THREE SEALINGS

Stephen Carter

My mother made spiral-bound books for the first few of her nine children: pastel-colored accounts (which she wrote, illustrated, and laminated) of how we had made our way from the spiritual realm to the mortal; how we became part of our eternal family, sealed together and destined for the celestial kingdom.

Gray and peeling from the attention of our little fingers, these books were childhood prologues to the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine & Covenants, and a thousand family home evening lessons where we learned about how our family was part of an all-permeating story—stretching as far into the future as it did into the past. Our eleven-person unit was a small army, marching in righteousness toward salvation, never to be separated. Sealed by the power of the priesthood.

At the center of that story stood a six-spired building: the Salt Lake Temple. Its portrait hung on the living room wall, golden and regal—the place our parents had been married for eternity. That temple, or one of its cousins, was our destination, the place each of us would someday enter to begin our own eternal family, our kingdom becoming larger and larger as more and more children joined this great chain of beings.

I was the first in line, marrying my high school sweetheart in the Salt Lake Temple just a few months after I got home from my mission. David got sealed in the temple, too, as did Lia, Angeline, and Michael. Each time, the number of siblings in attendance grew.

But then came Maddy's wedding.

She's the youngest. A bright, hopeful private marching at the end of our family's ranks. By the time Maddy had reached her 20s, only three of our nine siblings were still going to church. As her wedding date

approached, as we booked plane tickets, as we planned her reception, we kept bumping up against a stubborn reality: most of us would *not* be attending her sealing. Most of us would be waiting outside the holy walls.

We had never been all together inside the temple, usually because some of us were too young to have received our endowments (the reason none of my siblings attended my sealing). But sometimes it was because one of us was off on a mission, or simply too poor to travel across the country.

But this time, it could have happened. All of us had managed to make it back to Utah for the event and could have been united in the House of the Lord—finally together the way we perhaps once were in the pre-mortal life.

But over the years, the nine of us had travelled in nine different directions: various lives propelled by various souls over an ever-shifting sea of circumstance. Though, as I mentioned, many of my siblings had been sealed to their spouses in the temple, by this time, David was divorced and civilly remarried, Lia had left the Church, and Angeline and Michael were both on their way out. It seemed that the only thing we shared anymore was a past, from which we carried our own array of memories and interpretations, treasures, and horrors.

When the wedding day came, a few of us followed the giddy bride and groom into the Mt. Timpanogos Temple, and the rest adjourned to a nearby restaurant to wait out the ceremony.

The temple is a pristine place, glowing with light from its stories-tall opalescent windows. Elderly men and women dressed in white are stationed throughout the halls, ready to direct uncertain souls to their proper rooms. The rooms themselves are silent—the susurrus of slippers and the flutter of whispered instruction being the only disturbances.

The first time I had been in this temple was during its dedication about eighteen years before. Noelle and I had been married only a few weeks and were excited to take part in such a unique ceremony. After delivering a few sermons, some apostles led us in the hosanna shout.

"Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna to God and the Lamb!" we cried as we waved white handkerchiefs above our heads. It was a ritual that had its beginnings in the dedication of Mormonism's first temple. Our enactment of the ceremony connected us with the many Latter-day Saints who had come before us.

As we waited for the bride and groom, Daniel and I sat on a cream-colored couch in an upstairs room—shoes removed, temple-booties donned. I was the oldest; Daniel was the third youngest. I had changed his diapers, spooned strained peas into his mouth, and introduced him to some of my mother's least favorite rock bands. Despite this initial closeness, we hadn't seen much of each other for a long time—maybe a decade. I had headed out on my mission when he was around six years old, and then married soon after returning. It didn't dawn on me that he wasn't a kid anymore until he came home from his own mission and started growing a beard.

So we began to talk, trying to find out who each other were after so much time. But a temple worker suddenly announced that it is disruptive to the spirit of the temple to cheer or clap when the bride and groom exit the temple doors after their sealing. All celebration should be carried out *away* from the temple where it is more appropriate. Then she moved our small group into the sealing room: Daniel, our parents, the groom's parents, my wife, and me. We made only a small dent in the sealing room's seating space.

A few minutes after Maddy and Ammon took their places at the front, an elderly man in a white suit came in and introduced himself. He was the sealer: the one empowered to bind on earth and in heaven. He delivered an informal sermon before starting the ceremony, talking about the covenants one makes in the temple. While he talked, I thought about my own sealing, years before: how an elderly man had also spoken and how I remember nothing of what he said. I wondered if Maddy and her future husband were as distracted as I had been.

But then we were all shocked to attention when the sealer warned everyone in the room that the definition of an unholy or impure practice—which temple-goers vow to forsake—includes anything one would not do in front of a room full of Primary children.

We blinked at him in amazement. Did he and his wife have children, we wondered? And if so, how had they brought them into the world?

After a few more words, the sealer began the ceremony. I struggled to clear my mind of his bizarre admonition and focus on the vows the bride and groom were making, on the way they clasped hands across the altar, on the way they looked into each other's eyes. I had come, after all, to be with them during this moment. This was about family, togetherness, and eternity.

At that moment, a mile or so away, the other two-thirds of our family had taken over a large, round table at the Blue Lemon. Though clean enough, the restaurant was not pristine. Its windows were only glazed. The cashiers and servers wore blue uniforms and took orders. Tiled walls amplified the chatter.

The scene was a version of what plays out at many Mormon sealings: those without temple recommends being relegated to the ceremony's periphery. But Ron, who hadn't gone to church since he left home at seventeen, looked around the table at his five disqualified siblings and shifted the entire scene in one sentence.

"I finally got my family back."

Ron had waited outside the temple during at least two sealings. He knew what it was like to watch everyone go inside. He knew what it was like to wait in the car. In many Mormon families, this would have been a table for one or two lonely souls. But the group sitting here was twice as big as the sibling group sitting inside the sealing room. This was where the warmth of bodies had coalesced.

Then a conversation unfolded: one that had never occurred before. Though each sibling had gone on his or her own journey and ended up in a different place, with different philosophies and experiences, it was

hard to talk about those journeys when the whole family was together. Could Lisa talk about bartending school without making some people uncomfortable? Could Ron talk about his death metal band whose name included a frowned-upon expletive? Could Angeline wear a tank top without eliciting side-glances? Not when Mormonism was there—and it was every bit as much a part of the family as anyone actually born into it. It was, in fact, the patriarch: presiding over every conversation, restraining its language, staring down non-conformity. But for these few hours at the Blue Lemon, that invisible family member was absent. And, for the first time, the majority of our siblings found out what it was like to connect with each other directly, rather than through their childhood religion.

I've probably misrepresented myself a little. It's true that I attended Maddy's sealing; it's true that I was an active member of the Church at the time—in fact, it's true that I still am. But my relationship with Mormonism is nothing if not fraught. Ron cut ties with the Church without a second thought the moment he ran away from home, but I was the first to question the Church itself. It's a story that has become commonplace with the advent of the Internet: boy reads outside the Church-correlated canon, boy has to wrestle with everything from polygamy to the racial priesthood ban; boy knows that if he says one thing about his reading and wrestling to his siblings and parents, they'll freak out, so he moves to Alaska and goes through a years-long faith crisis without any of them knowing it.

I never really came out the other end of that crisis—at least, not an end that I would have recognized during my orthodox years. Faith has become infinitely more complicated; as well as infinitely more simple. Translating my experience and beliefs (or lack thereof) into Mormon language is like trying to translate music into Morse code.

However, I hadn't realized how deeply this transition had affected me until I went into the Mt. Timpanogos Temple to see my sister get sealed. The feeling of alienation that hit as I walked inside stunned me.

Everything, from the building's sterility to the benevolently officious gaze of the temple workers to the sealer's oblivious sermon, left me cold and annoyed. Every possibility of connection seemed to get thwarted once we entered that building: We had to leave part of our family outside. Attempts at conversation were shushed. The musings of an old man we didn't know from Adam were deemed more important than anything a family member could have said to inaugurate this marriage. It seemed to me that the temple—its sealing rooms, its ceremony—was not about family; it was about itself. We were just grist for its mill. A batch of souls to process.

When my other siblings told me about their lunch together, I felt jealous.

~

Two sealings took place on Maddy's wedding day: one over a temple altar and one over a restaurant table.

But neither was complete. Our family was still divided.

And it would always be so if the mother-made books we had pored over and the many lessons we had listened to were to be believed. Family was held together by priesthood, temple, and belief. And since some of us didn't have all of them, none of us had any of them.

These promises of togetherness: what are they if they keep us apart during mortality? What are they if we can't be ourselves when we claim them? What are they if they can't reach beyond the edges of belief?

Our family is not perfect. It will never fit the Mormon mold. But it yearns to be together. This became apparent when Maddy started asking if there was anything special our family could do on her wedding day: something beyond toasting with fruit-punch at the reception. Something that was just ours.

I thought about her request for months. And one day while I was walking down an aisle at a Sunstone symposium, I saw something

that made me stop. Artist Jody England Hansen was selling decorated handkerchiefs she called prayer flags. Each bore fragments of an almost decipherable language and filigrees of intense colors. Though each piece was unique, their unity as a group was unmistakable.

They reminded me of my family.

On the morning of Maddy's wedding day, before she went into the Mt. Timpanogos Temple, our family met at a different kind of temple. One with no walls. Where trees grew. Where lovers made out. Where kids threw Frisbees. Where dogs pooped. We gathered—complete with our various hairstyles, skinstyles, lifestyles, lovestyles, and faithstyles—in a small grove of evergreens.

And then we built a ceremony, one we could all participate in without feeling as if we were infringing upon—or getting too close to—Mormon territory. Mormonism was not invited. Only we were.

Hands were important. Words were important. Differences were important. Love was important. Our ceremony couldn't be complete unless everyone was completely present.

I gave a decorated handkerchief to each family member, and then we asked Maddy and Ammon to stand in the middle of our semi-circle and hold each other's hand at waist height. In no particular order, each of us stepped up, draped their clasped hands with a handkerchief and wrapped their hands in ours. We each gave them a small blessing, one born of whatever priesthood we had cobbled together through our individual courses of illness and health, grief and joy, belief and doubt, brokenness and healing. This blessing was from someone who had always been single; this from someone divorced; this from someone decades married. Some of us said prepared words; others gave blessings off the tops of our heads. Some ended in tears, some in laughter, and all with a hug.

One was simply a quote: "And you know that time and gold were never meant to last, and when they fade someday, we're left with who we loved along the way."

Mormonism is right: families can be together forever.

But forever is now.

The temple worker had been right. The true celebration *had* happened away from the temple doors.

In a place made holy by family.