

## Our Dinner with Levi Peterson

*Ruth A. Starkman*

Levi Savage Peterson, the beloved and controversial Mormon writer, throws a quietly skeptical glance over his menu in a posh Palo Alto nouveaux-Middle Eastern restaurant on a recent evening in early June 2011. My partner, Russell A. Berman, of Stanford University, president of the Modern Language Association, and I had invited Peterson to speak about his work and his contributions as a “literary intellectual” in the American public sphere. On campus, Peterson had read selections from his work, answered some questions from an audience of young and adoring Stanford undergrads, most of whom were Mormon, and now was seeking some respite at dinner before the seminar that would follow on the second day.

The menu doesn’t seem to entice him.

This is the moment I have been awaiting for a long time: dinner with my beloved author, Levi Peterson. I have read all his works—his seminal *The Backslider* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), a comically profound story of a Mormon cowboy who wrestles with his doubt; his provocative biography *Juanita Brooks: Mormon Woman Historian* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988); a novel *Aspen Maroonery* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995); two compilations of short stories, and his recent autobiography, *A Rascal by Birth, A Christian by Yearning* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006). So thinking I know something about Levi Peterson and, having lived in Utah, about Mormons, too, I try to be reassuring about the exotic offerings.

“Levi, you’re a meat and potatoes guy.”

“I’m a meat and potatoes guy.” He obliges, still in a state of distraction.

“Then how about some steak and potatoes?”

“Maybe.” He fends me off.

At his side perches Althea Peterson, his wife of fifty-plus years, slight, brown-haired, whose large, blue doe-eyes rest on me with gentle but keen 20/20 vision. She has decided on a vegetable platter. Althea, a non-Mormon, or as described in the dialect of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a “nonmember” and thus a “gentile,” looks on patiently as Peterson makes his choice: a light halibut dish with vegetables, which he’ll share with his wife.

No alcohol, no coffee, though he had just told the seminar audience that he has for years been unable to obtain—one wonders if he has tried—a “temple recommend,” the official document signed by two high priests of his Church certifying that a Church member has sufficient Mormon worthiness to enter the temple, the secret/sacred ceremonial space of Mormon rituals. He informs us gamely that he has succumbed to the “demon of coffee” and “has been known to take a glass of wine now and then.”

But tonight his austere alcohol- and coffee-free light meal makes one wonder how similar Levi is to his troubled protagonist Frank from *The Backslider*, who, unlike Levi, is a believer deeply disturbed by what he imagines to be his own moral shortcomings. In one of Frank’s many stringent efforts to atone for his (imagined) excesses, he renounces his beloved steak, pork, buttered biscuits in gravy, and potatoes for his mother’s bland and very ascetic vegetarian diet.

Could it be that Levi Peterson, the strapping, jaunty, fearless jack-Mormon (jack = one who has lapsed) is also as strictly ascetic as his characters?

Remembering him from fifteen years ago when I saw him read in Ogden, Utah, where he was a professor (now emeritus) of English at Weber State, I now encounter a somewhat slighter seventy-eight-year-old Peterson. Still bearded and mustachioed, dressed in professorial corduroy jacket and khaki trousers, very much the cowboy writer from Snowflake, Arizona, with a light drawl to match, Peterson is also a vision of profound humility.

But such modesty is wholly unnecessary. This is the American writer of God, man, and the American West, who shaped Mormon literature, who edited the unorthodox journal *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* from 2004 to 2008, whose writing and life have inspired many readers, Mormon and not, to confront the

demons of humanity and examine existential doubt. No dark brooding, politically programmatic Sartre with an arid mockery of faith, nor a transnational Camus, Peterson is a local guy, an American writer of contemporary American literature as Kafka was for modernism, a writer of poetic yearning, who translates Kafkaesque despair (“there is hope but none for us”) into a tragic-comic (“there is hope, and maybe even for a rascal like me”). Most of Peterson’s readers find their faith affirmed by his depictions of the gulf between religious ideals and everyday practice. Others discover in Peterson a kindred spirit of a yearning nonbeliever, a sensualist with a twinkle in his eye for scandal. For Americans, who despite their daily voluptuary embrace of the culture industry, the questions of faith and belonging are central. Peterson speaks to those questions.

It is fitting that Peterson appears at Stanford University, where *Dialogue* was co-founded by his colleagues Eugene England and Wesley Johnson, and where he offers insight into a part of American culture that struggles with assimilation, identity, and self-understanding. Stanford University harbors a sizeable group of Levi Peterson fans: young and old, undergraduates and full professors, both members and nonmembers of the Church.

Yet even as he faces a eager audience, Peterson doubts his status as a “public intellectual,” wonders which audience he actually reaches beyond the liberal Mormon reading public. For him and his small group of liberal peers, the Mormon Church is an “authoritarian institution” in need of modernization and liberalization, as can be evidenced by what Peterson calls “the debacle of Proposition 8,” California’s ban on same-sex marriage, which was widely supported by the LDS Church.

His life has been a story of the larger questions of human existence. At the opening of his autobiography he introduces himself simply:

I will introduce myself with a few facts. I was born and raised in Snowflake, a Mormon town in northern Arizona. I have lived most of my adult life in the cities of the American West. Although I consider myself a religious person, I know very little about God. At first I intended this book to be about wilderness, but as I wrote it, it became an autobiography with many themes. Among these themes are

wilderness, my vexed and vexing relationship with Mormonism, my moral and emotional qualities, and my family.<sup>1</sup>

Peterson actually knows quite a lot about God, his and others' search for divine connection. He also understands the pain of families and communities that are more conflicted in practice than in their ideal. The youngest of thirteen children born to a devout mother, who often doubted her own worthiness for salvation and wished out loud that Levi had been a daughter, Levi Peterson is also boldly individual, complex in his identity and self-understanding, Peterson appears surprised and honored that his writing has been meaningful to others.

To my right at the dinner table, Russell Berman, my partner of several years, silently studies the menu. I have no doubt what is on his mind: Surrender to the high-calorie, cholesterolemia-inducing dishes that beckon, or choose a healthier lighter fare. In the end, Berman virtuously chooses the same dish as Levi and asks for sparkling water instead of alcohol.

On my left is Nikil Saval, the handsome young graduate student organizer of the symposium, a vegetarian who describes himself both as a "non-practicing Hindu" and as someone who remains ever conscious of the weight of his dissertation dangling over his head like Damocles's sword. He is not drinking either tonight, maybe with a plan to return to dissertating-mode.

I drink neither coffee nor alcohol simply because I don't like either. Nor do I smoke. Nor do I swear in the presence of anyone younger than thirty-one or older than sixty-one. Except for the swearing, I might pass for Mormon if I mention things like the "Aaronic Priesthood," tell people that I grew up in what was semi-rural California riding horses, or if anyone had seen me dive into my mashed Idaho potatoes in heavy cream that evening. But I'm Jewish, like Russell.

Tonight I've decided that Peterson, despite his Scandinavian name and Nordic looks, is, perhaps unbeknownst to himself, actually Jewish in spirit.

"Maybe you're Jewish!" I exclaim.

"How's that?"

"You know how you say you go to church just for the human connection?" I try. "Just for the opportunity to allow a restless

one-year-old girl to climb up on your lap and play with your beard, as you told us. Or to connect with people and hear about their lives?”

“Yes . . . ” He allows, curious though unpersuaded.

“Well, that human bond for us Jews is the presence of God. We don’t have testimonies about a ‘burning feeling in the chest’ like Mormons do. But we believe we can see the face of God in a young child or a bride or when we feel true human understanding between people.”

Peterson nods politely. The imagery I’ve just offered him is actually a jumble of Hasidic thought mixed with a little Talmud, Maimonides, and Martin Buber, all of my own invention. Wondering if I’m getting through, I continue: “I can tell from your writing and what you say in public that you are very directed at this world, that you reject a kind of ‘worldlessness’ of religious institutions.” I’m pushing some Hannah Arendt at this point, which, if it applies to him at all, must exist in his concept of nature, but I don’t think to ask about nature.

“Your public can tell that heaven for you is on this earth.” I cast about. “That one has to make heaven here by doing good and connecting to others. When you die, your body may go in the ground and there is no afterlife, but you live on in the memories of others.”

Russell, who has just returned from an unveiling of his late mother Evelyn’s tombstone, may her memory be a blessing, nods his affirmation of at least this last statement.

Peterson looks tense and uncertain.

I can tell that I’m losing him, but at that moment, it doesn’t occur to me that heaven remains a tantalizing concept for Peterson, the unbeliever. I know from his writing he hasn’t given it up and that he still wishes for a benevolent Christian God, so unlike my tough-guy Jewish God, who gives us in turns the “silent treatment” or, when he’s not ignoring us, acts like an ill-tempered gambler from Las Vegas. Surely Peterson, who loves his wife deeply, has written at length about whether there is an eternity for them, a blissful undying bond that the LDS Church will deny them for not marrying in the Church and not participating in temple ceremonies.

“Of course—” I strike out in another direction, thinking I

could bond with him over our shared American identity “—Jews have to be circumcised.” *Isn’t every American man?* I think.

Levi’s face pales. I can’t understand why. Here is a famous author who writes in detail about sexual acts, his own youthful masturbation, and a male character’s horrifying genital self-mutilation in *The Backslider*. He can’t be offended, can he?

I dare not glance at poor Nikil, who is cringing next to me, not wanting to deflect a faculty member, but surely utterly embarrassed by the topic. Nikil is American, too, after all, and has just shared with us his ideas about being an Indian-American, who has grown up without much of an Indian community and whose literary interests are European. Althea is puzzled and waiting to see what transpires. Russell looks blithely on.

Levi gazes at me steadily and says softly, “I guess I wouldn’t fit in.”

“Oh,” I stumble on, horrified that I have just trapped this great American author of distinguished age into discussing his anatomy. “Um . . . well . . . there are some Jews who reject ritual circumcision now. I mean, you can still be Jewish if you want.”

“Funny what a lot of fuss there is about a little piece of skin,” Peterson offers, hoping someone will change the subject and knowing full well that a “little piece of skin” remains, like many other small, trivial things about the body and humanity, enormously contested.

Althea comes to the rescue, asking Russell about foreign language acquisition; and the conversation turns to more pressing topics like American literacy.

Meanwhile, I’m wondering how I could possibly make amends to Peterson. Maybe he would feel better if I told him it didn’t matter, he could be whatever he wanted. But that was already true. Maybe a funny story would help? One about how, after my oldest son’s ritual circumcision at home when he was eight days old, the rabbi handed me the foreskin in a piece of gauze and told me to bury it in my backyard with a prayer. I couldn’t do this, though, because the yard was being dug up for a garden. I put the foreskin in the freezer, planning to bury it later. Then the garden seemed to be taking forever while a part of my firstborn child’s body lay in the freezer next to the Dreyer’s French vanilla ice cream and Mrs. Paul’s frozen fish sticks. Before I knew it, the fridge broke and was

hauled away one day with all its contents while I was on campus. Who knows what kind of burial that foreskin received? I could mourn, I could tell Levi this story and hope he would laugh, but the moment was gone and the conversation had turned to yet another topic: the question of visions.

Do Mormons really believe in visions and what are they? Certainly not my vision of the contents of my old freezer. Peterson affirmed that Mormons have visions and apologized that he had none really, unless by vision, one meant literary images like his Cowboy Jesus, who comforts the troubled protagonist in *The Backslider*. My mind wanders to how Russell and I miss his late mother, how we gaze at the light reflected on the ceiling at night, joking to ourselves that it marks the enduring presence of the Berman matriarch. Our elegiac longing contrasts with the Mormon understanding that such images and even dreams may constitute actual visitations.

For us that night, however, Levi Peterson's literary vision more than sufficed. In fact, it seemed to offer a redemptive promise that a person like him could extend his gift to others and that we'd be so moved. Peterson is writing something new now. A non-Mormon story. I wonder who his audience will be. I wonder if we thanked him enough that night?

#### Note

1. Levi S. Peterson, *A Rascal by Birth, A Christian by Yearning* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006), 1.