

## Pillars of My Faith

# IN THE GARDEN GOD HATH PLANTED: EXPLORATIONS TOWARD A MATURING FAITH

By *Lavina Fielding Anderson*

WHEN I WAS TEACHING FRESHMAN ENGLISH AT the University of Washington in 1969, I had a very bright Chinese-American student who uncharacteristically missed two classes in a row. When he showed up for the third class, I asked where he'd been. "I was in my room," Garry said. "I couldn't think of a good reason to come out."

I spent the rest of the afternoon with him just talking, trying to understand why this bright, competent, hitherto motivated young man was suffering an existential crisis of enormous proportions. He had experienced no triggering trauma, but he had been overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of life. He literally could not find any good reason to continue living, though he was not particularly suicidal. As we talked, I caught a glimpse of his universe, a black hole that pulled into it all sparks of awareness, remorselessly extinguishing them one by one. I sensed the crippling and crushing that happens to someone who looks out into the universe and sees, not the face of a loving Father and Mother, but blackness whirling toward oblivion.

And I wondered about myself. Why, despite my glib graduate school discussions of angst and existential despair, had I never taken either seriously? Why, even as I saw Garry's universe, did I sense, beneath my feet and at my back, as solid as granite, a loving and attentive presence? Whatever I identify as my consciousness is anchored in and shared with a consciousness of God—inseparably connected with that attentive, loving presence. I cannot remember a time when this has not been so. My patriarchal blessing, bestowed upon me at age eleven, told me, "You have received a testimony of [the gospel], knowing within your heart that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ and the Savior of all mankind." I do know. I accept

that gift of faith as pure grace.

I grew up in a devout and loving home with five brothers and sisters on farms in southern Idaho and central Washington. Ours was a household of faith and miracles: miracles of healing, miracles of protection, miracles of adverse weather controlled. Ours was also a household committed to the Church. My father was a bishop twice and built two chapels. My mother taught Primary for forty-five years. Both were returned missionaries. All of us children married in the temple; two of my brothers and I went on missions; the grandsons are following suit.

Furthermore, I had the immense good fortune to be persecuted for my religion when I was growing up. My family moved from a solidly Mormon community in Idaho when I was about twelve to the Columbia Basin in Washington, where construction of the Grand Coulee Dam had made it possible to bring thousands of acres under cultivation. One side effect was to upset the existing agricultural base of dryland farming, much of it by families who had been in the area for more than a generation. The only church in town to that point had been a comfortable little Congregational Church. Since many of the new farmers came from Mormon areas of Idaho and Utah, the economic differences coincided with religious differences. The Congregational minister responded by preaching openly anti-Mormon sermons that were, for a time, quite popular with his parishioners. The natural problems of integrating newcomers with old and well-established families were thus exacerbated by religious suspicions.

I have to admit that the persecution amounted only to mild social ostracism and very mild name-calling ("carrot-snappers," for Mormons). Our school was too little to turn up its nose at the husky Mormon athletes, and you didn't have to have a date to go to anywhere except to the junior prom. Thus, with very little inconvenience or distress to me, I chose Mormonism and its values as my own, solidifying my already firm Mormon identity and bonding culturally with my own community. The most important predictive fact about me then

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was that I was a Mormon. It explained me, summarized me, justified me. As I grew into consciousness of myself as a person, it was as a *Mormon* person, identified wholly with what I perceived to be the major values and norms of the Church.

My mission in France, graduating (twice) from BYU, and spending seven and a half years on the staff of the *Ensign* were all experiences that both deepened and challenged my simple one-to-one identification with the Church. I still am a Mormon, a committed believing Mormon. I never considered marrying outside of the Church, and Paul's own strong testimony and active family were both attractions to me when I married. He has been in a bishopric and on the high council. He resigned from that position to teach our son's Primary class. We pay tithing. We have temple recommends. We attend church weekly, study scriptures, have family home evening, and family prayers. I subscribe to and read all of the Church magazines. I have taught Primary since age fourteen, with a few gaps, and currently teach Sunbeams and run a den of Cub Scouts. I have been a visiting teacher since age nineteen. We feel deeply blessed with a loving family life, stimulating work, good friends, good health. We acknowledge the Lord's hand in these blessings.

**I**N short, there are many ways in which the word *Mormon* summarizes the most important things about me. But *Mormon* is not the only adjective I would use today. Two others are *intellectual* and *feminist*. These are aspects of myself that the Church does not approve, reinforce, or encourage. Instead, the message that I hear is one of denial, repression, or suspicion.

Intellectually, the Church, through BYU, gave me what I consider to be a first-rate education and reinforced a powerful hunger for learning; but I now find the official attitude toward scholarship in general and Mormon studies in particular to be quite dismaying.

As a woman, I feel deeply alienated from the structure of the Church. Theologically, it offers a vision of godhood that includes the feminine principle in the form of a Mother in

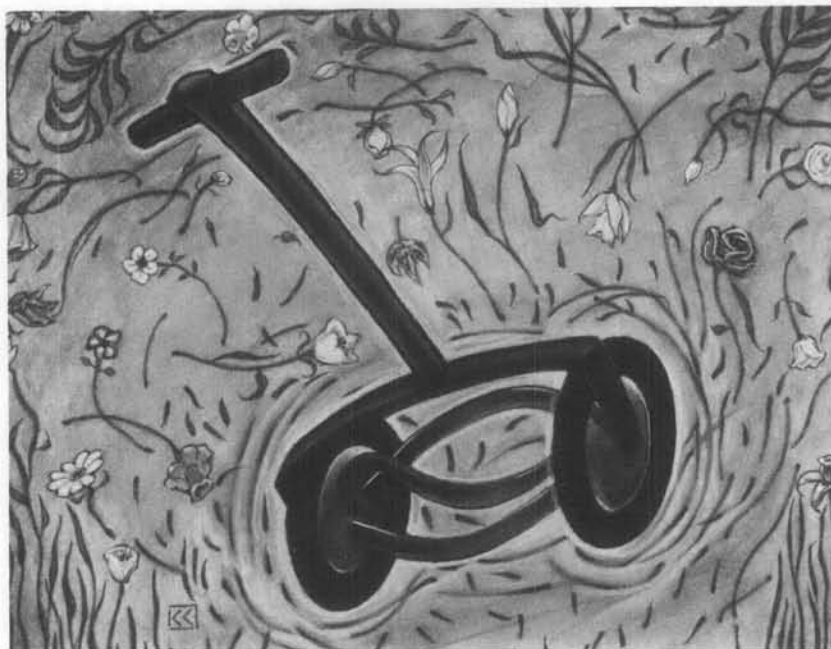
Heaven who is, like our Father in Heaven, divine. But as a practical matter, the Church defines women primarily as child-rearers and husband-nurturers, steers women into supportive roles organizationally, uses their labor to operate important programs but withholds from them the final financial and managerial authority it grants to men, and gives men an apparently preferential relationship with God through their ordination to the priesthood.

I know many other intellectuals and feminists, with whom I share much, who have become disaffected and disappointed with the Church. Some have "drifted away," as the saying is. Others have marched out, slamming the door behind them. Neither is a viable choice for me. God does not speak to me *only* through the Church, nor does God speak to me in *everything* the Church says; but I still hear that divine voice in many of the Church's messages. I accept the beauty of its community, the authority of its ordinances, its shaping of the vessel from which we may drink the waters of life.

Over the years, as I have found my own identity taking shape in a pattern different from what the Church prescribes for women, I have also found my understanding of God developing in some noncorrelated ways. Two aspects of God's character that I am searching to understand most keenly right now are diversity and free agency.

**F**IRST, diversity. Recently, I stood in a little meadow below our cabin in Lamb's Canyon, up to my waist in green plants. Slowly, I rotated in a circle, looking at what was growing within a three-foot radius. I counted twenty-three different varieties, none of them trees or shrubs, none of them flowering, all of them a different shade of green. To perceive each of those aspects of green, texture, and shape without being able to name them, describe them, or even remember them accurately, was an exhilarating revelation of how highly God values diversity in even little things.

God doesn't plant lawns. He plants meadows. But we belong to a Church that, currently, values lawns—their sameness, their conformity, the ease with which they can all be



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cut to the same height, watered on schedule, and replaced by new turf if necessary. (And against which it is easy to spot dandelions.) All organizations are limited in their ability to handle diversity, but our Church seems particularly limited right now in its ability to cherish and nurture individuals as individuals—as wild geraniums, catnip, western coneflowers, or yarrow—not as identical blades of grass in a uniformly green lawn.

When Joseph Smith said he taught his people correct principles and let them govern themselves, I've usually assumed that this must be God's method, too. Now, I'm not so sure. I think rather that he expects us to identify those correct principles out of the floods and torrents of raw experience with which he drenches us daily—experiences of good and evil and every gradation in between. Some of those principles will make us more like him. Others will take us from him. Our choices relentlessly reveal the true desires of our hearts, no matter what our lips may say. When we find principles that work for us—principles that teach us “the manner of happiness”—then we naturally try to share them with others. When a group of us shares the same principles, we have a community. The Church teaches many of those principles, but I no longer believe that it teaches all of them, nor do I believe that the Church is the only place we should seek them.

I now believe, at this stage in my life, in the fundamental holiness of diversity. One of the results of this discovery (along with the humbling revelation of how easily I, myself, drift toward conformity) is an evolution in my understanding of revelation and how it comes. I grew up, probably like most of us, with the telephone model of revelation: The red phone rings. The prophet, who has been sitting there staring at it alertly, seizes it. God dictates a crisp sentence, the prophet scribbles it down, says, “Right, Chief,” and comes out into the room where we're all sitting on folding aluminum chairs holding our note pads and pencils. He announces, “Now hear this. The gymnasiums will get red indoor-outdoor carpeting with basketball courts printed on them.” (Or whatever the *message du jour* happens to be.)

I now feel that we get revelation from many sources, sometimes clearly, sometimes emerging from conflicting points of view, sometimes as personal discoveries, sometimes brought to us by other people. The model of revelation that now makes more sense to me is that all of us are working in a madhouse, a zoo. There are lots of phones and they're all ringing. People are talking into them as well as listening. They're also talking to each other. We say, “Just a sec, Joan. I've got a call coming in” or “Let me put you on hold, God. Somebody is waving a memo at me.” Sometimes the message on the telephone is, “Joan's got the memo you need.” Sometimes the messages contradict each other. There are also nonmessages going on. There's background music. There are word processors clicking, printers clacking, videos flashing. You can hear birds, cars, and helicopters from outside. Some people are slamming file drawers open and shut looking for last week's messages.

And these messages are all very important. They're about lunch. Lunch is free but the schedule is uncertain: who gets to go when, what the menu is, whom you get to sit by, how long you get. The hungrier you are, the more numbers you punch, files you search, people you ask. And quite frequently lunch appears on your desk while you're not looking because somebody ordered pizza on one of those phone calls. And even when you go to the skyroom where it's served on a lovely linen tablecloth, there are still phones, people at the same table talking, people at adjoining tables whose conversations you overhear, background music, birds, and an occasional colossal crash from the kitchen where somebody tried to enter through the exit.

Revelation is not an orderly, linear process. It can be a sunburst of insight, a glimmer of comprehension, the rethinking with understanding of long-past events, the testing of a beloved principle in an unforeseen crucible. But most important of all, it's *our* experience. Even if it begins with instructions from elsewhere, it must become *our* experience before it becomes *our* revelation.

THE second principle, free agency, is even more fundamental than diversity, since diversity could not exist without it.<sup>1</sup> As I grew up, I learned in Sunday School and seminary that free agency was a kind of true-false quiz or, at best, a multiple choice test—the freedom to make right choices as defined by the rulebooks in the hands of our teachers. I no longer believe in this view of freedom. We are far from understanding the absolute and deadly seriousness with which God regards our free agency. Contemplate, if you will, his profound reluctance to tamper with it, no matter what is at stake, his terrible patience as we make choices—sometimes stupid, sometimes irresponsible, sometimes downright dangerous. I believe that he suffers with us as we learn the consequences of some choices—suffers so profoundly that only the Atonement could preserve for us the continued ability to choose. Other decisions he celebrates with us.

Jesus did not say, “Read my mind.” He said, “Follow me.” That divine invitation sets us in motion. Freedom is a dance that we enter into, understanding only as we move that each gesture flings grace or grief to the far reaches of the universe. It is a dance with life, with death, and ultimately with the light that fills the immensities of space where no space exists without kingdom.

This view of free agency has developed in large measure from my struggle to understand why history in general and Mormon history in particular has taken some of the directions it has. Let's look at Joseph Smith for an example. Linda King Newell's and Valeen Tippet Avery's biography of Emma Hale Smith<sup>2</sup> was deeply disturbing to me for the documentation it provided about Joseph Smith and the origins of polygamy. Michael Quinn's examination of the termination of polygamy<sup>3</sup> raised painful and poignant questions about intention and deception on the part of Joseph's successors. Richard Bushman,<sup>4</sup> Jan Shippis,<sup>5</sup> and Michael Quinn<sup>6</sup> responsibly,

sensitively, and exhaustively examined the rather distasteful role of folk religion in the first decades of Mormonism.

I had to take this information seriously. You see, I love Joseph Smith. I do not feel betrayed and angry if Joseph was wrong or mistaken or misled—and I think that he sometimes was. Those times were direct results of his free agency. Certainly, God spoke to him. God speaks to everyone. But Joseph listened better than a lot of us and actually entered into a dialogue that lasted for the rest of his life. It is the listening and the dialogue that are the models for us, I believe, not whatever notes he jotted down in the course of that ongoing conversation.

Let me be more specific. I was shocked and disgusted to discover that Joseph Smith married a fourteen-year-old girl, fully consummated that marriage, and concealed it from Emma.<sup>7</sup> My image of “prophet” did not accommodate this kind of behavior. I could not begin to find holy motives for such behavior. I also felt deeply guilty, naturally, to feel this way about a prophet—not just *a* prophet, either, but *the* Prophet. I took my indignation and guilt to the Lord in prayer over a period of time. I don’t recall being particularly sophisticated or eloquent in my petition. It was more along the lines of, “If Joseph Smith did this—and it looks as if he did—then he was a real jerk. What do *You* have to say about it?” You know, on some level, I wasn’t even expecting an answer. But I got one. From that attentive, loving Presence—gently, tenderly, and with finality—came the words, “Joseph is mine. He is in my hands.” God did not agree with me that Joseph was a jerk. He did not even agree that Joseph had made a mistake. He acknowledged my grief and upheld me in those same hands that were holding Joseph and that upheld Helen Marr Whitney, not only at age fourteen, but for the rest of her long life.

I have the feeling, though, that if I hadn’t acknowledged my outrage and hadn’t protested it to the Lord, that I probably wouldn’t have got that answer. As a result, my affection for Joseph Smith is, if anything, increased by this new information about him, and I want to know more. I want to know everything I can *because* I love him—not because I’m trying to decide whether he is worthy of my love. Freedom and diversity intersect—not in rules, not in regulations—but in relationships. The ultimate value of that experience for me was not what I learned about prayer or even about Joseph Smith, but what I experienced in that loving relationship.

WELL, these are discoveries that I am just now making. They are far from the final word in the divine dialogue that I hope will last the rest of my life. We belong to a church that, for the time being, enforces and rewards conformity, hierarchy, and obedience. I think that this direction is an experiment—the result of choices perhaps instigated by some leaders but in which we have cooperated. It happens to be an experiment which tacitly encourages adults to remain dependent and which exacts a particularly high price from its women. I think God is watching it with loving attentiveness

and with a terrible patience.

Patience is hard, but I plan to still be here when the Church stops experimenting with lawns and refocuses on the garden which the Lord hath planted. The glory of the Church, realized in many shining ways even now, is its ability to foster conditions in which richly loving relationships can thrive—with each other, with God. And ultimately it is these relationships that are our defense against the darkness of despair. Then shall the Lord “comfort Zion . . . and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving and the voice of melody” (2 Nephi 8:3). ☞

## NOTES

1. A hopeful note was sounded by Elder Boyd K. Packer, speaking at the Regional Representative Seminar on 30 March 1990. Titled “Let Them Govern Themselves,” he reiterated the importance of the announcement on tithes and offerings and its purpose in reducing “the overregimentation of the Church. This overregimentation is a direct result of too many programmed instructions” (p. 4). Acknowledging that “smaller budgets and fewer activities, fewer programs . . . will leave a vacuum,” he pled with the Regional Representatives to “absolutely resist the temptation to program that vacuum. . . . Please, for this one time, honor the agency of the members, the families” (p. 7). He also significantly in this context, points out that “the term ‘free’ agency is not found in the revelations. It is a *moral agency*” (p. 6).

2. Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (New York: Doubleday, 1984).

3. D. Michael Quinn, “LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriage, 1890-1904” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18:1 (Spring 1985).

4. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

5. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

6. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987).

7. Newell and Avery, 46-47.

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## WAITING FOR CRAZY HORSE

We wait for Crazy Horse to return,  
the scar on his face, the bayonet wound.  
Coyotes won’t tell where they buried him.

They never tell anything that matters.  
They are as bad as those history buffs  
who say everything matters, even the lies

they want to believe. We know how he took  
his father’s name but would take no scalps  
because of his dream. No sons were born

to him, and when war came he tied a stone  
behind his ear, sprinkled his body  
with dust to make the bullets turn.

He feared no one in battle. It was peace  
he couldn’t handle: peace, and lies  
in the mouth of a friend that did him in.

—DONNELL HUNTER