

Buildings

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Our new, low, brick ward building is about a mile from my house. It's an easy walk there, on clean, neat sidewalks, through a young development of nearly identical ranches and split-levels in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. Yet most of the time we drive there—to save time, I suppose. Primary is on Tuesday afternoons. We also receive the sacrament in Primary on Sundays, or Junior Sunday School, as it was known then, separate from the “big” sacrament meeting.

My mother writes a story in my baby book (although I'm no longer a baby) that after one morning meeting, I went home with another family for lunch. On the way back to church for the afternoon meeting, they asked me if I would want to sit with them, or with my family. I explained in all seriousness that I must sit with my own family. They told me there may not be room on the bench, to which I replied the obvious: that with one person missing there will be a hole on the pew where my family sits and so of course there will be room. It is from this story that I realize my memories extend back to before the consolidated schedule. The mile drive from home is no hardship for my family, but for many families who live—as we do—in what Utahns persist in calling “the mission field,” Sunday is an all-day affair and gasoline is expensive in the early 1970s.

With the new building, its crisp rust-colored carpet and dark paneling marking it as a loving creation of that least stylish of decades, my family becomes a sort of pioneer. The building is new, the ward is mainly young families, the area is rapidly changing from farmland to suburban tract housing. My dad, in his mid-thirties, is a member of the bishopric. One Sunday, he conducts the meeting and asks for a show of hands for someone's calling. Then, “Any opposed?” he asks, the pro forma question which does not really invite a response. A child in my Primary class—the “bad kid” in the class—raises his hand high. My dad looks down from the pulpit, smiles a little, and says, “We'll ignore that.”

Once a year, the ward holds a “corn bust” in a local park. It in-

volves a corn-shucking contest, all the corn on the cob you can eat, Frisbee playing, three-legged races, and the like. The heat and humidity make everything wilt and shimmer. I'm amazed at how fast the grownups shuck corn and how fiercely they compete.

The aerobics craze hits; the Relief Society starts an aerobics class at church once a week. It must be in the summer, because I remember attending and trying along, doing doggy-kicks to Captain and Tennille's "Love Will Keep Us Together" in the gymnasium.

I remember my Merrie Miss leader conducting personal progress interviews, so I must be about ten. I shyly confess to her, since this is a private setting, that I think I was born in the wrong century. I long to live in the nineteenth century, all those petticoats and trims. I have been poring longingly over the old issues of *Godey's Lady's Book* which the public library keeps in a locked cabinet, but which they will unlock and release to a polite and persistent child. My leader stares. Then she comments incredulously, "But they had to wear black wool stockings in the summer." *Fine by me*, I think. When I pick beans in the family vegetable garden, I wear a dress-up pioneer dress and an apron.

Sunday School class, age thirteen. It's a large class. The ward has grown. We have filled the building to capacity. Our classroom must meet in the center of the gymnasium inside a carpeted portable cubicle. It's noisy, distracting. Our class is large and rowdy, even rude. We are trying the teacher's patience week after week. He must have decided to try something drastic. He hands us each a letter to read in silence. It explains that he cannot go on teaching us in the usual way. He would like us to consider trying an experiment instead, an experiment on the Word. He invites us to make the gospel real in class. I don't remember the details, or even whether the culture of the class changed. I do remember that he punctured the placid complacency of same-old Sunday School, and that he addressed us as moral agents who were making dangerous choices. I remember that his pain and his frustration came through clearly in the letter—that he felt he was failing to reach us. I found that admission rather shocking, even a little terrifying.

I'm on a youth temple trip at the Washington DC Temple. I'm perhaps fourteen or fifteen. I'm sitting in the waiting line, swing-

ing my feet which don't touch the floor. The air is chlorine-heavy and warm, the splashing is muffled, my friends are quietly whispering. I notice a woman standing there, on the edge of the font. She's more visible in my peripheral vision than when I look straight at her. She is simply standing there, watching the font. She stands there until a certain name is read. I feel that name like a jolt. Then she is gone.

My second ward building was the brick chapel on Longfellow Park in Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I arrived at MIT in the fall of 1988; my parents dropped me off at my temporary dorm for Rush Week—choose housing, fraternities, take nighttime campus tours through the hacker tunnels, make major decisions all in one overwhelming week before classes begin. I remember a sudden sense of panic that I hadn't gone to BYU. How would I find someone to marry? I did not have long to worry.

My new ward was chockful of bright, good-looking, earnest, edgy, talented people. The talks were erudite works of literature. The Gospel Doctrine lessons openly mocked the insipid Church manuals. The activities calendar was one eternal round, with something for everyone, any night of the week. The building hummed with events, dances, institute classes, volleyball tournaments. Every Sunday after church, for two dollars, you could eat a meal—homeless people came through the line along with Harvard and MIT students whose dorms didn't serve dinner on Sundays. The ward was divided into districts and each took a turn preparing the meal.

In mid-fall, I was asked to coordinate the Thanksgiving meal. I'd never cooked a turkey in my life. I was in the thick of my first semester at MIT, nearly drowning in the blast from the "firehose," and this calling felt monumentally hard. Yet somehow I pulled it off—met new people and delegated to them, borrowed cars, learned where the Haymarket vegetable stalls were, bought birds, mashed potatoes. Those meals became a punctuating rhythm to my church attendance and service.

There was always music involved. I remember one evening a group of four college women looked for space in the fridge for leftovers. We stood shoulder to shoulder, gazing into the shelves meditatively. Someone started singing, "Nearer, My God, to Thee" and we picked up the harmonies, weaving and improvis-

ing. Suddenly we realized we were singing into the open fridge, and we cracked up laughing until we fell over, gasping.

The chapel had one long wall of tall, mottled-glass windows that let in light but only suggested what lay beyond. Behind the pulpit, a huge circular-paned window dominated the wall, veiled the leaves outside, invited light. I sang in many choirs in that building. We sang difficult, complicated music, boundary-pushing music, orchestrated by musicians of unusual quality. One stands out, a performance of a lengthy and complex arrangement of "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief." The choir director, Elise Phelps, was a sylvan redhead, elegant, whose silk blouse had French cuffs fastened with little navy blue buttons. I remember that she was transported by the emotion of the words, transported to tears while conducting, lit by the transcendent light from the circular window behind us. I thought she looked as Jesus must have on the Mount of Transfiguration: "His face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light" (Matt. 17:2).

In spring, my district prepared a video for the ward's contest. We had one afternoon to make it, so we could not edit the film. It had to be made in sequence, just stopping the camera between scenes. It was the decidedly low-tech offering from a group of overworked MIT students without access to any technology except the camera itself. We met at the chapel, each bringing a couple of vegetables. We had a vague idea we'd make a spoof of CNN News, calling it VNN News, the Vegetable Network News. We thought up skits on the spot. One imitated the sportscaster for the Boston Celtics, calling the plays on the basketball court. We made several commercials. We broadcast live from various places in the building. I think I was "Corny Chung" and my friend Brian Eastley was "Dan Radish."

For our closing skit, we went outside, down across Longfellow Park, across Memorial Drive, to the steel guardrail that ran along the bike path next to the Charles River. Traffic whizzed past. We chose a particularly large tree along the path, right next to the guardrail. I narrated the scene, reading from 1 Nephi 8, Lehi's dream of the tree of life. The overspreading tree, the iron rod leading to the tree, the river of filthiness alongside. The dazzlingly white fruit? Our only white edibles were big onions. We

elected Dave Barrett to play Lehi and instructed him to pluck the white fruit from the tree. It was obvious on camera that it was an onion, but he bit into it with brave determination, giving a masterful impression that it was sweet beyond all that was sweet.

It was in that building, about a year later, that I washed lasagna pans after one of the church dinners with a good-looking, funny surgical resident, Don Hangen. We were in a hurry, because a friend, Kristine Haglund—who had been in charge of that night's dinner—had invited a group of us to attend a sing-along of Haydn's "Lord Nelson Mass" down the street at the Longy School of Music, and we were eager to go. The conversation with Don over the dishes turned to fast-paced banter and movie quotations. Within a week we were dating. By October, we were something of a couple. No one was fooled when we sat next to each other in church, folded our arms reverently for the prayers, and linked fingers under our folded arms. The Halloween dance was coming up, disco ball, costumes, soundtrack by Fine Young Cannibals and Dead or Alive. We decided to make something of a public announcement—a bold move in a singles ward in which speculation about couples was a full-time hobby. We went as Velcro. He was "fuzzy" with a rugby shirt striped with the stuff, and I was "sticky" with a shirt similarly striped with the opposite side. After slow dances, we made a satisfyingly loud ripping sound as we pulled apart. We got engaged over Thanksgiving break.

After we were married, we moved over to the Cambridge First Ward, the "married" ward in the same building. The unit embraced a small deaf branch and a Mandarin branch. Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking units met in overlapping schedules with the singles ward and the married ward. Haitian converts were among our newest and most sincere members. One Haitian woman paid her tithing by giving the church a carpet-cleaning machine. Relief Society hour was palpably charged with emotion, an invisible but immovable dividing line between stay-at-home-wives-of-graduate-students and women-getting-their-own-advanced-degrees. I remember awful, awkward, weeping, angry lessons. The intense atmosphere was like the air before a thunderstorm. Conservatives and liberals, each highly defensive and in the throes of their own self-identity crises, hurled charges and counter-charges. Lightning

bolts of the Spirit sometimes, cathartically, struck during meetings, mercifully followed by the loving, steady rain of tears.

My husband was called as bishop, the first one not to be called away from the “family” ward in Belmont but to be called from within the ward itself. During his time as bishop, a young member of our ward, Daniel Von Dwornick, found out he was HIV positive. Eventually he came home with hospice, a hospital bed set up in their third-floor walkup apartment, his wife handling everything with grace and grief, and a steady stream of meals and visitors. We had a special training session at the church to give volunteers medical protocol for helping the family. I remember that one task I did often was to walk the couple’s little terrier around and around the neighborhood near the church. I remember that one day in the midst of the usual chaos in the apartment, the Relief Society president came running up the stairs, charged through the door, unplugged the constantly ringing phone, and plugged her own answering machine into the wall so his wife, Ruby, could finally begin to screen her many calls.

The Boston Mission offices moved from Cambridge to Belmont in those years, vacating a large suite on the ground floor. Part of it—the prettiest part with the low bay windows—my husband turned into the nursery. The other part became a family history library, which I helped stock and staff, as people wandered in off the street, in search of themselves and their stories.

In the summer of 2008, the building had a fiftieth reunion. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich headed up a committee to collect memories, document the building’s past, and sponsor a series of events around the building’s significance in the Mormon diaspora, the Cambridge community, and the growth of several generations of Boston-educated Mormons. I strolled the halls, peering at the photographs. Some of my own memories felt too raw to process, although we had moved one stake over and had been away for over ten years.

In May of 2009, I felt that umbilical cord tying me to the Cambridge chapel tighten and tug. We had one of those new-fangled, slightly awkward broadcast stake conferences from some studio room in Salt Lake. Afterwards, someone came up to me and my husband, with a photo on his iPhone that had been sent by his

son, who attends the Cambridge Ward. The building was in flames. Oddly enough, it started during the broadcast. Apparently it began in the attic, below the roof, and the building burned from the roof downward. Since it was a broadcast, everyone was in the chapel on the ground floor. No one was in the second-story classrooms. Everyone got out. Some of the paintings were salvaged, as were some of the institute's books and papers; I heard that after the fire was out, a line of intermingled Mormons and Quakers made a bucket brigade across the lawn from the chapel to the Friends meetinghouse, and handed books down the line for safekeeping in the Quaker building. That afternoon I called Kristine and we cried on the phone together.

It's a little like the death of a person, the sudden loss of a sacred building. The tangible reality—the organ and the piano and the hymnals and the chalkboards and the pipes and the walls, the furniture and the layers of paint—ascended to heaven in billowing black smoke. For me, it's the building where my childhood faith became something more complex, where it was forged and refined, tested, found wanting, and nourished. It's where I laid myself on the altar. That it has turned out to be a burnt offering strikes me as biblical, as oddly resonant with stories of the pillar of fire and the tabernacle in the Old Testament. It reminded me of Joseph Smith's curious account of the dedication of the Kirtland Temple: "The people of the neighborhood came running together (hearing an unusual sound within, and seeing a bright light like a pillar of fire resting upon the Temple), and were astonished at what was taking place" (*History of the Church* 2:428). I think it's their same astonishment which I feel most often—at the convoluted, densely woven web of experience in my own life, which is part of some larger, dimly perceived tracery. I am surrounded by tendrils of human connection, buoyed by the mundane physicality of churches, blood, flesh, and food—and occasionally transfigured from the light in the circular window.