A Year of *Dialogue:* Thinking Myself *into* Mormonism

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The Green Library stacks are a study in contradictions.

Outside lies Stanford grandeur—three-story stucco architecture spread across multiple thousands of acres, perfectly manicured lawns and plant arrangements, arches, gates, fountains. The rest of Green Library shares that aura: airy rotundas with marble floors and booming ceilings, elegantly decorated study lounges with comfortable, oversized couches, crisp clean top-of-the-line Apple G5 computers, luxurious carpeting, and well-lit lines of bookshelves holding knowledge in tens of different languages.

In contrast, the stacks are cramped and stark. At six foot two, I'm constantly afraid I'll hit my head on the overhanging pipes and the sprinklers. Glaring fluorescent lights shine on the hard floors, and the occasional dusty computer looks to have been plucked from the turn of the millennium.

That's where I went wandering on a warm October day in my junior year of college, searching for some book on Mormonism. I had been baptized LDS a couple of months earlier, after a journey that started when a girl I was dating sent me a Book of Mormon and walked me through 1 and 2 Nephi.

We broke up, but by happenstance I ended up with a Mormon roommate the next year. And in a time when a cloud of darkness surrounded me, I ran across Joseph on his way to church. "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Rom. 7:19) would have been a pretty good description, if I had known the words then. He was late; and I made him later.

I kept coming back because of the fruits I saw: the tangible goodness of the people, the less tangible meatiness of the Book of Mormon, like the beauty of Lehi's vision.

It was the empiricism of Alma 32 and that "the glory of God is intelligence" (D&C 93:36)—aspects emphasized by the man who would eventually baptize me—that helped me see how such teachings could be true, even grand and wonderful. My occasional prayers to know whether this stuff was true grew in urgency. During one fast and testimony meeting, I received an answer: Feelings of peace and love for the congregation bubbled out of me, and for thirty minutes I could not stop shaking.

Back at Stanford, I was curious about something or another and resolved I'd go to the library. Ascending some solid, utilitarian metal staircases, I found the book I was looking for, but then my eyes were drawn to a wall of red covers of bound periodicals dating back forty years, dominating the Mormon section. On each red cover white letters spelled *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.

The journal, I soon read, had been co-founded forty years earlier by Eugene England and Wesley Johnson, then both Stanford professors. And, interestingly, Brother England had been in the bishopric of my ward.

I soon read other things. A lot of other things.

"How can I still call myself a member of this church?"

My journal of the time has been lost, but I vividly remember a maelstrom of emotions within a short time span.

The first and hardest-hitting was disappointment. I felt sad. Let down. Shocked. Wanting to close the book, to end the emotional barrage, at the same time being sucked in, trying to learn more and realizing that closing the book was not the answer.

In a corner on the third floor, I turned the pages of Lester Bush's articles about the priesthood ban and its racist origins and justifications. Others about baseball baptisms and inflated growth statistics in Latin America. Women, or the lack thereof, in the Book of Mormon. Mormon intellectual life and the September Six.

Emotions: estrangement, after an afternoon spent in the library reading *Dialogue*. I remember getting caught up in it and missing a Church activity, wondering, perhaps as a justification for not going, what the point was anyway.

I asked a few questions. On the one hand, I saw the point when the institute director explained why he didn't focus on his-

torical "bales of straw." On the other, that attitude assumed that Church teachings were correct in the first place.

It might sound silly, but I remember in particular an institute class on eternal progression. The director taught the opposite position, but to me, Eugene England's position (God is still progressing in knowledge) made sense and Bruce R. McConkie's official reprimand seemed overbearing, at the least.

The end result was a question that sometimes popped into my head around then, prompted by these turbulent emotions: "How can I still call myself a member of this church?" Especially embarrassment: The Litany of Embarrassing Stuff is probably longer for Mormons than members of other religions—certainly more immediate. Controversies over Muhammad's wives? That happened over a millennium ago, in a different culture. Joseph Smith's multiple wives? That was *yesterday*—in the 1840s, in *Illinois*.

Perhaps at this point, the conservative reader is getting the impression that interaction with less-faithful scholarship loosened my grip on the iron rod.

I'm sure it could have. But I don't think it did, partly because of my chosen reactions but mostly because of what I was reacting *to*—and what I came to realize after deep study.

Shaping a story.

I may be a bit wet behind the ears, but seven months full-time as a journalist gave me a bit of experience in recognizing and consciously articulating narratives, stories people tell that make a series of events coherent.

In political crises, old political structures vanish. "The actions that are then taken," Milton Friedman said once, "depend on the ideas that are lying around."[1] When personal crises occur, when life throws us unfamiliar data points hard and heavy, our old narratives, too, fragment, reform, and crystallize—usually in the pattern of one of the ideas we have lying around. At such times, we form narratives whether we are trying to or not.

I needed a narrative.

My parents, accepting but opposing strongly my conversion, offered me one, sending me anti/post-Mormon literature. The critiques contained were constructed along historical and secular

humanist lines. They delve into any of the above events and say something like the following:

"I used to be a believing Mormon. Then I learned the truth about Mormon history. I saw how the lens of faith had warped my worldview, clouding my vision of what should have been in front of my face. So I decided to seek truth by leaving the Church, even though it was painful."

For example: after detailing at length his personal investigation into Mormon history and subsequent departure from the Church, Chris Morin writes: "Scientific theories, which I had previously refused to consider, suddenly became credible, thus completing the demolition of my view of eternity. . . . Using faith and hope to determine truth failed me miserably in the past. Now I feel compelled, by experience, to base my beliefs on evidence and reason. . . . Earlier in our lives, [brother Brad and I] had felt compelled to justify our religious beliefs when we encountered a contradiction. Now we hope to let encounters with truth reshape our views, rather than try to force the facts to fit our faith."[2]

The Morins' narrative is filled with anguish. Sadness over their lost faith, over relatives' misunderstanding, knee-jerk anger, the severing of family ties, accusations that their estrangement is driven by sin.

This type of narrative—perfect illustrations of Friedman's thesis—was lying on the floor, ready for me to pick up and make my own. *I guess I didn't realize what I got myself into. Eek! Let me get out before I get in too deep.*

I'm glad this narrative wasn't the only one.

Crucially, through the confusion and sadness, I knew I had still tasted sweet fruit. Most certainly, I wanted it all to make sense. Family home evenings were a refuge from the constant beat of school. When I went to the temple to do baptisms for the dead, I saw my fellow ward members looking like angels.

And yet, I knew I needed everything to fit together. While all this was going on, I emailed Church friends saying that there was a "whole host of considerations that I've temporarily set aside because of my experiences" and noted that "eventually, my faith will have to encompass and comprehend everything I know about the world, not just what I learn in church."

And so learning about historical issues, including what was on offer in *Dialogue*, was just creating more problems.

But the way I found out of this swamp turned out to be the way in: a thoughtful examination of what Mormonism *is*.

The narrative I came to might be called "informed and faithful." It sounds something like this, plucked from the website of amateur apologist Jeff Lindsay: "I recognize that the Church has plenty of those pesky mortals in it, even running much of it, and that means errors and problems and embarrassments from time to time. OK, I can't give my full endorsement to every historical event and statement and practice over the years, neither in modern Church history or the Biblical record, for that matter. But I do think we have some amazing things that the world should know about, especially *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*. Got one?"[3]

This approach seems to consist of two basic propositions: (1) Mormonism has historical flaws and embarrassments, but (2) it really does have the truth and goodness it claims. For me, coming to this type of perspective started with reading the historical literature—the apologetics on both sides.

Still, while apologetic arguments giving context and explaining were helpful, for me they only got halfway. They seem largely a defensive tactic. Rarely in themselves do they show strength.

I found chiasmus, Nahom, and explanations of the Utah War helpful, but they still had to contend against divining rods, polygamy, and Mountain Meadows.

But over time, another non-obvious fact became clear to me. The same search process by which I found the problems of Mormonism also helped me feast upon doctrines that continue "to enlarge my soul; to enlighten my understanding; to be delicious to me" (Alma 32:28).

Of the myriad blog posts and articles, and occasional books, some stand out:

1. Blake T. Ostler on how (perhaps only) Mormon assumptions about uncreated humans give human agency teeth.[4]

2. Eugene England, on the application of this agency: how a God who weeps for lost children but cannot interfere with their freedom to reject His love explains evil.[5] I already delighted in:

"For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things" (2 Ne. 2:11); this was more good fruit.

And any number of thoughtful commentators—especially Brother Ostler—on how concepts like faith, works, grace, salvation, theosis, covenants, sin, moral law, justice, and mercy are powerfully illuminated by the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's teachings.

Like most people, making myself reflect the ideas I believe requires models. I need someone I can identify with. Ideals are too abstract.

Ex-Mormons provide one possibility. They often remember from their days as Church members rigid stances that were unresponsive to and disengaged from different ideas. "At the time, no combination of words could have turned my convictions," wrote Brad Morin. "My uncompromising zeal closed all avenues for discovering the error in my beliefs. I refused to question."[6]

They also often recall the pride of Church members that incompletely masks disdain and insensitivity for non-Mormons. Brad recalls: "I once took great pride in Mormons and their goodness. I bristled whenever I heard someone criticize Utah Mormons." Chris described his wife's distress when her nonmember parents were excluded from their temple wedding: "I thought to myself . . . given that they had not accepted the gospel that could make their family an eternal family, then surely our wedding could not be important to them."[7]

Again, this is one model for viewing Mormonism. But it's not the one I ended up adopting. Rather, I found myself learning from Nephi's model: collective, self-examining repentance.

That principle of collective, self-examining repentance is perhaps the most important strategy I discovered in identifying with the "informed and faithful" narrative. It allows me to confront human flaws and embarrassments as part of identifying with the "informed and faithful narrative." I'm convinced that, though such repentance is never perfect in practice, it is still foundational to Mormonism.

On this, Margaret Blair Young's essay reflecting on the ban prohibiting priesthood ordination for worthy black men struck me deeply. In explicitly or implicitly addressing secular critiques of Mormonism, the first step must be, as Sister Young implicitly

does, to acknowledge the point of such critics. *Yes, it is logically possible to believe with zeal falsehoods propagated by leaders.* But acknowledging this is not the same thing as ignoring overwhelming evidence that the Church's main claims are false. Instead, it could mean that we are simply putting our stock in false beliefs that Church leaders are infallible, or that everything Church-related will be straightforward, neat, tidy, and clean.

Sister Young recalls the irony of a racist seminary teacher who believed that, after his many righteous years, he earned freedom from temptation:

> I've wondered if he ever grasped his self-deception, if he ever realized that the most dangerous, most tenuous place of all is an enclosed system where all things are set and known—or pretend to be so.
>
> The inertia invited by a desire for absolute certitude and closure is either the setting for the second law of thermodynamics—the tendency towards chaos—or it is simply death.[8]

Reading that reflection of Sister Young, I felt some words of Nephi become real to me. I remembered that the ancient prophet had dished some choice language at enclosed systems—or, at least, proponents of one type: "Wo be unto him that shall say: We have received the word of God, and we need no more of the word of God, for we have enough! Yea, wo be unto him that saith: We have received, and we need no more! For thus saith the Lord God: from them shall be taken away even that [wisdom] which they have" (2 Ne. 28:27, 29, 30).

Only a few verses earlier in the same chapter, Nephi had cautioned his readers against taking the erroneous position: "All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well" (2 Ne. 28:21). This is how we are "pacified" and "lulled away into carnal security," with the result that Satan will lead us "carefully down to hell" (2 Ne. 28:21).

Now, maybe I'm missing Nephi's point. But he seems to be saying: it's the same self-satisfied complacency, being "at ease in Zion" (2 Ne. 28:24), that motivates both of these errors. This complacency makes us assume we have all the Word we need; this complacency makes us assume all is fine and dandy in the Kingdom.

Note that such a self-satisfied complacency opposes both

points of Lindsay's "informed and faithful" narrative. It refuses to acknowledge problems, and similarly—at least according to Nephi—deprives us of the truth we do have.

Returning to Sister Young's piece, she smacks me over the head by making a similar point with a different Book of Mormon passage. "If opposition has ceased and self-examination has ceased," she writes, "then growth has ceased."[9]

To expand on that: Lehi explains at length that, without the ability to be enticed by and choose between good and evil, "all things [would] be a compound in one," and "if it should be one body it must remain as dead, having neither life nor death, happiness nor misery" (2 Ne. 2:11).

So Lehi says a world without choice and struggle is "as dead"; and Nephi says that people who proclaim falsely that all is well—perhaps assuming all choices and struggles have departed—are being led to spiritual death. Embracing this perspective, shaped by uniquely Mormon scripture, has helped me come to terms with another tic.

I sometimes restrain myself from frustration or impatience at various things I hear in church. I'm sure that sentiment is universal, even if the personal triggers of annoyance differ. For me, those include (what I perceive as) ill-phrased or ill-mannered proclamations that everyone will eventually convert, or testimony of divine providence that seems to disregard agency.

But the above perspective helps determine when to raise a hand or apply a mental filter: if others' statements seem to promote collective complacency. This was reinforced for me when I read another *Dialogue* article.

In "Good Literature for a Chosen People," Eugene England notes that we see ourselves, like Israel, as a chosen people—but don't always realize the implications.

Brother England details what he calls "the Amos strategy": a prophet who, at the height of the chosen people's self-satisfied judgment of others, turns the judgment of God on them. Brother England gives as an example a sermon by President Spencer W. Kimball, which uses this strategy to rebuke the Saints for having absorbed the surrounding culture's materialism and militarism. Then Brother England continues:

[In the] Amos view, . . . being chosen means being the ones known and taught by the Lord and, thus, the ones most responsible to keep his commandments and be punished if one does not.

It does not mean being better than others, by definition more righteous and blessed. It does not even mean knowing the correct forms of worship and having special priesthood power to perform them as the core of one's religion.

The Lord makes this painfully clear by saying, through Amos, "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts."[10]

So, why didn't I take up the post-Mormon narrative? At least partly because embarrassing stories look different through the definitely Mormon lenses I found in *Dialogue*.

If pride and ease in Zion led the Morin brothers to look down on their neighbors; if the racist seminary teacher certain of his righteousness was really just saying he had "received, and need[ed] no more"; if it is because we think "chosen" means "more righteous and blessed" that we jump to circulate falsely attributed stories about being generals in the war in heaven, we must ask ourselves a question.

Are we willing to own up to our failures to keep the Lord's commandments? I mean not just each of us individually, but we as a people?

Certainly—as in personal repentance—there is a balance between refusing to admit wrongdoing, and going overboard. On the one hand, it is hard to change practices if you refuse to admit fault. On the other hand, it's possible to get so wrapped up in admitting fault that you refuse to acknowledge and benefit from your strengths.

It's a hard balance to keep, and I don't know where it is personally—let alone institutionally. But I do know that the collective, self-examining repentance involved is fundamental to Mormonism. And though we may not speak in terms of collective repentance, we understand both why and how we must do it.

In the October 2008 general conference, after recalling the failure of early Saints to establish Zion in Missouri, Elder D. Todd Christofferson cautioned us against judging them too harshly, because "we should look to ourselves to see if we are doing any

better. 'The Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them' (Moses 7:18). If we would establish Zion in our homes, branches, wards, and stakes, we must rise to this standard."[11]

The message I take from Nephi and Lehi, from President Kimball and Elder Christofferson, from Brother England, Brother Lindsay, and Sister Young is this: We are a chosen people, but only because we "stand on the shoulders of giants." Jesus Christ told Joseph Smith that the ministers of the time "draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (JS–H 1:19). We are "chosen" because latter-day revelation teaches us the process by which we may draw near with our hearts.

The main problems with Mormonism, I've come to believe, stem from the fact that too often, our hearts are—and my own heart is—still too far from the Lord.

That's my narrative.

Notes

1. Quoted in Tyler Cowen, "Shock Jock," *New York Sun,* October 3, 2007, http://www.nysun.com/arts/shock-jock/63867 (accessed January 3, 2009).

2. Brad and Chris Morin, *Suddenly Strangers: Surrendering Gods and Heroes* (Chula Vista, Calif.: Aventine Press, 2004), 190–93.

3. Jeff Lindsay, "JeffLindsay.com—The Cracked Planet: Humor, Education, Mormons and Mormon Studies, Science, and Eclectic Items from Jeff Lindsay of Appleton, Wisconsin," http://jefflindsay.com/index.html (accessed December 15, 2008).

4. Blake T. Ostler, EXPLORING MORMON THOUGHT series (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books). Vol. 1: *Attributes of God* (2001); Vol. 2: *The Problems of Theism and the Love of God* (2006); Vol. 3: *Of God and Gods* (2008).

5. Eugene England, "The Weeping God of Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2002): http://content.lib.utah.edu/u?/dialogue,28651 (accessed December 15, 2008).

6. Brad and Chris Morin, *Suddenly Strangers,* 168.

7. Ibid., 59, 42.

8. Margaret Blair Young, "Essay for June 9, 1998," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1999), http://content.lib.utah.edu/u?/dialogue,9612 (accessed December 15, 2008).

9. Ibid.

10. Eugene England, "Good Literature for a Chosen People," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1999), http://content.lib.utah.edu/u?/dialogue,9578 (accessed December 15, 2008).

11. Elder D. Todd Christofferson, "Come to Zion," *Ensign,* November 2008, http://lds.org/conference/talk/display/0,5232,23-1-947-13,00.html (accessed December 15, 2008).