. He told me to keep an eye on the bottles moving down the line toward the spigot dispensing pink shampoo. Then he stood back with his arms folded across the elastic waistband of his jumpsuit to make sure things ran smoothly. But there was trouble in Soap City. The dour man who had been running the operation solo while waiting for us laggards to arrive launched into his orientation demonstration, but empty shampoo bottles suddenly jumped ship, flew through the air, and bonked against the shiny concrete floor.

I wanted to laugh. I couldn't help my good mood. The bouncing bottles reminded me of the Three Stooges. I forced down the corners of a breakout grin. We had a Larry, and I felt like Moe, ready to break into schtick by elbowing Virginia and saying, "Hey, Curly." But Larry, trusty manager that he was, interrupted that thought. He stepped up to the spigot and jabbed a big red button. More bottles jammed into each other. More empties flew through the air and skittered across the floor.

"Give me a minute," he said, grim under pressure.

Virginia took that time to unstick the tape from the roller of the tape dispenser she'd be using. I assessed a stack of gigantic cardboard boxes, wandered over to peek into the only open one, then swam my hand through a sea of empty plastic bottles. But the True North magnet for me was the long ribbon of soap being slashed by paper-thin blades into rectangles. Hypnotic rhythm. Smooth, sharp cuts forming bars that disappeared into a bulky machine. Curious, I walked around to the other side and felt like a kid in The Magical Land of Deseret Soap & Detergent when a newly minted bar of soap popped out, freshly stamped with a beehive.

And suddenly, as I sit in the parking lot of the Aurora Cannery not far from Denver International Airport, listening to the peripheral sound of a jet streaming overhead, I'm remembering when I was twelve years old and a Beehive girl in the Mutual Improvement Association. I was taught about the industry of bees who worked, worked, worked for the community (though I'm thinking now that no one ever said much about the drones who worked, so to speak, only for the queen bee). The beehive was the logo for both the State of Deseret and the Great State of Utah. It ranked high on my list of favorite symbols. There it was again, imprinted on the broadside of a bar of soap—a reminder that, in this Church, industry was sacred. "When we're helping, we're happy," we sang in Primary before I went to MIA. Work, work, work—a strong Mormon ethic stamped firmly into my own broadsides. The key to a good life was service to others.

I check my watch. Ten minutes to go. Time is ticking more slowly than usual. I find the button to lower the seat back and try to get comfortable while I wait. Larry and Salt Lake are on my mind again.

After several stops and starts and mumbling under his breath (no expletives—this was, after all, a Church operation), Larry had things under control. The march of the bottles began again. This time, each empty stopped in the correct position for its manually operated fill-up to the perfect level. Then each was sent on its way to have its top tightened into end-product shape before Virginia hand-loaded them into boxes and taped them shut with her heavy-duty dispenser.

My job was to keep a supply of empty bottles ready for filling and replenish the bottle-top bin for the man regulating the flow of pink shampoo. As I rushed around trying to be all things to all people, I moved the huge open box of bottles from one spot to another (it wasn't heavy but my efforts could make a good impression for anyone who might be watching, maybe Larry) and unloaded it, ready for the assembly line. Spigot Man kept an eagle eye out to make sure I came nowhere close to being remiss in my duty.

After a few missteps and one reprimand, I synchronized my rhythm with the machines and the process. I felt as if I were a dancer in a mechanistic *corps de ballets*. I kept the assembly line supplied before the humorless Spigot Man could catch me being lax again. I felt a surge of pride in my competence: *I wonder if the soap factory has ever had such a fine worker, such an efficient cog in the wheel of industry*, but then I heard a man's voice calling out. "Pay attention," he said, louder this time. I'd let the supply of bottles come dangerously close to the red line indicating he would soon be bottle-less at the spigot. *Pay attention. Step it up.* Panic hit when I realized the big cardboard boxes with more supplies were taped shut, the open one empty. I had no knife. Fingernails wouldn't work. *Don't panic. Where's Larry?*

I looked around the concrete warehouse/factory and saw him in the northwest corner directing a forklift operator moving pallets of boxes, directing the operation of loading trucks destined for the Bishop's Storehouse where those in need could obtain cheese, bread, meat, canned tomatoes, feminine hygiene products, and soap, of course. I'd been to that store without cash registers. But now I needed to get bottles on the assembly line. *Larry?* Luckily, another employee walked by, saw my dismay, pulled a box cutter from his pocket, and sliced the sealing tape. He helped me carry it and pour its contents into a bin. Back in business again.

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By now, the sun on the driver's side of my car is heating up the window glass even though it's cold outside. I wish I had a towel to tuck into a crack at the top, something like a maiden's handkerchief signaling that I need the sun to let up. I'm ready to go inside for the canning *du jour*. I've heard that the Greeley tomatoes are

the A-1 product from the Aurora Cannery, but it's too early in the season for tomatoes. So I wonder what we'll can today. When I look at my watch, it seems as though time has stopped. I shake it, though that's an old-fashioned, useless thing to do with batteries. I'm still early.

I breathe deeply, center myself, ease the tension in my shoulders, slow my overactive thoughts. But they, as usual, keep tramping across the open field of my mind. I can't believe I'm sitting here like a faithful Latter-day Saint, waiting to be a cog in the machine. Why am I doing this? Am I play-acting? I still have my questions. I still have my arguments. But then, I remind myself, some part of me speaking its truth, that when I hear anyone speaking unfairly about the whole enterprise, I'm there. The Defender. There was that difficult evening in 2002 when I lived in Park City. . . .

I'd been asked to speak to a group of New York socialite women gathered for a week of skiing and *après-ski.* The acquaintance who invited me was a part-time resident of New York City and Park City, and her friends had expressed curiosity about Mormonism. Would I please present an after-dinner speech on the culture and a brief overview of the theology?

Having been inactive in the practice of my religion for twenty years, I wondered if I were the best person to speak, but I had, after all, spent the first forty years of my life totally immersed. I'd come from a long line of nineteenth-century pioneer ancestors converted in Wales, England, Denmark, even Massachusetts and Illinois. Some of these hardy forebears had bumped across plains in Conestoga wagons, some had pushed handcarts and worn out their shoes, but all had found something deeply invigorating about the idea of building the kingdom of God here on earth. It represented something to which they could give their lives, their all. As they traveled westward, their passion for God became even more thickly mixed with the blood that flowed through their veins and then into mine. Scratch my skin and you'd find a Mormon there.

I'd tried to disaffiliate myself from the religion, frustrated with its challenges to my wide-ranging intellect and my concern for how women's voices were underrepresented and often unrecognized outside the domain of homemaking. My childhood, my roots, tradition, the music, the community, even the language

and concepts of the cosmos, however, inhabited much too much of my sensibility for me to think I could make a clean break. I was certainly still Mormon enough to discuss the exotic faith with a group of curious New Yorkers.

The hostess and owner of this never-ending mansion on the side of a hill overlooking Deer Valley had opened her doors with grace. She'd shown my sister and me into her breathtaking home where old money spoke softly from the muted corners of every room. I noticed a copy of one of my books at each place setting, purchased as a favor for each guest. After introductions, I was immediately enamored with the savvy group and their anthropological sensibility: a willingness to learn, to listen, to actually treat Mormonism as a subject worthy of consideration. I'd been used to other responses—dismissing Mormons as a quaint weirdness of the other Wild West; decrying the way they sent out their young, naive, robotic missionaries dressed in funereal suits with those grim plastic nametags on the lapels; denouncing them as an insidious cult of long-john-wearing crazies with Stepford wives. When I'd "left" the Church years before, a well-known poet had asked me, "How can anyone as smart as you are still be a Mormon?" I'd surprised myself with the uncharacteristic sharpness of my response. "Do yourself a favor, and don't ask a dumb question like that." Very few outsiders understood the appeal or complex demands of living a life patterned after Christ's teachings in the alien Mormon format.

But there was an element of surprise that evening in Park City: the inclusion of four guests from Salt Lake—all of whom I'd known when I'd lived there from 1970 to 1990 and been involved with community voluntarism. One of the high-profile, prominent women was known for her voluble opinions about Utah culture and the ever-present majority population. The divide between Mormons and "non-Mormons" was a constant topic of newspaper editorials and *sub rosa* conversations, the substance of sniper remarks from both sides of the fence. I wondered if this group would be open to a fresh encounter with an all-too-familiar subject.

I'd become accustomed to a wariness around the fact of my Mormonism. I'd lived in Boulder City, Nevada, for the first eleven years of my life. In this small town of 4,000, my family lived among geologists, engineers, employees of the Bureau of Reclamation,

Veterans of Foreign Wars, Masons, Catholics, and members of the Grace Community Church, all employed in the construction and maintenance of Hoover Dam (Boulder Dam in those days). There were relatively few Mormons in town. Even though our family was what I thought of as regular as apple pie with one mother and one father and four kids in a tidy and a tiny white plastered house with red shutters—a true family of the '50s—my father, who'd served in the Navy in World War II, had instructed us children to keep our Mormonism to ourselves. "Too many people don't understand what the religion is all about. They have cockeyed ideas about who we are."

So we learned to keep a tight lip on the subject of our faith. We knew we were viewed as a "peculiar people," both internally and externally. We knew that our belief in Joseph Smith translating the Book of Mormon from gold plates, in his conversations with the Godhead and angels, in latter-day prophets who kept our religion current with God's desires and whom we were taught to obey as our consciences allowed, was something about which people could raise their eyebrows. And, of course, there was the ever-present topic of polygamy which everyone loved to seize with canine teeth and roll their eyes about, even though the Manifesto had withdrawn official permission for new plural marriages in 1890. I could appreciate the difficulty of the topic—both my paternal and maternal great-great-grandfathers had been polygamists—but these things could be skewed and twisted and turned in strangulating, frightful directions.

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I assess the smudged winter remnants on my windshield, almost dangerous for visibility. I need to get to a gas station after my shift and get the thing washed. Checking my watch again, I see that only one measly minute has passed. I'm rarely early, so this stretch of unfilled time is disconcerting, but I can't stop thinking of that palatial living room in that tastefully decorated mansion.

I spoke for thirty minutes on the history, the bare bones of the theology, and about the Mormon desire to build the kingdom of God on earth. I spoke of the cooperative experiment when everyone's crops were taken to the bishop's storehouse to be distrib-

uted to all. I spoke of the paradox of a hierarchical, patriarchal church that seemed monolithic to the outsider who wasn't informed of the deep regard for free agency. I spoke of the paradox of people who seemed so sure of their theology and yet who were also taught to seek individual answers from God and to continually search the scriptures and best books to perfect their knowledge. I spoke of how Joseph Smith, the original prophet, had expressed in his personal writings that "the first and fundamental principle of our holy religion is, that we believe that we have a right to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men, or by the dominations of one another"—and how this applied to all members, not just to men.[1]

The women seemed open-minded. They admitted that they knew little about the religion and seemed genuinely curious during the question and answer period. After five minutes of Q&A, the hostess raised her hand. "Why don't Mormons have dinner parties?" she asked, though too many other questions were also flying through the air, and I was beginning to despair of answering them all. Just as I was mentally formulating an answer to her what-I-considered-to-be-off-the-wall question, one of the women from Salt Lake City waved her hand impatiently.

I called on her, then realized she'd raised her hand to ask a question that wasn't a question. "You're not talking about the reality of the Mormons," she stood to say. "You're not talking about the rednecks from the rural part of the state who have no conception of separation of church and state, who take a lion's share of control over the legislature—the ones who vote for guns to be allowed on the university campus and think that by their very numbers they can run things however they see fit. You're not addressing the problems in education and in a fair representation of the opposing point of view." She was a prickly heckler from Hyde Park, parachuting into this Deer Valley living room and standing defiantly on her own soapbox.

"I wasn't asked here to address the problems," I said, trying not to be defensive, my familiar default position. "I was giving an overview of the culture and the theology. Of course there are problems, but that's a subject for another lecture."

I knew the problems well. I hadn't expressed my concern with

the Mormon claim of being "the only true church," a stance which often made me uneasy as it created an unnecessary divisiveness with other religions, or with the insensitivity that occurred when a few ill-mannered Mormon children in Utah taunted non-Mormon children for being blind to their truth. I knew Utah Mormons were used to being the majority and used to their own language and conception of right and wrong. I also knew they were caught up in the very busy and demanding world of their wards and stakes, inadvertently making the uninvolved feel peripheral. Worse yet, many nonmembers felt Mormons were only interested in them as possible converts, not as friends. Back in the '70s, I'd written about this split/rift/divide in "Culture Shock," an article for *Utah Holiday*. In it, I'd observed that a move to Utah challenged Mormon newcomers as well. But please . . . I wanted to say to that woman, Utah wasn't the first place in the world having to deal with majority versus minority. Consider Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, India and Pakistan, Northern Ireland, even Boston.

Lately, the fact that people seemed very sure about who and what Mormons were had become a source of irritation. I myself had played that game. For a time, I'd tried looking down my nose, not being native to the Utah culture, after all. I'd taken a sophisticated, "above it all" stance, and sniffed at young couples with overly large families using up educational resources without paying a fair share. There's no tax penalty for large families, and I'd heard that Utah traditionally hovered just above Arkansas at the bottom of state expenditures for education per child. I'd groaned over some of the legislative decisions and the liquor laws that seemed to ignore people who thought differently. But while I was living in Park City and gradually, almost subterraneously, reconsidering my roots, I'd also been coming to an awareness that I had an immature understanding of my religion and of Jesus Christ. He not only said, "Feed my sheep" and provided fishes and loaves, but was a source of solace and salvation I was only beginning to comprehend.

The hostess had raised her hand again. "Please tell us why Mormons don't have dinner parties. I really want to know."

"It's not that they don't have dinner parties," I began cautiously, still torn by the challenge from the heckler from Salt Lake, her words on the cusp of my mind. "Mormons are very social, ac-

tually, especially among themselves. Their entertaining, however, is done on a practical level as they're very busy with their families and church service." I stalled, trying to stay focused, trying not to short out from the demands on my knowledge and my position of being the authority on a complex subject. "They're busy taking care of the sick, the dying, baking potato casseroles for funeral dinners, working at canneries, going to temples to renew covenants and honor their ancestry by unbinding the knotted links in the genealogy of the world."

My words began to feel as though they were whirling, going nowhere, unintelligible. "Also, Mormons don't drink alcoholic beverages. Sumptuous dinner parties usually presuppose a familiarity with fine wines. While some Mormons have no objection to either providing wine for their guests while drinking none of it themselves or telling their guests to bring along what they want to drink, this still makes for an awkward dinner party."

As I saw a jungle of hands being raised, including the hand of the Hyde Park heckler, I felt hunted. I didn't want to stand up there anymore. I'd subjected myself to old wounds in my psyche long enough. I'd left this religion. So why had I accepted the invitation to speak to this group of women, defending it, wanting them to understand something even I'd said didn't matter?

"I'm sure I've taken more than my time," I finally said. "Thank you for inviting me here tonight and for your interest. If you have further questions, feel free to talk to me afterwards." And as I drove home with my sister, I vowed not to accept that kind of invitation again.

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There's still five minutes before I'm due to sign in at the cannery and stash my belongings in a locker. I might as well close my eyes for at least three of those minutes. I could turn on the Herbie Hancock CD again, but I'm not in the mood. I roll down my window a smidge because the magnifying-glass sun's almost burning my shoulder. The cool breeze helps.

A few summers after my speech in Park City, on a hot July day in 2004, I drove through Provo Canyon to Robert Redford's Sundance resort to hear the caustic columnist, Molly Ivins, speak.

I wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of her tongue, though I suspected she wasn't a total sidewinder beneath the lingo. When I arrived at the Tree Room, I saw the Salt Lake woman who'd been so outspoken at the Park City dinner three years earlier. We exchanged greetings, though her response still burned hot in my memory. She'd seemed so dismissive, sure of her position, even arrogant, and I could be good at holding onto a grudge. I took my assigned seat which, I was relieved to see, was not next to hers.

After a sumptuous brunch where prime rib was sliced onto plates next to a selection of opulent fruits, vegetables, sauces, and puff pastries, the crowd quieted to hear a speech from the lively Molly. Touring to promote her latest book, *Who Let the Dogs In?*, she took us on a brief, wild ride to visit the unruly characters in politics, including the top dog known as Dubya. Afterward, she asked for questions. A man raised his hand and asked, "Is Karl Rove an undercover emissary for the Mormon Church in Washington, D.C.?"

"Hell, no," she said. "He goes to some Presbyterian church, something like that, and doesn't have anything to do with the Mormons. Where'd you get that idea?" Then my mouth dropped open in astonishment as she continued: "And furthermore, I think people say things about the Mormons they'd never say about a Jew or a Catholic or whatever they are. There's a lot of disrespect."

Molly Ivins said that? And the Hyde Park heckler heard it, too? *Yes*. I wanted to raise a triumphant fist. *Yes*.

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I had no intention of "going back" to Mormonism when I bought a house in Salt Lake City in December of 2002. I'd lived in the city from 1970 to 1990. My first husband and I had raised our three sons here before moving to Colorado and into a divorce. But I'd been living in sharp contrast to Mormon beliefs for almost twenty years. In one of my cross-country moves after my divorce in 1997, I tried largely non-Mormon Park City to be closer to my younger sister but not too entangled in my religious roots. Then I impulsively married a local man trying to right the ship. The marriage lasted twenty-one months and was devastatingly disappoint-

ing. Not knowing where I belonged, I moved back to Salt Lake to be close to old friends and well-established networks. I needed something when so much else seemed to have failed.

But after ten months of hiking and biking and sometimes attending other churches on Sunday mornings, one day I smelled winter coming, the end of the crisp autumn days. I noticed the change in the light. Sunday mornings had become like other people's Saturday nights for me. The dawning of the Sabbath had always meant it was time to get ready for church. A lifetime of that habit had made its indelible mark. I often felt restless in those early hours.

On that particular Sunday, a neighbor, another divorced woman named Belle, called to invite me to sing in the ward choir with her. "Singing is good for the soul," she said, probably hearing overtones of depression in my voice. On a whim, I decided to go along, possibly influenced by my readings of Carl Jung and the Dalai Lama who both spoke of reclaiming one's roots. After all, I could keep to myself in the choir and not get caught up in the rigmarole of having a calling or answering questions about my worthiness for a temple recommend. I did love music and the chance to sing. But after a few weeks, when we were told we'd actually be singing in sacrament meeting, the game plan changed.

Walking into that meeting by myself, walking into that lair of "happy families" sitting shoulder to shoulder on the benches, felt like walking the gauntlet—a self-conscious sinner returning to the chapel with a sign around her neck: "I am alone. I'm not with my family. I'm not like the rest of you anymore."

I walked tall, acting proud, pretending immunity to this all-too-familiar setting with the organ playing prelude music and people chatting amiably before the meeting. I'd known what it was like to sit, another mother hen, in this safe nest with my chicks at my side, their shoes shined and their hair combed, tucking them under my wing, urging them to think about Jesus during the sacrament rather than playing with Nintendo or drawing giraffes and tigers with crayons.

I walked toward the choir seats on the speaker's stand. I didn't look right or left, but took my seat hastily, feeling both shy and displaced. I could see little diversity in all of those trimmed, cut, and shaved Latter-day Saint faces. I took a deep breath to keep from

weeping in front of everyone. As I fought tears, I saw a man who'd been sitting behind me walking toward me. He held out his hand. "Hi," he said. "My name's Jim Pearce. I just want to say it's nice to have you here. My wife and I have heard you playing the piano when your windows are open and we've been out walking. We'd love to hear more sometime."

"That's nice," I mumbled, feeling as exposed as a snail without its shell. He had picked the perfect, right/wrong moment to approach me when my protective shell was not in place. Sometimes there are moments when things change, when there's an opening, a little shaft of light, a recognition, a moment when the guard is down and when the tide comes in with a wave that curves in a different way than any other wave before it. Jim could have approached me another time and our exchange would have been idle talk, but something about him or something about the moment and its timing caught me by complete surprise.

"I play the banjo," he added. "Maybe you'll accompany me sometime." Then it was time for the meeting to start. We nodded to each other, and he went back to his own choir seat in the tenor section.

The congregation sang the opening song, "Love at Home." I averted my face and tried to stay the tears, though they were coming fast. This was a song I'd sung many times. This chapel was my home, my childhood, my family. I surveyed the people when I dared through the wet veil over my eyes, not quite able to focus, but somehow seeing something more than the concrete wall of self-righteousness I experienced when I first walked in. Those were individuals out there, not just a brick wall of conformity. It wasn't fair to lump them into one monolithic unit designed to make me feel uncomfortable because I'd strayed from the path.

A few days later, Jim's wife, Virginia, called to ask if they could come by for a visit. I didn't quite know what to do with myself. After the meeting where the choir had sung, Belle told me that Jim's wife was the daughter of President Gordon B. Hinckley. I felt briefly like the duck girl from the village noticed by the daughter of the king. I'd grown up bearing my testimony of the gospel every first Sunday of the month, saying how I was grateful for a prophet to lead the church. As cynical as I was, I could still be im-

pressed, even touched, by the thought of having the prophet's daughter cross the threshold of my home.

During the following few years of living alone in Salt Lake City, Jim and Virginia were like two patient photographers waiting for a wounded animal to come out of its lair. They never prodded me with a stick. They helped me feel safe by saving a seat for me next to them on Sundays. I felt as if I could be myself and that I wouldn't be forced into anything. "We're not here to change you," Virginia said. "We like who you are."

Also during those years, Virginia, Laurel Olsen, and I had volunteered several times together at Welfare Square, one of the Church-related services I could render with no hesitation. We'd bagged bread in the bakery, catching slices after they passed through rows of sharp blades and easing them into a plastic bag. We'd helped package fruit drink powder on a day when another machine was acting up and granules of cherry-colored powder sprayed onto the floor, under our feet, so that when we walked we crunched. We'd toured the cheese factory and were told about Atmit, an indigenous Ethiopian porridge of oats, honey, and milk, reformulated by the Deseret Dairy from oat flour, powdered milk, sugar, salt, vitamins, and minerals. Six hundred tons had been shipped to Ethiopia in 2003 to aid children whose digestive systems had almost completely shut down. Given two tablespoons every two hours about eight times a day by a team of doctors, nurses, and other volunteers, the children graduated to something more substantial. Atmit had also been sent to Uganda, Israel, Sudan, Niger, Southeast Asia, Bangladesh, Chad, and the Gaza Strip.

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It's time for my shift at the wet pack cannery. Finally. I raise the back of the seat, grab my purse, and climb out of the car. A few strangers are gathered at the front doors, but no one seems to be going inside. Not in the mood to socialize just yet, I lean back against the cold metal of my car and fold my arms across my jacket. I'm living in Denver now, close to my three sons—the Wild Barber Bunch—their wives, the four grandchildren, and my first husband, David, who is, now that the battle cries have faded, a

good friend. I'm trying to work out what it means to be family again when Mother and Father aren't married anymore. But it's not bad. I love my sons too much to be away from them. It's satisfying to feel as if we're united again. I'm still going to church, though I sometimes feel peripheral, as if I were supposed to be at the center of something and am not. But then I remember how people can feel lonely, and isn't it the higher purpose to reach out and be a friend rather than wait for one to come?

The cold from the metal is seeping through my jeans, making my legs feel like ice, a wake-up call to go inside and practice welfare—something that benefits both the giver and the receiver. I'm happy to be here, even though I still feel like a stranger, maybe an imposter, in this role. But as I'm walking toward the glass doors, I think of how, just a week ago, I'd taken the bus to my office. That morning it seemed as though all of Africa was aboard, no one speaking a word of English, the aisles jammed with strollers, women with babies in their arms, tall, thin men. About five stops down the line, everyone disembarked in front of the New Covenant Church, which serves the Ethiopian Orthodox Church community. Africans dressed in white ceremonial robes sometimes linger outside the building on certain Sunday mornings. Before the bus started up again, a somewhat bedraggled Caucasian man boarded and sat behind me. I surmised he was en route to the VA Hospital not too much farther along the line, that he was probably a Vietnam vet. I'd met so many of them on the #10 bus line. "Must be some kind of a church meeting," I said to express my curiosity out loud, "but then, it's a Friday morning." "No," he answered. "They've probably come for food."

I gazed after the last of those Africans streaming across the street and entering the church. *Feed my sheep. The loaves and the fishes. Give them this day their daily bread. Feed them. Take care of their hunger, and you will be filled with Spirit.*

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Spirit shows its face in the most unlikely places and times. I first became acquainted with it as a child when I prayed to God, my Father and Friend. I trusted He would catch me if I fell, that He cared about my well being, that each creature was of His mak-

ing and therefore beloved by Him. Beneficence reigned beyond the staging of this world.

My father was the bishop of the Boulder City Ward, which met in an old wooden church building small enough to have been transported on wheels from the town of Henderson. I'd heard him talking about stranded travelers, to whom he'd given money and for whom he'd arranged shelter. I'd accompanied him on Saturday mornings as he directed the building of a brick chapel—because he was bishop, not because he knew the contracting business. Members of the ward came out to help, some of them knowledgeable about construction, most not. He was a good shepherd to his flock, a man who could be filled with Spirit as he tended to their needs for food and shelter as well as to those of their souls. Once, late at night, I overheard him talking to my mother after he'd been gone all evening.

"He shot himself in the head," I heard my father saying. "Do you have any idea what it's like to pick up the pieces of someone who's blown off his head?"

"He's lucky to have you, even if he's gone," my mother said.

"I wish I'd known he'd hit bottom," my father said. "I wish he'd at least have called me first."

* * *

And so it is that I'm moved to spend a day at the Aurora Cannery, one of a network of over 750 storehouses, canneries, thrift stores, and family services providers. I'm the first from my ward to walk through the doors for the morning shift. The manager directs me to a row of black rubber boots hanging upside down on poles to dry and warns me to be careful stepping over the orange and yellow hoses. Unsupervised, I meander through the facility, surveying large stainless steel baskets next to voluminous pressure cookers, cardboard boxes filled with Ball lids, a row of emergency buttons, a stainless steel table top with twenty round-hole cutouts at its edge.

The six women assigned to the round table, including myself, are short, tall, wide, hefty, wiry. They could be doctors, lawyers or Indian chiefs for all I know, their hair and most of their features hidden inside their gauzy shower caps. We stuff mounds of

ground beef into tin cans, then send them down the line where lids are sealed and pressure cookers steam. We laugh and make smart remarks. We're sisters. Three hours later, we clean the room with pressure hoses and pressurized hot water. There are squeegees to clean the floor, to push the water and remaining bits of ground beef into a drain in the center of the floor. When everything is spick and span and I've retrieved my purse, I take the outside sidewalk to the dry pack wing to check it out.

"Sister Carlson," her standard plastic name tag reads, is seated at a rectangle folding table in a cavernous warehouse. She greets me cheerfully. I ask her a few questions about the operation, and it's as if I've turned on a spigot. "Mesa, Arizona," she says with high enthusiasm, "has a huge welfare cannery with a monster truck packed and ready to go at all times. When a tornado, earthquake, or hurricane is being forecast, a truck will be on the road before the storm even touches the ground."

Resting her elbows on the table, she grins with delight: "Two churches were listed by the media as being the main source of help to those hit by Katrina, one of them the Mormon church, the other the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." She laughs a can-you-believe-it laugh. "The genius of this system is that there's someone to receive the goods on the other end who knows how to distribute and deliver them where they're needed."

I used to tire of what I considered to be a certain smugness, this Dudley Do-Right infatuation with one's goodness and accomplishments. Today, though, I respect her pride and dedication. Today, I don't feel separate from, above or below, Sister Carlson. Oh so subtly and gradually, I'm being folded back into the fold. I've given up resistance somewhere along the way.

As I depart for the parking lot, I read a poster in the foyer, something written by a Sister Jean Christensen while serving a Philippine mission: "Ultimately, I sense I have only . . . been whole when I've divided myself among those who needed me. I've only stood tall when I've stooped to help those that needed lifting." There had been a time when I'd have thought, "How saccharine. Give me a break, Mary Poppins," but today I set my cynicism aside. *To be saved spiritually, people need to be saved temporally. Feed my sheep. We are one. Love one another.*

As I drive away from the Aurora Cannery listening to Herbie Hancock's incomparable piano accompanying Corinne Bailey Rae who's now singing the title track "River" (about "coming-on Christmas" and the upset over lost love), I feel that vulnerable part of myself rising, the part that gets kidnapped by duality—like, is this the right way to live life or am I only kidding myself with unreal idealism? Mentally, I scan my emotional interior for that hard edge in myself, the dependable part that'll keep me from going too soft. Maybe jazz will save me. *Turn up the volume. Blow those horns.* "I wish there were a river I could skate away on," Corinne wails. But today I'm immune to the sadness those lines have elicited in the past. I've been there, done the blues, and, at this particular moment, I don't share that sentiment.

Note

1. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 415.