



2014

# Exodus: a Mormon history tour

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**Exodus: A Mormon History Tour**

by

Lee Chancey Olsen

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Kathleen Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

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Lee Chancey Olsen  
May 2014

**Exodus: A Mormon History Tour**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

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Lee Chancey Olsen  
May 2014

## Abstract

*Exodus: A Mormon History Tour* is a creative nonfiction journey narrative that traces the author's path in and out of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly referred to as the Mormon church. This memoir piece includes elements of the Bible's Exodus story and essential Mormon history and theology, with a focus on Joseph Smith, the church's founder. Through a fragmented though chronological form, the memoir offers a variously spiritual, logical, emotional, and psychological exploration of issues surrounding faith and spirituality, spiritual knowledge, inculcation of belief, memory, record keeping, self-representation, and so on. The piece is interspersed with and undergirded by depictions of landscapes of northern Utah.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to acknowledge the invaluable instruction and counsel he received from his thesis committee: Kristiana Kahakauwila, Suzanne Paola, and Ning Yu. He would also like to acknowledge the instruction and guidance he received from his advisor, Brenda Miller, as well as the other faculty and peers he worked with while a master's student at Western Washington University, including Mary Janell Metzger, Kaveh Askari, Laura Laffrado, Kathryn Trueblood, Christopher Wise, Bruce Goebel, Anne Lobeck, Carmen Werder, Roberta Kjesrud, Nathaniel Barr, and Megan Spiegel. He thanks each for their kindness and support. Outside the university, he wishes to acknowledge and thank his family and friends, especially his parents, Dean and Katherine, for all their loving support and for their saintly example. He thanks Linda Lambert and Amory Peck, too, for the late-night conversations that spawned this project.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Critical Preface.....	1
Part One .....	11
Part Two.....	26
Part Three.....	42
Part Four.....	57
Part Five .....	65
Part Six.....	76
Works Cited .....	81

## Critical Preface

*Exodus: A Mormon History Tour* is a memoir piece through which I loosely trace my journey in and out of the Mormon faith as housed in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the sect typically identified as the mainstream Mormon church. As such I paired the memoir with portions of essential Mormon history, theology, and culture as I have experienced them through personal experience, Mormon lore, and written texts. Throughout I explore various spiritual, emotional, and psychological elements that attend an upbringing in a dominant religious culture—and, subsequently, elements that attend a break from such a culture. I examine experience as journey as well as the actual exercise of re-living the past through record keeping and consequent re-visiting of those records.

The project took root in Professor Kristiana Kahakauwila's journey narrative seminar during Spring Quarter 2013. Among the texts we studied was *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Zora Neale Hurston's re-appropriation of the story of Moses and the children of Israel as found in the Book of Exodus. The novel led me to re-read the Bible's account—for the first time in at least ten years—and to consider parallels between the biblical exodus and the Mormon exodus from upstate New York to the Great Basin in the mid-1800s following the murder of Joseph Smith, the religion's founder, and his brother Hyrum, the church's ordained patriarch. As I discuss briefly in the memoir, it is not uncommon for Mormons to draw comparisons between the two journeys as a way of grounding their faith in the religious tradition of the Old and the New Testament.

This consideration developed into the conceptualization of an autobiographical project—I had recently practiced autobiographical writing in a memoir-writing workshop with Professor Brenda Miller during Winter Quarter 2013—a project which would braid together elements of the biblical exodus, the Mormon exodus, and my own exodus away from the Mormon religion. This project is my own re-appropriation of these exodus stories, a way of grounding my



experience in a larger religious tradition—but also a way of showing myself as an itinerant fringe Mormon at odds with that larger tradition.

The project moves in an essentially chronological manner, with some flashbacks, including a re-visitation of a journal entry eight years after I recorded it, an act which hints at the fallibility of memory and record keeping—two elements that feature prominently in the memoir. The literal action begins pre-birth, in a sense, in Part One with segments on family history, Mormon concepts of the pre-earth life, and the physical formation of the landscape of present-day northern Utah. I start here to emphasize Mormonism’s grand perception of an overarching universal and eternal history that began before this world existed and to establish the notion that the piece is about process and pilgrimage. Too, this move grounds me in the larger Mormon scriptural tradition, with its emphasis on the creation and the perpetuation of the human race. It is also an attempt to overreach the *ab ovo* approach to “autobiography” used by Laurence Sterne, for example, in his novel *Tristram Shandy*.

My journey then follows my upbringing in Mormonism, with attention paid to the inculcation of belief that came with it. This portion sees a building sense of spiritual awareness accompanied by an increasing sense of “Mormon guilt,” as I call it. It is my answer to the treatment of coming-of-age, prep-school accounts found in nonfiction works like Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life* and George Orwell’s “Such, Such Were the Joys,” as well as fictional “autobiography” works like James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

The memoir reaches a sort of climax as it moves from Part Two into Part Three, roughly halfway through, at the end of my service as a Mormon missionary in Ontario, Canada. At that point, the journey begins tracing the Mormon exodus—commonly referred to in present-day Mormonism as the Church History Tour—as I physically follow the path of the early saints from

upstate New York to the Salt Lake Valley, visiting sites prominent in Mormon history, such as the temples in Kirtland, Ohio, and Nauvoo, Illinois. My creative nonfiction treatment of this trip was influenced lightly by Wallace Stegner's *Mormon Country*, a creative treatment of the Mormon pioneer trek, and by the travel-writing narrative *From the Holy Mountain* by William Dalrymple, in which he traces the decline of Christianity in the Middle East.

The action here sees a descent as my faith unravels to a point of doubt and disillusionment when I return to school in Utah; here I present myself as a type of spiritual drifter. Without any real sense of resolution, the journey terminates in the desert of western Utah, on a solo camping trip, shortly before my graduation from Utah State University. The abrupt ending—a scene of me laying in the desert, feeling the wind pass by, like Moses sensing the spirit of Jehovah passing him while he hid in the cleft in the rock—is, most simply, an invitation for the reader to make her or his own conclusion. I made a conscious decision to forego any sort of resolution or any type of epiphanic ending. This final section was inspired by Everett Ruess's journal passages and the account of his break from his family, his travels, and his mysterious disappearance in the deserts of the American southwest as found in W.L. Russo's *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty*. I would also pay tribute here to John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*.

My initial intention was—through the investigation of my own memory via the act of memoir writing—to come to terms with a religious experience that left me full of confusion, doubt, and disillusionment. Specifically, I wanted to revisit a pivotal period I experienced post-mission, as I began to move away from the Mormon church as an institution. I felt driven to write the piece because I believed a meticulous review of my religious life would produce some sort of spiritual sense in my mind. I believed also, that the process would help me develop a

better idea of how memory operates, how knowledge and education happen, and how the self is able to create identity through critical thinking and through challenging established beliefs.

Perhaps the greatest textual catalyst associated with these intentions was, as explained in the memoir, Fawn Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*, a fastidious historical account that questions and arguably debunks Smith's claims to prophethood (Brodie was a former Mormon turned UCLA professor of history and a biographer of Thomas Jefferson, Richard Burton, Thaddeus Stevens, and Richard Nixon). The project was also informed, indirectly, by Richard Bushman's Smith biography, *Rough Stone Rolling*; Leonard J. Arrington's history of the Mormon church *Great Basin Kingdom*; a lifetime of Mormon scripture study; and numerous accounts from Mormon lore surrounding historically prominent Saints who apostatized without formerly recanting their testimonies of Smith or *The Book of Mormon*.

When I began to feel the emotional and psychological weight of the project, I made a more concerted effort to understand why breaking from tradition is so difficult for the individual—though, of course, through all of this, I realize that clear answers are unattainable and it is more or less the act of introspection/writing that matters, rather than the product. To a great degree I view memoir writing as an interrogatory process, a layperson's philosophy with the potential to reveal ineffable truths of what it means to be and what it means to be an individual. This piece is one articulation of the process as I experienced it over the past fourteen months—and, more largely, over the past ten years, since the time I began keeping a journal consistently, an act strongly encouraged within Mormonism.

As I pondered and composed the project, I had two basic audiences in mind. The first audience consisted of sympathetic non-Mormons—"Jack Mormons," as they would have been called in the early days of the church—those thoughtful and curious enough to learn certain basic

principles of the religion and the culture as a means of creating mutual understanding and tolerance. The second consisted of Mormons who, to speak in the most diplomatic of terms, may not have taken the time to understand or to empathize with their brothers and sisters on the fringe of the religion and the culture. My intention was the same with this audience—that is, the promotion of understanding and tolerance. I also wanted to suggest the potential for increased critical thinking and individuality within the Mormon church and its accompanying culture.

I attempted to keep my stance non-conversionary in both instances, before both audiences; having broken from a tradition that, in many ways, scorns fence-sitters and demands allegiance to the point of blind faith and “righteous submission,” a large portion of my being has come to abhor conversionary mindsets, dogmas, and ideologies. While I appreciate Brodie’s project, for instance, I take issue with her approach, as I feel she is too aggressive, too quick to condemn Joseph Smith as a charlatan and a liar, all under the guise of objective biography—though I know my response is biased following my upbringing in Mormonism. In the end, it was never my intention within this project to prove Mormonism right or to prove it wrong; my intention was to produce an objective investigation of certain complexities of my own experience (insofar as such an act is possible). However, in retrospect, I see that the project is in many ways an oblique criticism of certain facets of institutionalized religion—Mormonism, more narrowly.

Because one potential portion of my audience is comprised of family and friends who still adhere faithfully to mainstream Mormonism, I had to check myself constantly with thoughts of how those closest to me might respond if they read the project with no preliminary explanation from me personally. I perceive that this type of influence was beneficial because it forced me to incessantly analyze the veracity and fairness of my writing. (I might emphasize the fact that this project is only one version of the Mormon experience taken at one specific time in

history—it is in no way representative of the views of any other contingent of affiliated with Mormonism.)

Formally and stylistically I took inspiration from the following authors and texts: Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* and *When Women Were Birds*; Annie Dillard’s *An American Childhood* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*; N. Scott Momaday’s *The Names* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*; and Nick Flynn’s *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*. Like these writers in these specific texts, I chose to use a fragmented form that proceeds in short sections and displays varying voices.

I wrote this way in part because I enjoy the challenges and rewards of writing in short segments—for instance, the challenge of portraying a broad picture by way of concise brush strokes and the reward of producing great feeling in the white spaces and the unarticulated lines. In part, I chose this disjointed form because I want to tap into the feelings of discombobulation that, potentially, accompany memoir writing, especially memoir writing with heavy emotional investment. And, in part, I chose this form because I wanted to mimic the effect of indoctrination by seemingly-benign repetition.

I attempted to maintain an understated yet strong voice that establishes some version of the Mormon experience before it unravels and frays, suggesting inner turmoil, doubt, frustration, and so on. In the lightest way possible, I attempted to transition from a childlike tone with lots of “storytelling” (a child listening to stories, learning religion via culture) to a more mature voice with more “reading” (a grad student studying Mormon history and observing the experience critically).

Like Williams, Dillard, and Momaday—and other writers who have influenced my approach to creative nonfiction, such as John Muir, Mary Austin, Willa Cather, Everett Ruess,

Barry Lopez, and others—I place great emphasis on the natural world and the ways in which it contributes to the formation of individuals and communities. I identify closely with this notion from Dillard in *American Childhood*: “When everything else has gone from my brain. . . . when all this has dissolved, what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that” (3). When I think back to my childhood and my early religious experience, the resulting impressions are always tied up with images of the land.

When I began this project, following Professor Kahakauwila and Professor Miller’s courses, and Professor Ning Yu’s ecocriticism seminar in Winter 2013, I was working on two nonfiction pieces with environmentalist slants and considering an expansion of one of these for my thesis project. Though I decided to write about my Mormon history, I wanted to keep Naturalist and environmentalist threads in the larger weave of the project. A critical reading of environmentalist texts by Terry Tempest Williams, Henry David Thoreau, John Elder, and others, under the direction of professor Yu, proved invaluable for this project. Much of the text was produced during Professor Suzanne Paola’s nonfiction-writing seminar during Winter 2014, while studying *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, *The Writing Life*, and *Holy the Firm* by Annie Dillard.

In the memoir, I immediately introduce Ben Lomond Peak as the landform that dominates my view of home and, less directly, as a symbol of the religion that overshadows my life. I return to the landscapes of Utah again and again in order to ground myself in a concrete place and to complicate notions of home and belonging. I also utilize movement across the landscape to illustrate a transition from diligent Mormon and Christian to questioning Naturalist and spiritualist. Toward this end I worked to create a juxtaposition between various landscapes (the humid greenness of Ontario and New York versus the arid deserts of Utah) in order to reflect different periods in my life paired with differing states of mind.

For the majority of the piece I try to maintain a strong, even, articulate voice, but a voice that borders on naïve at times. Toward the latter portion, as my character becomes more critical and cynical, I try to make the voice come apart to some degree as a way of indicating inner turmoil and confusion that result from a loss of faith and naïveté. At this point, my narration becomes increasingly removed from the real world as I move more into a psychological realm.

Here, especially, I had to refuse the tendency toward an overtly cynical or snide tone. I feel it is too easy to be sarcastic and sneering when it comes to discussions of religion. For example, speaking anecdotally, I perceive this type of tone time and time again when I read (post-) Mormon blogs and listen to (post-) Mormon podcasts. I wanted to prevent those elements from tinging my voice as I feel they are self-deprecating and they lead people to view Mormonism dismissively at best and derisively at worst. And, because there are many serious and important Mormon-related conversations happening currently—for instance, conversations on women and the priesthood and the church’s use of tithing money—I believe people should adopt a more serious approach and tone if they want to be taken seriously.

For me, aside from the emotional and psychological investment, the greatest struggle involved making decisions as to what to include and what to omit. I sensed that this project could go on indefinitely, so I had to decide how to crystalize my experience in a small selection of experiences and impressions without assuming the reader knew too much or too little. And, because I was writing around material that is inherently sacred and deeply personal, both to me and to certain people close to me, I had to make careful choices about the most sensitive matters. For example, I chose to forego speaking about Mormon temple worship, except in the most general of terms, though I presume many readers would prefer to know more about this apparently-secretive facet of Mormonism. I also refrained from too much discussion of various

points of Mormon-specific doctrine, because such points are so much subject to personal interpretation and, currently, I feel uncomfortable with my ability to seriously discuss the more peculiar points of the religion's theology which, again, I presume many readers would be superficially or perhaps deeply curious about.

Because I want the reader to understand intimately my views, feelings, and opinions as situated in a larger background, I use first-person point-of-view for all but a few segments. Toward the end of the memoir I use the second-person to address the reader and Fawn Brodie. I address the reader as a way of, hopefully, forcing introspection and critical thinking. I address Brodie as a way of showing myself in a rational conversation with a scholar-writer who was fundamental in my current positioning in the larger conversation on Mormonism specifically and organized religion generally.

To this end, I also interspersed the piece with passages and phrases from the Mormon "standard works"—that is, the King James Version of the Holy Bible, *The Book of Mormon*, *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*. (Another reason I include these passages and phrases is to suggest a cognitive effect associated, at least in my mind, with a religious upbringing: the ever-present scriptural/hymnal language that accompanies a person through a religious or a post-religious life.)

Too, by way of my shift from narrated telling, via story and Mormon teaching, toward showing, via quasi-objective scholarship in Brodie's critical text, I mean to show my personal transition from unquestioning follower to questioning individual. This move is part of my exploration of religious/cultural indoctrination, part of my exploration of what it means to learn and to know, especially when it comes to matters of religion, spirituality, philosophy, and so on. I also mean for this transition to further illustrate my subtle shift from Mormon-Christian to



Naturalist-spiritualist mentioned above—though, at present, I admittedly vacillate between these camps and others. Perhaps, overall, this is the heart of the memoir: I have been, like Moses, a sojourner, a wanderer, a stranger in a strange land.

## I.

Any thought of home, for me, is initially grounded in earth-toned images of the mountains and valleys of northern Utah, as well as peripheral pictures of the red-rock canyonlands of southern Utah. A more precise thought of home involves a view from the front room of my childhood house, inside staring out, northward, at Ben Lomond Peak, a stony monolith that dominated—and dominates still—much of the view from the picture window. This view is most striking during winter months, when Ben Lomond and its flanking ridgelines, dusted in snow, catch rosy light streaming from the west as sun meets mountain over Great Salt Lake. With that scene established, I turn to other details. I allow characters to filter in, including parents, five siblings, neighbors, friends. I lived the first nineteen years of my life in the same house, in the same neighborhood, where North Ogden City nestles against a doglegged crook in the Wasatch Range.

Mormon pioneers trekked to the Wasatch, Utah Territory, mid-1800s, to escape persecution and violence that had followed them since the beginning—persecution and violence that intensified and culminated in the murder of their founder, Joseph Smith, and his brother Hyrum. The Great Basin's arid valleys surrounding an extensive inland sea were an unassuming home, dismal soil in which to ground a fledgling faith.

Like most religions, Mormonism sprang from humble roots. The boy Joseph Smith—troubled by the number of Christian denominations, as well as the religious competition and contention they created—walked into a grove of trees near his home and prayed to God, vocally, to know which church was the true church. As he later told it, God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared and called him to bring Christ's Church out of the wilderness, to restore it to its

fullness; the world was then in a state of apostasy and needed one true church to contain all the truths and ordinances God ever revealed, or would yet reveal, to humanity.

When Joseph was laid to rest, his people, the believers, under the direction of his prophetic successor Brigham Young, carried their Restored Church back into the wilderness, where they made the desert blossom as a rose.

My father, Dean, son of Lee Olsen and Clara Child, was born and raised in Plain City, Utah, a farming community west of Ogden, that old railroad hub that spurred growth in towns north of Salt Lake City. My mother, Katherine, daughter of Margaret Manning and Wilbur Lee McCracken, was born in Hooper, a farming community south of Plain City, though the family later moved to Roy, another suburb of Ogden. Lee, Clara, and Margaret all descended from Mormon pioneer stock; Wilbur was a Civilian Conservation Corps transplant from Kentucky who joined the church before marrying Margaret and shipping off to the South Pacific. My parents, both raised in the church, met at a rodeo—Dean was involved with the junior posse—and were later married in the Mormon temple in Ogden. They spent several years in Fresno, California, before returning to build a home in North Ogden.

I was born on October 09, 1984, in the late evening, at McKay-Dee Hospital in Ogden. In recent days, my father had poured a slab of cement alongside the front steps of the family home and allowed my older siblings to scrawl their names in the drying concrete—Brooke, Cami, Andy, Jaime. The fifth and last child, I was represented by the initials *TBA*—To Be Announced. When my mother went into labor, my father was watching the world series of baseball; they waited for her parents, babysitters, to arrive before making the twenty-minute drive to the hospital. A family friend recorded the delivery on VHS, off to the left, aside the doctor and

nurses. I've seen the footage once or twice. My mother, smiling, chats quietly with the doctor; several moments of apparent discomfort later, and there I am, a screeching little mess; my mother is back to smiling and chatting with the doctor. My parents named me Lee Chancey, after both grandfathers, Lee and Wilbur Lee, and great-grandfather Chancey Child.

Because my parents were married in a Mormon temple, I am considered to have been “born into the covenant”—the idea being that the rituals and covenants of the temple, including marriage, seal or bind families for eternity. Thus, I was born into this sealing. A month after my birth, I was blessed formally by my father in a sacrament meeting of our local congregation. This rite allows a father to confirm a child with the chosen name by which he or she will be known upon the records of the church; he may also offer blessings of direction and safety for that child. This is the first step in initiating a child personally into the ways of the church.

The whole point and purpose of Mormonism is to link together all God's faithful children in one continuous chain as part of His Plan of Salvation—the grand scheme, the perfect plan, by which we, as humans, move from a spiritual pre-earth existence to this mortal existence and on to an immortal existence in the cosmos. There are Mormon notions of predestination, something about birth in the covenant as a sign of valiance in the pre-earth life, perhaps leading a charge against Lucifer and his minions in a heavenly battle that led to the banishment of the Morning Star and his demonic underlings. But, that was before birth, supposedly, drew a veil over the eyes of the entire human family, before we all forgot where we came from and who we were before our spirits received bodies of flesh and bone. Before God created heaven and earth, when the earth was without form and void, before the light.

\*

First there is upheaval, pitching, rising, banking—then there is Bonneville, though nameless, formless at the time. One day weakness, one day breach. Bonneville drains from present-day Utah, the Wasatch Front, spilling, carving into Idaho. Remnant water settles after the break, settles into the landlocked, salty sea of Great Basin’s arid expanses.

Landscape here is landscape formed by faulted earth, vaulted skies, water lapping tirelessly. Landscape as process: upheaved, roughshod, rasped off at places and times by piling, receding, piling, receding water. Foothills slouch toward the valley like so much silt scuffed from the gnarled, dark faces of towering peaks. Soily slopes give way to fertile river bottoms, plains, marshes, shoreline of Great Salt Lake.

As a child on Skyline Trail, headed north toward Ben Lomond Peak, siblings gone ahead, wandering among scrub oak and stony outcroppings, I picked at chalky-white shells, shells spiraling outward, emptied of whichever creature called them home.

“Seashells,” I said, searching for some formless memory from a late afternoon years before, when my father walked this path with my slight body melted against his back, exhausted. Searching for something he told me in passing. “Seashells left from Lake Bonneville, I think, thousands of years ago.”

I remembered wrong, for the lake never rose this high. Truth is these were not seashells, but an extinct species’ mobile home—bygone land snails, calcified nomad huts. I held and picked at pearl-gray spirals formed not by erosion of boney-white, but delicate construction, particle by particle by particle—careful formulation of smoothest covering left to chip away among shale, talus, scree.

\*

Some of my earliest memories come from days spent on the farm where my father was raised. I spent many Saturdays exploring the sheds, the barn, the root cellar, and the boxcar chicken coop. I wandered the pastures and fields, walked the ditchlines where cattails grew taller than I stood, while my father fixed sprinklers or pruned trees for his parents, my grandparents, Lee and Clara.

On the west side of the faded red barn, a banked earthen roadway ran west; it was once crowned by a railway that serviced surrounding sugar beet farms and the decrepit cannery north of the house. On one side of the embankment, above a marshy canal, there was a midden of sorts: antique bottles, rusted cans, silverware, and other refuse buried in the soil, discarded in the days before the local landfill. My siblings and I excavated this trash, looking for unbroken bottles and other collectibles, caching our finds in an old steamer chest in the barn.

Below the midden, where water pooled under a box elder tree, where water-skaters skimmed the surface, miniscule silver guppies darted here and there, then congregated, bound to the darkness alongside the bank, staring outward, blankly. We once caught several, using a broken porch screen as a makeshift net; one didn't make it back into the pool, but died as we handled it curiously in the open air. We tossed its still body into cattails across the ditch.

On the opposite side of the embankment, where a culvert spilled onto the exposed roots of another box elder, roots that held the iron body of a potbellied stove, water pooled deeply but housed no guppies. I imagined burnt-orange goldfish living in the shadows, amid the roots, in the stove, in the murky stillness. And they were there, because I wanted them to be there, hiding from the noonday sunlight. I conjured up these illustrious fish as I crouched against the grassy bank, watching hosts of sparrows as they circled towering cottonwoods to the south—brown

bodies swarming, cutting against summer sky before concealing themselves once more in the upper reaches of those downy giants. I can still hear their collective *cheech-cheech-cheech-cheech!* as they disappear in the branches of my mind.

If the dead guppy was a quiet shock, the dead goldfinch was a tragedy and a horror. One weekend, on a two-day stay with my grandparents, I patrolled the barnyard with my brother's Red Ryder. When I saw the bird bobbing on a cottonwood branch, I decided to scare it from its perch. I aimed for the bark alongside its foot, but the BB went smashing into its little wing, sending the bright yellow body careening downward. I jogged to the point where it hit the ground, and found it flitting around in circular lurches. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* I thought. In wide-eyed panic, I pumped the lever and shot it once more. Shot it again. And again, till it stopped shifting there in the dust.

My only instinct was to pray, guilt-heaving chest and hot tears, *God, it was a mistake, God, I didn't mean to kill it, God, sorry, sorry, sorry.* Again that night, kneeling in plush crimson carpet alongside the deep spare bed, face buried in the comforter, I prayed for forgiveness, overwhelmed by young Mormon guilt—the first occasion of genuine concern for the welfare of my eternal soul. I couldn't stop. I prayed and pleaded to be free of all sin and darkness—absolute absolution, though I had no articulate words for it at the time.

I don't know what came over me that night, where the guilt originated, though it was real, thick, palpable, weighing heavily in my lungs like pre-dawn fog in the river bottoms alongside Weber River where it passes south of the farm before emptying into Great Salt Lake.

If I think back on the earliest recollections of my religious experience, before my first prayer for absolution, I see myself opening a large wooden cabinet, drawing out baskets of bright plastic

Playskool toys, kneeling on unpadded carpet, two shadowy adults milling around, chatting. It's nice there in that moment, though dim in my memory. This is Nursery, Sunday morning, and I'm about three years old. My siblings and my parents are in the building, somewhere, in their respective meetings, and I trust I'll see them soon. It's a childlike trust: believing your caretakers will return to collect you after a short period of separation.

I move on in later years to Primary, the group meeting for children too old for Nursery and too young for Priesthood or Young Women's. Because we meet in a room on the eastern side of the building, our morning meetings are full of sunlight. My memory becomes lucid when I call up these sunny stills, with rays streaming through iced privacy glass and partially-parted gauzy yellow curtains, rays splaying across dozens of bright-eyed children perched on the edge of their seats. The opposite wall, cinderblock painted white, features a large corkboard plastered with scenes from The Bible and *The Book of Mormon*. This room is heavenly; we are angelic.

We've organized our seats in the same fashion as the chapel, with a pulpit and a piano at the front; my mental picture is developed always with a forward-looking perspective, staring toward the pulpit. A chorister leads the group in song, encouraging volume with a cardstock rocket ship on a cardboard backdrop.

“Jesus came to John the Baptist / In Judea, long ago . . .”

Our volume increases, she manipulates a string, and the rocket climbs into the blue sky, where it hovers before a cartoonish sun.

“. . . And was baptized by immersion / In the River Jordan's flow . . .”

We lose our gusto, the rocket settles back onto green grass below; we gasp, deep breaths, the noise increases.

“To fulfill the law, said Jesus / When the Baptist questioned why . . .”



“Very good! Now, you all know the words and you’ve got the volume. Let’s focus on the melody before the closing prayer.”

Every Sunday, we sing Primary songs, recite Primary talks, and offer Primary prayers. We play Primary games during sharing time, we pray again, and we divide into our respective classes for Sunday School.

In sacrament meeting, where I run after Sunday School, each family establishes territory among the pews. Ours is in the back: Dean and Katherine in the center, flanked by Brooke, Cami, Andy, Jaime, and Lee. After adult prayers and adult hymns, the sacrament is prepared and passed by young men in white shirts, khakis, and too-long ties. White bread and miniscule cups of water, not wine, circulate quietly. The adult talks begin. I spend fifty minutes sketching on a printed program before we sing the final hymn, listen to the closing prayer, and race home for an afternoon spent reading Calvin and Hobbes or riding out to the grandparents’ houses.

If you were to pause in an old-growth grove of trees—a stand of maples in upstate New York, for example—you might marvel at the size of a single tree or at the fact that so many trees could come together to form an expansive forest.

In order to understand one of these maples, you might balance on an exposed root or cling to a low-reaching branch, feeling the tree on your skin and in your joints as you dangled there. You might brush your hand along the tree’s bark, testing the roughness, picturing the coarse, overly-sweet sugar you could produce from distilled maple sap. Noticing sunlight filtering through branches overhead, you might question how a plant derives nutrients from light, air, soil—how one of these giants grows from a single miniscule seed.

Going farther back, you might question how the seed itself came about, how it developed from distant ancestors, and what other diverse progeny might have descended from those same ancient ones—perhaps an organism as unfamiliar as a clump of sagebrush in the Great Basin of the Rocky Mountains.

To understand something less concrete than a maple tree, you would approach it differently, observe it in a different light. A spiritual conviction or a major religious denomination, for instance, could appear far more difficult to understand.

Joseph Smith claimed he went into a grove of maples to pray; he went away with a hybrid seed planted in the deep soil of his young mind, and that seed sprouted into a new American religion.

The blessing and naming of a child, as mentioned before, is the first rite in Mormonism. It may be followed, over the years, by priesthood blessings of healing or comfort. The next rite proper involves baptism by immersion accompanied by the bestowal of the Holy Ghost and church membership. This at the age of eight or thereafter. In Mormon doctrine, eight is the age of accountability, a time when a child begins to know good from evil, when a child becomes accountable for sin. Mormons do not believe in original sin; infant baptism is considered an insult to God, as it suggests children are inherently flawed.

Those who join the church in later years are commonly known as converts, though the process is the same. The decision to be baptized is meant to be a conscious decision on the part of the baptized. For the young, in the same way that converts are taught by missionaries, often elderly couples from the congregation give personal instruction to baptism candidates—this

aside from whatever instruction might come from parents, siblings, friends, Sunday school teachers, scriptures, books.

However, I don't imagine many children raised in the church see baptism as a choice. I can't imagine many children, seven years and eleven months old, saying, "no, no, I've weighed my options and have decided to refrain from baptism." It just happens. Call it tradition or culture or parental guidance—it just happens by some ambiguous pressure that the child passes through the process. A young mind perceives something good, wants to please, to fit in.

I remember, vaguely, sitting in the front room, Ben Lomond looming large in the background, September of 1992, while Brother and Sister Gooch from our congregation—what a terrible name! Gooch!—talked with me about baptism.

"So you've decided to be baptized . . ."

"Mmm-hmm."

"The bishop sent us here today to teach you a lesson on baptism."

A shy child, I perched at the edge of the coffee table, staring past these ancient-of-days where they sat on our wooden carriage bench in front of the bay window, staring at the mountain behind them, likely wishing I was outside with my friends.

"What do you know about baptism?"

Silence. My parents were, I imagine, sitting behind me, quietly urging answers.

"Did you know Jesus himself was baptized?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Did you know John the Baptist appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery? They gave him the authority to baptize. Do you know what authority is?"

"Mmm-hmm."

“Do you know that your father has that same authority?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

I recall several details from my baptism, though I don't remember the ritual itself. October 10, 1992, the day after my birthday. Sheena Fleming then Kara Clark, Sunday school classmates dressed in all white, preceded me with their fathers, also dressed in white; first one pair, then the other, waded slowly into the baptismal font while dozens of members from the ward looked on. As I waded into the water afterward, my friend Spencer said, “Gross, you have to get into the water with all their hairspray!”—the idea being that their early-nineties hairdos were full of product and probably cooties, too. My face burned red; someone shooshed him.

My memory is blank after that, though I know what happened because I've seen and even performed baptisms since. My father held my right wrist with his left arm; I plugged my nose with my right hand and held his left wrist with my left hand; he raised his right arm to a square and spoke this prayer:

“Lee Chancey Olsen, having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

He then submerged me fully and brought me up again. I assume he hugged me before we returned to the shower in the men's room. We forgot dry underwear for me, so I had to wait in a wet white jumpsuit while a sibling ran home for a pair. The party, while waiting, congregated in the chapel. Sheena, Kara, and I were then, in turn, confirmed as members of the church and given the gift of the Holy Ghost. I can't recall it, though I know my father, my grandfathers, and a handful of uncles—all priesthood holders—stood around me in a circle and laid their hands on my head. My father spoke this prayer:

“Lee Chancey Olsen, having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, we lay our hands upon your head to confirm you a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; we say unto you, Receive the Holy Ghost.”

This portion was followed with other spiritual and temporal blessings as my father saw fit, though I don’t remember any of that. I was officially a member of the church. We celebrated my birthday, my baptism, my confirmation that night, back home. My aunt Margie gave me a new Lego set. I remember that vividly—that was a highlight of the day for me.

The following day in sacrament meeting, Sheena, Kara, and I were invited to stand alongside the bishop at the pulpit; he welcomed us as the newest members of the congregation and asked the rest of the crowd to offer a sustaining vote of membership—which they did, beaming their approval. He then gifted us with our own copies of *The Book of Mormon*, each with a small card stuck into the pages at random—a card with a picture of Jesus on one side and the Mormon Articles of Faith on the other. We walked back to our families, and the bishop continued with the meeting.

In 1842, two years before he was murdered, Joseph Smith wrote one summation of Mormon belief upon request of John Wentworth, a newspaper editor in Chicago. These thirteen articles were later canonized in Mormon scripture in *The Pearl of Great Price*. The list was not intended as a creed but a broad overview of Smith’s blossoming religion. The articles read as follows:

1. We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost;
2. We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression;
3. We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel;
4. We believe that the first

principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost; 5. We believe that a man must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof; 6. We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth; 7. We believe in the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues, and so forth; 8. We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God; 9. We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God; 10. We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and, that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory; 11. We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may; 12. We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law; 13. We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.

I memorized these articles, like the majority of Mormon children, before the age of twelve. This was one pillar of my belief, articles set to song, sung out in Primary meetings, learned by repetition, read countless times from a small card stuck in my *Book of Mormon*. They're fading now; it's been too long since I've recited them.

Mormons place a large emphasis on families. One peculiar tradition in Mormonism is called, simply, Family Home Evening. A night set aside for family time, scripture study, parental council, games and activities, treats, prayers. This is a strong part of the notion that if you bring up a child in the way he or she should go, he or she will not depart from it—at least not so far that a safe return will be impossible.

FHE for the Olsens might include dinner, a chapter of *The Book of Mormon*, a spiritual lesson from my mother, a closing prayer. Sometimes this was followed by a lecture and demonstration from my father, with his dry wit, on how to hang wet towels after a shower; he'd lead us into the bathroom, speaking as if this was a new concept, walking us through each step; we'd roll our eyes and grumble, "oh, brother, Dad, like we don't know."

Family Home Evening might entail something different altogether, like an early-evening hike in the foothills above our home, east of Henry Hall's orchards and alfalfa fields. I remember one instance of eating a picnic dinner—fried chicken, potato salad, hard rolls, store-brand soda—above the local equestrian park and gravel pit, above the canal company's retention pond. When, on the way back to the van, we came upon a stoned, bloody, rattle-less Great Basin rattler in the sagebrush alongside the road, my father's weekly lesson was an explanation that there are cruel people in the world, people who don't respect the natural beauty of God's green earth, people who'd rather display a trophy rattle than let be a wild creature.

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“Today we’re going to talk about young Joseph Smith, when he was just a kid like all of you! Joseph got an infection in his leg bone and the doctors wanted to cut off his leg.”

I think back to all the volunteer Sunday School teachers who taught us about the gospel. We drove some to tears, drove others away. We were young, rambunctious kids; we didn’t want to be there, but we made sport of it because we were all friends and what else would we do. The teachers probably didn’t want to be there, either, though they did their best to keep our attention and to present us with a faith-promoting view of Jesus and Heavenly Father and of Joseph Smith and his prophetic life.

“Then a new doctor came. That doctor said they could cut open the bone and take out the bad part and then Joseph’s leg would be OK. Back then, they didn’t have medicine to put him to sleep. The doctor asked Joseph to drink some brandy to take away the pain, but he said ‘no.’ His father held him tight, and the doctor did the operation, and Joseph’s leg was fixed! Do you think Jesus watched over Joseph that day?”

In priesthood classes—after I turned twelve, received an ordination to the Aaronic priesthood, the lesser priesthood, and moved on from Primary—the picture persisted, of Joseph as prophet of God raised up to lead His chosen people into the Promised Land, to build heaven on earth.

Instructor: “Who remembers the Tenth Article of Faith?”

Class, in unison: “We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion, the New Jerusalem, will be built upon the American continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth.”

“Very good. How about the Fifth?”



“We believe that a man must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof.”

“So how are these two related?”

Adolescent silence in a room of too-cool young men.

“Let’s talk about Joseph’s vision and his mission—”

Here, in these classes, these discussions, I was inculcated with the belief that Brother Joseph was essentially a demigod, a man among men who spoke with God face to face, who translated an ancient book of scripture, who received revelation directly from the heavens, who died a martyr’s death in a rustic jail in Carthage, Illinois, along with his brother Hyrum.

“Have any of you read Elder John Taylor’s account of Joseph’s martyrdom? Section 135? Taylor was in the room when Joseph was shot. He said ‘Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it’.”

Save Jesus only. Joseph Smith, the Prophet, has done more for the salvation of man, save Jesus only. That’s a bold claim, and Mormons believe it.

“Further, Taylor says, he ‘left a fame and name that cannot be slain. He lived great, and he died great in the eyes of God and his people; and like most of the Lord’s anointed in ancient times, has sealed his mission with his own blood . . .’”

In seminary classes held off-campus for junior high and high school students in Utah, I learned further about Joseph as the man chosen to gather the elect out of the four corners of the world. Jew and Gentile alike, Joseph lived to lead them to Zion. He was a modern day Moses, as was Brigham Young, Joseph’s successor. The similarities are striking, and seminary teachers—

Church-appointed educators who teach the Old Testament or the New Testament one year and *The Book of Mormon* or *The Doctrine and Covenants* the next—miss no opportunity to draw parallels between the two.

“Think about it, class: both were powerful men called of God to lead and intercede for the people, to receive revelation and commandments from Jehovah. Both went to the wilderness to pray, and subsequently spoke with God personally. Both communicated through a mouthpiece—Moses had his brother Aaron, Joseph had Sydney Rigdon, an educated Methodist preacher who joined Joseph early in his religious career. Think about it. Both pleaded the cause of the people in front of oppressive governments—Pharaoh and Governor Lilburn W. Boggs and President Martin Van Buren—and they later retaliated when the government would not cooperate with or protect them. Moses and Joseph died before they saw their people pass into the promised lands they had so long hoped for—Joshua led the Children of Israel, Brigham Young took charge after Joseph’s death and led the Mormons into the Salt Lake Valley.”

It all made sense; granted, it was essentially all I knew of religion. But the stories all seemed to add up. I believed God was a real being. And why not? God was the father of our spirits; we also have a heavenly mother; Jesus Christ was their son and our brother; the Father and Son are one in purpose; Heavenly Mother is hiding somewhere and we don’t really talk about her. God communicates with humankind during all periods of time—collectively through prophets and personally through the Holy Spirit. The Church of the Lamb—after the crucifixion of Jesus and martyrdom of His apostles—was corrupted over centuries of apostasy, adulteration, and misinterpretation. God called a modern-day Moses to lead the elect out of spiritual and temporal bondage. It seemed logical for modern-day Moses to be an obscure, uneducated man

living in rural America, a country cultivated by God to foster unbounded religious freedom. All part of God's plan, one big narrative arch.

## II.

Joseph Smith produced *The Book of Mormon* using a translation derived from gold plates, which, under the direction of an angel named Moroni, he retrieved from a hill near his childhood home. Thus the "Gold Bible" appellation. According to its official introduction, added in 1981 by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the book "is a volume of holy scripture comparable to the Bible" and "a record of God's dealings with ancient inhabitants of the Americas and contains the fullness of the everlasting gospel." Its parts, written by numerous prophets, were "quoted and abridged by a prophet-historian named Mormon"—thus the nickname "Mormon," initially a pejorative. It is, overwhelmingly, a dry pseudo-historical text, and perhaps Mark Twain was not far off when he called it "chloroform in print."

Drawing again from the introduction, the book: "gives an account of two great civilizations. One came from Jerusalem in 600 B.C. and afterward separated into two nations, known as the Nephites and the Lamanites. The other came much earlier when the Lord confounded the tongues at the Tower of Babel. This group is known as the Jaredites. After thousands of years, all were destroyed except the Lamanites, and they are among the ancestors of the American Indians. The crowning event recorded in the Book of Mormon is the personal ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ among the Nephites soon after His resurrection. It puts forth the doctrines of the gospel, outlines the plan of salvation, and tells men what they must do to gain peace in this life and eternal salvation in the life to come."

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Testimony meetings are common in the Mormon church. They happen monthly on the first Sunday at the congregational level and often in smaller meetings, fireside-type gatherings, and youth retreats. I never willingly offered my testimony. Something about a public profession of faith or knowledge of spiritual matters struck me as odd, and I could never differentiate between reactions to spiritual promptings and reactions to sentimental feelings. Too, my cynical side found the standard, formulaic presentation of testimony, instilled in children from the youngest age, to be empty and artificial: I know the church is true, I know Joseph Smith was a prophet, I know *The Book of Mormon* is true, etc., etc. How can a person *know* such things, anyway? These people really think they *know* what they're saying? Could we possibly modify these statements slightly? I *feel* these things are true. *My heart tells me* there is truth and goodness attached to these things. I *want* these statements to be true. I never willingly offered my testimony, but God knows I tried to build it, tried to create something within my heart and my mind.

*Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 18, verse 15, reads: "And if it so be that you should labor all your days in crying repentance unto this people, and bring, save it be one soul unto me, how great shall be your joy with him in the kingdom of my Father!" Mormons typically interpret this verse as a promise of blessings following diligent missionary work, and so it is; another reading I'll offer suggests that the "one soul" is the self, that missionary work is a sure way to convert one's self to the Gospel of Christ. Indeed, a secondary result of evangelism is increased membership; but, a primary result is personal transformation. Bring *yourself* unto Christ; anticipate the joy you will experience at present and in the future, in the kingdom of your Father! I made the conscious decision to serve a mission largely because I wasn't entirely converted

myself, because I wanted to know for myself that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was God's true church on the earth. I wanted to bring *myself*.

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, *If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free . . .*

When I turned nineteen in 2003, I decided to dedicate two years of my life to service as a full-time missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The mission trip is a rite of passage for thousands of young Mormon men and women, and a service opportunity for thousands of elderly couples and individuals. Yearly, more than sixty thousand Mormon missionaries serve worldwide in various part- and full-time capacities. The custom was initiated before the Church was formally organized, and it never slowed. Joseph Smith and other early Mormons, channeling ancient evangelical fervor, proselyted throughout the United States and Canada. Missionaries were soon being sent abroad, primarily to England, where converts joined by the thousand—including my Grandma Margaret's pioneer forbearers.

My ancestors on my father's side emigrated from Denmark to Utah with the earliest pioneers, and some returned to Denmark as missionaries. My father's parents served two missions in South Africa; my father himself served in Ireland; my older brother served in Alabama, as did a brother-in-law, coincidentally. I saw friends serve Mormon missions in the United States, Mexico, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Russia, Spain, Singapore, Malaysia, Romania, Uruguay, and elsewhere. Most recently, from January 2012 to December 2013, my parents served an administrative mission in Nairobi, Kenya.

I applied for service during March 2004, in my second semester at university. When the acceptance letter came one month later, early afternoon, I stuffed it into my rucksack along with a bottle of water and drove our family van to the foothills above our home. Climbing through crusty late-spring snow and scraggly scrub oak, I made my way to the top of a large outcropping we call Big Rock. With my hometown stretching away from me to the west, and Ben Lomond brooding to the north, I opened the envelope.

“Brother Lee Chancey Olsen, You are hereby called to serve in the Canada Toronto West Mission. It is anticipated that you will serve for a full two years. Please send a formal letter of acceptance . . .”

The feeling was epiphanic, and my eyes watered and blurred as I read those words.

*Canada . . . Toronto . . . Sounds right, sounds inspired.*

In the spring air, the pure afternoon light, the call came with a perfect sense of clarity I identified as inspiration, as a testament from the Holy Ghost that I was on the path God wanted me to follow. I lingered there, wiping away scant tears, grinning, looking north along the ridgeline toward the peak, turning west, south, to gaze out over Plain City, Hooper, Roy, Ogden, Great Salt Lake, its islands and the mountains beyond. Later that night, I gathered with my family and a handful of friends to re-read the letter. I cried, family cried, friends laughed, we all laughed. I was going on a mission to Ontario.

Faith in God is a tricky concept, never mind testimony or spiritual knowledge. Paul said in his epistle to the Hebrews, “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” This is a go-to definition of faith in Mormonism, as in all Christian faiths. Another go-to Mormonist treatment comes in “The Book of Alma,” chapter 32, in *The Book of Mormon*, where

the prophet Alma speaks of faith as a seed planted in the soul, a good seed that brings forth delicious fruit when nourished diligently. His version of the Pauline maxim reads: “faith is not a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.” Alma spoke to a group of people who wanted proof of Deity; he rebuked them, saying, “there are many who do say: If thou wilt show unto us a sign from heaven, then we shall know of a surety; then we shall believe. Now I ask, is this faith? . . . Nay; for if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe, for he knoweth it.” Incidentally, knowledge isn’t a principle of Christianity generally, nor of Mormonism specifically; faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the principle, not knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ; and, as Alma seems to me to suggest, the assertion of knowledge eliminates faith, makes faith a moot point. (Never mind the relation between professed knowledge of The Truth and its ugly sibling Dogma.) But the desire for a sign, the desire to know, the tendency to proclaim certainty, it’s all so human. It’s upsetting to entertain the notion that perhaps, after all, we really know nothing. So much easier to sleep at night if we can say, “I know this or that is true,” without questioning. It’s disheartening to walk into the darkness of doubt and uncertainty. But that’s what faith is: walking into the dark and hoping the light follows. If the light doesn’t follow, well, I don’t know. You can keep walking into the dark, you can do an about-face and head back to where you started, or you can go off at an angle and see what happens.

In June 2004, I said goodbye to family, friends, and my girlfriend, Hannah, and entered a missionary training center in Provo, Utah, near Brigham Young University—the Mormon Bubble as it’s called fondly. For three weeks I studied *The Book of Mormon* and other facets of Mormonism with returned-missionary instructors and thousands of outgoing missionaries—

elders and sisters. To Mormons, all males are brothers, all females are sisters; brothers become elders when they are ordained to the Melchizedek, or higher, priesthood; this is the first office of the higher priesthood; women are not ordained to a priesthood.

We gathered in small classes for personal instruction and in a large gymnasium for talks from general authorities, upper-tier leaders, of the Church. We prayed and we sang: “Called to serve Him, heav’nly King of Glory / Chosen e’er to witness for His Name / Far and wide, we tell the Father’s story / Far and wide His love proclaim . . .” I hated that song. Too upbeat and cheery, it sounded like a pep rally piece rather than a canonized hymn. But, the energy was undeniable: we were missionaries, soldiers on God’s errand.

At the three-week mark, with the Toronto West group, I pulled an all-nighter, finishing last-minute letters and packing my luggage for the second time. At 4:30am, we boarded a shuttle bound for the Salt Lake City International Airport. We flew out as the sun rose over the Wasatch Mountains, the land of my nativity.

*The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church* is, primarily, a collection of Joseph Smith’s revelations concerning prophecies, doctrines, church administration, missionary work, and so on. The collection is canonized as one of four books comprising Mormonism’s “standard works,” the others being the Holy Bible, *The Book of Mormon*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*. These constitute the entirety of Mormon doctrine. If a teaching, a policy, a comment, a conjecture cannot be firmly grounded in these scriptures, it is not Mormon doctrine. During June of 1829, Joseph Smith claimed a revelation, from Jesus Christ, which was later recorded as Section 18 of *The Doctrine and Covenants*. The first five verses have Christ assuring Smith, and the Church generally, that the scriptures are true. “I give unto you a commandment, that you rely upon the



things which are written; For in them are all things written concerning the foundation of my church, my gospel, and my rock,” Christ says. “If you shall build up my church, upon the foundation of my gospel and my rock, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you.” Christ as the Word then issues the following pillar of his doctrine: “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God; For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him” (verses 10–11). Here we see, as in numerous scriptural cases, the core of Christianity: Jesus Christ sacrificed his life in order that all humans might be redeemed from spiritual death. This is the message of the Bible; this is the message of all Mormon scripture; this is the message of Joseph Smith and his colleagues. And their assumed work was to spread the word, to build the fully-restored Church of Christ.

On my first full day in Ontario, downtown Hamilton, I walked out of the apartment building with my missionary companion, Elder Clifford, and he challenged me to bear my testimony of the restored gospel to the first person we encountered. As we rounded the corner, headed into the parking lot of the neighboring convenience store, we approached a man.

“Excuse me, sir—” He looked at me as if I had horns protruding from my forehead. “We’re missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of—” He blew past me with no further acknowledgement.

*O God, I thought, what have I gotten myself into?*

“It’s OK, Elder Olsen, try again with the next person.”

And I did. I was soon in the habit of talking to every person who would pause long enough to hear me out as we walked between teaching appointments or meetings. Street

contacting and door knocking required quick thinking on the feet; it was a challenge, but also a game of sorts, trying different approaches on people, trying to get them to stop for a moment, to smile, trying to get them to listen to our message. Teaching was slower paced; once we had a captive audience, we'd ask to offer a prayer; we'd teach them a few points of the restored gospel as found in Mormon scripture; we'd then try to answer questions and concerns they had before we invited them to read from *The Book of Mormon* and to pray to know God's will for them. If we were talking to people on the street or in a park, the conversations didn't typically last more than ten minutes; if we met someone in their home, we'd stay for no longer than one hour.

*Remember . . . the worth of souls is great in the sight of God . . .*

Ontario is a beautiful province. Though a mountain lover and a desert rat, I was smitten by the rolling green countryside and farmland, the Great Lakes, Niagara Falls, lake country, cottage country. Low skies and deep snow during winter months made me feel at home.

And the people—the people. There's a mission-related phenomenon I'll call “growing to love the people.” Elder Clifford, my so-called trainer, suggested this effect when we first met at the mission office, the day I flew into Toronto. I mocked him inside my head—mocked him for sounding like such a bleeding heart. But I grew to love the people with a charitable wholeness I hadn't felt before and haven't felt since. Something about being beholden to a society as an unprofitable servant brought out an altruistic feeling I never would have imagined.

On a daily basis I studied Mormon scripture, writings of contemporary church leaders, church publications, and missionary manuals. Metatexts, I might call these: texts that talk about, talk around, add to the scriptures and the doctrines found in them. Primary and secondary study

goals alternated: one day I wanted to be a great teacher of what I held to be true; the next day I wanted to hold true what I was teaching.

Almost every day I taught people in their homes, in church buildings, on the streets, all about the Mormon Church and its theology. I challenged people to develop a personal testimony of Jesus Christ and invited them to be baptized, if upon investigation of Mormon Christianity they felt baptism was right for them. I served the Church and the communities in which I lived, by delivering sermons, teaching Sunday school, teaching ESL, working in soup kitchens, performing physical labor, and so on. It was a difficult journey, at least emotionally and spiritually. I met daily doubt, frustration, and occasional anti-Mormon slander. I engaged in endless discussions about the truthfulness of Mormonism and the validity of our work. I approached and talked to strangers every single day, which is indeed a strange notion anymore.

Many missionaries operated on the “fake it till you make it” approach (it’s fine if you don’t have a testimony! just keep teaching and testifying and praying, and it’ll come! keep walking into the darkness, and the light will eventually follow). I prayed every day for a testimony, for conviction, for patience and charity. I prayed to know God personally. When anticipated responses didn’t come, I’d become devastated, I’d curse God, I’d pray to disappear, to become a non-entity. I was still a teenager, tainted by residual angst and an overwhelming desire to make my own way in life, anxious to be an outstanding individual. But, there I was, humbling myself, praying for forgiveness of my arrogance.

Following years of worship service and scripture study, certain lines are embedded in my mind, and they circulate, touching down here and there in my consciousness.

*Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest, Jesus said. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls, he said. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light . . .*

As a young missionary, expected to observe the protocol of mission life with exact obedience, I missed my pre-mission life. I missed cycling, hiking, backpacking, rock climbing, snowboarding, longboarding, cliff-jumping. I missed sleeping late, watching movies, reading non-Mormon books. I missed being a student and making money. I missed late nights with friends, cruising into Ogden on Washington Boulevard in borrowed cars, bonfires, dates with girls, making small talk and making out in dark places. I missed my family. We wrote weekly, though we were only allowed to talk on the phone twice each year, once on Christmas Day and once on Mothers' Day.

I missed Hannah. At times I felt care packages, letters, and pictures from her were the only things that kept me going. There's an unwritten guarantee embedded in Mormon mission lore: serve faithfully, with perfect obedience, and you'll be rewarded with a choice wife or husband when you return home. She certainly fit the bill: she was tall, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, beautiful and sweet, soft-spoken, kind, loving, positive and cheerful always. And I was an emissary abroad, struggling to spread the word, and everything she sent to me was an emblem of her abiding love, a promise of our future together. We were going to get married, and we both knew it. Young love, long distance—it made good, romantic sense at the time.

The LDS Church divides the entire world into areas, regions, stakes, wards, and branches—divisions overseen by male priesthood leaders. Missions are laid over these divisions, subdivided

into zones, districts, and areas, and overseen by mission presidents and their wives. My two years were spent under the leadership of Alan Ashton—a wealthy businessman from Utah—and his wife, Karen. They were like a second set of parents to most missionaries. Every six weeks, they would meet with each zone for a day of prayer, singing, talks, and testimonies. These were “Zone Conferences,” something to look forward to every six weeks.

As our ecclesiastical leader, President Ashton would also conduct interviews to check on our mental and spiritual wellbeing; Sister Ashton assumed a similar, less formal role. I often confessed to President Ashton that, while I enjoyed what I was doing, more or less, I didn’t feel the conviction I wanted, didn’t feel certain of the truthfulness of the gospel. I told him I was often depressed. And I knew I wasn’t alone. Many missionaries struggle with depression and anxiety; many leave before two years are up, including my closest friend in the mission; many are sent home following bouts of philandering and even violence (“apostasy,” we called this). Mostly there were simply classic cases of homesickness. Generally speaking, there are two types of missionaries: those who admit homesickness and those who lie about it.

During one interview, President Ashton offered an interesting thought: he suggested that depression is *spiritual* homesickness. We know somewhere in our minds where we came from and where we’re going: heaven, the celestial kingdom of God. See, the crudeness of this temporal world is offensive, abrasive to our spiritual sensitivities; we are wanderers desperate for our heavenly home.

Of all the stories in *The Book of Mormon*, the story of Alma the Younger was always a favorite for me. This Alma is a rabble rouser and a carouser who goes around with his friends trying to convince people that the church, led by his father, Alma, is false. Like Saul on the road to

Damascus, Alma the Younger experiences a heavenly visitation and sinks into a comatose state; in utter spiritual darkness, he recalls the words of his father about a divine Savior and he prays, *O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.* As soon as he utters this prayer, he is released from spiritual torment. With his also-converted friends, he spends the rest of his life doing good and teaching others about the atoning power of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

“Boys, how do you know what you’re saying is true? You’re so young!”

Much of our time as missionaries was spent knocking on doors, talking to pedestrians, canvassing neighborhoods, row houses, housing projects, apartment buildings, malls, parks, looking for everyone and anyone who’d talk to us. Whether you know it or not, you’ve probably seen missionaries in every town you’ve ever lived in.

“Sure, we’re young, but we know because we’ve studied and prayed about it—you can, too—you don’t have to take our word for it.”

“Were you raised Mormon? Have you ever known anything different?”

“I was, but, but I know—”

All day, every day. Each day the same, but different, for two years.

We were like amateur anthropologists: we classified and counted the types of responses we heard, analyzed people based on their varied rejections.

“No.” Just *no*. That was a common one.

“Sorry, no time.” That was common, too. Got it, we’d say, no time for God.

“I was raised Catholic and I see no reason to change.” Check. Cath-a-holic, we’d say, just out of earshot. I hear that’s really hard to cure, we’d say.

“I figure I’ll be fine so long as I live a good life and treat people right.”

*Check.*

“I know you; you’re the Jehovah’s Witnesses.” *Check.* “I know what you’re about . . .”

*Do you? Because I’m not sure we know what we’re about.*

“Get the hell off my porch, or I’m calling the cops. Don’t come back. Got it?”

*Check. Why so angry?*

“Nope.”

*Check.*

“NO.”

*Check.*

“No, sorry.”

No, no, no. Check, check, check. Dear God, please help me to know that the Gospel is true and that what I’m doing is right. Please, give me a sign, help me to feel it in my heart. Give me patience.

Among the most common questions we were asked as missionaries, by those patient enough or open-minded enough or curious to speak with us, are these: How is your church, your faith, any different than other Christian churches? And why should anyone join your church?

That’s simple, we’d tell them. Ours is God’s living church; we are led by Christ through a living prophet (it was Gordon Hinckley at the time; you might recognize him from Larry King’s show). We have the fullness of Christ’s gospel, as well as the authority to act in his name to perform saving ordinances. This is the holy priesthood. We also have a second volume of

scripture, *The Book of Mormon*, which is another testament of Jesus Christ; it complements and completes the Bible.

We don't come to take away the beliefs you already hold dear, we'd say. We come to add to the truths you value. We believe membership in our church will bring you great happiness in this life and eternal life with your family in the eternities.

*And if it so be that you should labor all your days in crying repentance unto this people . . .*

*. . . and bring, save it be one soul unto me . . . how great shall be your joy . . .*

I attended my last zone conference during May 2006. I was training a new missionary at the time, Elder Phillip Call from California. I was trying my damndest to show him that missions could be fun, that they could be an opportunity to help others regardless of the missionary's motivations or beliefs. He was homesick and depressed; his family wasn't active in the church and they didn't support his decision to serve a mission. We had endless conversations about testimony and conviction; some of the best occurring late at night, after our curfew, when we'd walk around the corner for pizza from a restaurant operated by Turkish immigrants. My overall message to Elder Call: "Be yourself, and people will love you for it. Do the right things for the right reasons, and you'll be happy when the day is done." Those were lessons I'd spent two years learning, amidst all the spiritual anguish and the longing for a conviction of my own.

At the end of that conference, I stood to give my "dying testimony" with a handful of departing missionaries. When my turn came, I plagiarized a talk given by a popular bygone general authority of the church: Hugh B. Brown's "God is the Gardener." I spoke soaringly: "Growing up in northern Utah, on the foothills of North Ogden, my father kept several fruit trees



in the yard. The rocky soil is perfect for cherry, peach, and apple orchards. As I got older, he began to teach me how to prune these fruit trees in order to help them produce the best fruit possible. Eventually, he sent me out to prune the trees on my own. After the first go-around, he told me that I hadn't cut away enough wood; he told me to do it again. I did, but it still wasn't enough. He sent me out a third time to trim away, and I did. Only then was he satisfied. Months and months later, when the trees were heavy with ripe fruit, I understood. And so it is with us as missionaries: until we cut away all our pride and selfishness, until we strip our beliefs down to the fundamentals, the fruit of testimony can't begin to grow in our hearts."

By this time, I was crying, as was most everyone else—not based upon my testimony solely, but upon those of the other missionaries and the spirit in the room, too. I continued, expressing gratitude for all the wonderful people I'd met, for the incredible experiences I'd had, for the blessing of serving as a missionary. I was tired, ready to return to Utah, to Hannah and my friends. I closed with my testimony.

"I know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, our Savior and Redeemer, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I know that through His Gospel we can find peace in this world and eternal life in the world to come . . ." I was moved by the Holy Ghost in that moment; I had a stout conviction of the words I was saying.

### III.

He said unto them, *But whom say ye that I am . . . ?*

And Simon Peter answered and said, *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*

*Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee,  
but my Father which is in heaven.*

*But whom say ye that I am . . . ?*

In June 2006, I finished my two-year stint; I was in Stoney Creek, a suburb of Hamilton, a short drive from Niagara on the shore of Lake Ontario. My father had recently retired from a job with the state, and my mother took off work for a month so they could drive from Utah to pick me up. Typically outgoing missionaries fly home, but my parents and I wanted to complete what Mormon's call fondly the Church History Tour, a tour that follows the route of the Mormon Exodus, the movement of the early Mormon church from its cradle in upstate New York to its current home in Salt Lake City. It is, practically speaking, Mormon pilgrimage. To visit each site on the tour is tantamount to visiting Mecca, the Holy Land, or the bodhi tree in India. One of my sisters, Cami, flew in from Utah to join us and, after visiting people and towns that constituted my life for the preceding two years, we drove into New York, to the town of Palmyra.

My missionary status did not dissolve when we crossed the international border near Buffalo, as we left the geographic limit of my assigned area. I still wore a dress shirt, tie, and slacks, and my official missionary nametag, as per my mission president's request. The Mormon mission is an official church calling for which the elder or sister, as they are called, is set apart, ordained, formally. I had not yet been released from my calling.

The white shirt, necktie, and nametag were not outstanding when we arrived in Palmyra because so many people there are familiar with the Mormon Church. Numerous strangers greeted me with a smile and the same coded question: "Hey, Elder! Are you coming or going?"

*Ah, a riddle: "Depends on how you look at it."*

“Well, are you coming to serve or are you going home?”

“Can’t you tell by the jaded look in my eyes?”

“Haahh!”

This elicited polite laughs every time. Persons willing to instigate a conversation with a Mormon missionary are typically amused by anything the missionary has to say—unless, of course, that person is looking to tear down the missionary and set straight the record on Mormonism.

“I’m headed back to Utah. I served in Ontario. Toronto West Mission.”

“That’s great! How was it?”

“Loved it.”

“That’s really great, Elder.”

*Can’t you tell by the jaded look in my eyes?*

Seeing Palmyra was stepping into a history book I had read, defended, and taught for two years. This small community was the childhood home of Joseph Smith. Near the Smith family home—a structure preserved to this day as a visitor center and museum of life in early nineteenth-century America—stands a grove of sugar maple trees commonly known to Mormon’s as the Sacred Grove. Here, following religious investigation and prayer, Joseph Smith claimed that God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ appeared to him. They spoke to him, face to face, just as Jehovah of the Old Testament spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. They told Joseph no church of the time had a fullness of Christ’s Gospel, and they called him to bring Christ’s Church out of the wilderness, to restore it to its fullness in preparation for the Second Coming.

I knew this place. I knew the story. I described it hundreds of times as a missionary in Ontario, going so far as to memorize portions of Joseph Smith's own account: *I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun . . . I saw two personages whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air; one of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other, This is my beloved son, hear him.* I recited the words to anyone willing to listen.

Outside a restaurant in downtown Hamilton, Ontario, the summer before, King Street, my mission companion and I stop to talk to a young man smoking in the shade. The province, nestled among the Great Lakes, is humid in the summer, uncomfortably hot. Long days spent on the edge of irritation, we prayed for people to listen to us. Actually prayed, standing in parks or alleyways, under the guise of consulting a street map, we'd pray to God for someone who'd hear our message. The young man, dressed in T-shirt, work pants, boots, asks what we are doing walking around in the heat in dress clothes and nametags. This was, mind you, before we were the subject of a Tony-Award-winning Broadway musical.

"We're missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—the Mormons. Maybe you've heard of our church."

"We meet at 1 Jarvis, in the basement of the Ministry of Labor."

Everyone in Hamilton knew the building; they were amazed to know our congregation met in the windowless basement of that sterile concrete building.

"But you look so young for missionaries!"

"We are—we're both nineteen."

"What do you guys do, exactly?"

“We invite people to hear a message about Jesus Christ and his teachings, about how those teachings can bring peace and understanding into our lives. We’re also inviting people to attend church services and to read *The Book of Mormon*, another volume of scripture that we have—like the Bible—it’s a testimony of Christ written by ancient prophets.”

*Does that sum it up? Make sense? Sound natural? Am I talking too fast?*

“We can give you a free copy if you’re interested.”

He looks interested, or at least respectful enough to listen. Enough that I forget momentarily about the muggy heat, the blisters, the chafing, the traffic, the hot-trash smell of city streets in summer, the industrial drone of steel mills several blocks away on Lake Ontario.

“Have you heard of Joseph Smith? It’s actually an amazing story. He translated the book. He was a prophet of God called to restore the fullness of the gospel. God spoke to him, personally in a grove of trees . . .”

He bends slowly to snub out his cigarette on the sidewalk: “Really?”

*He’s taking this seriously—somewhat—this is great.*

“Close to here, too. In New York State. He wanted to know which church was true, so he went into a grove of trees and prayed to know which was true.”

“OK—”

“Jesus Christ and God the Father appeared and told him no church was perfect.”

Back and forth. Teamwork. Our presentations may as well be choreographed.

“They called him to build up Christ’s church just as it existed when Christ himself was on the earth and immediately afterward, to bring together all the truth and practices. Joseph didn’t start his own church or religion—he restored Christ’s church.”

“Wow, that’s crazy.” He seems genuinely curious—though baffled at finding himself in such a bizarre situation. “I’ve never even heard of this before.”

“We can teach you more and you can read for yourself.” Perhaps a bit too anxious; we are, after all, desperate for people to listen to our story, to validate our conviction in some way.

“I’m pretty busy with work, but maybe I can visit your church sometime.”

*He’s flaking—be persistent.* The heat’s back in full, morale’s wilting.

“Here’s a card with some contact info—you can get in touch or go to our website—”

“Thanks guys,” he says, moving toward his friends as they step out of the restaurant.

*He went into a grove and prayed about it and God appeared in a pillar of light.*

In the last chapter of *The Book of Mormon*, Mormon, the prophet-historian who abridged the records that became the text, speaks to his son, Moroni, the angel who would eventually appear to Joseph Smith and direct him to the gold plates. Mormon gives Moroni a prophetic promise concerning the record, which becomes a promise to all readers:

I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things. . . . that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things.

Mormon missionaries and other members issue this promise daily; this is the test by which the sincere in heart may come to know of the truthfulness of *The Book of Mormon*, of its divinity, and, in turn, of the truthfulness of Joseph Smith’s mission and his church. Many sum up this

relationship in what they hold as a simple aphorism: If *The Book of Mormon* is true, then Joseph Smith was a Prophet; if Joseph Smith was a Prophet, then *The Book of Mormon* is true!

The Sacred Grove harbors a peaceful atmosphere, one conducive to reflection, especially for followers of Brother Joseph's religion, those who believe that Deity indeed condescended to visit young Joseph in this wooded area nearly two hundred years ago. Sugar maples grow densely there; wood-chipped paths meander throughout; a split-rail fence marks a former property boundary. A lawnmower whirred in the distance as we strolled around speaking in subdued tones about the notion of the creator of the universe existing bodily in this exact location. My mom broke away to pray alone; my dad walked along, hands clasped behind his back, staring up into the green canopy and the blueness beyond. My sister and I wandered back to the car, chatting, catching up after two years apart.

“Are you glad you did it?” she wanted to know.

“Yes.”

“Are you happy to be done?”

“Yes. I'll miss a lot of people, but I put in my time.”

. . . *I saw a pillar of light, exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun . . .*

Several miles from the Sacred Grove is the Hill Cumorah, where Joseph and his wife Emma purportedly recovered the ancient gold plates from which they extracted *The Book of Mormon*. Thousands of people are drawn each year to this sparsely-populated farm country characterized by rolling green hills and second- or third-growth forests. They go to see a modern visitors'

center surrounded by sprawling lawns, manicured shrubbery, and monuments built to Joseph's honor. They go there, like we did, to ground their beliefs in a real place, a physical setting.

*This is where it all started, and I'm finally here, I thought.*

As we wandered around the visitors' center, two female missionaries identified me as one of their own and invited us to join a small group of tourists for a presentation. We watched a short church-produced video on the life of Joseph Smith. I'd seen it about one hundred times before, used it myself as a missionary to offer church members and non-members alike a brief overview of the prophet's experience.

After the film, the missionaries asked me to bear testimony of the prophet. I stood and shared a few thoughts. *I had the blessing of teaching and serving people—I know God lives—I know Joseph Smith was a prophet, just like Moses and Abraham and Jacob and Joseph—The Book of Mormon is a true book that testifies of Christ and it complements the Bible—I've read and prayed about these things. I know. I know.*

I sat down; the missionaries thanked us for visiting. Everyone in the room was moved, some to tears, by the Spirit of God. Or perhaps sentimentality. We trooped out together, shaking hands, thanking, smiling, dabbing at tears, knowing.

Our next major stop was Kirtland, Ohio, on the shore of Lake Erie, where Joseph and the saints built their first temple before being driven out by bad debts and unhappy neighbors. It was here, in the upper chapel of the temple, that Joseph and his associate Oliver Cowdery—as recorded in *The Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 110 verses two and three—had visions of Jesus Christ.

Joseph wrote the following description:



We saw the Lord standing on the breastwork of the pulpit, before us; and under his feet was a paved work of pure gold, in color like amber. His eyes were as a flame of fire; the hair of his head was white like the pure snow; his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun; and his voice was as the sound of the rushing of great waters, even the voice of Jehovah.

The purpose of the divine visitation: the deliverance of further priesthood keys, further authority to act in God's name, as part of the restoration of the fullness of the Gospel. When the vision of Jesus Christ closed, the prophets Moses, Elias, and Elijah appeared and committed to Smith the keys of this, the final dispensation of the gospel.

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the first of numerous splinter groups, known commonly as the Community of Christ, operates the temple as a visitors' center. Joseph Smith's son Joseph III and others founded this church after Joseph's death. Joseph's first wife, Emma, later joined them when Brigham Young ostracized her and led his contingent to Utah Territory.

I felt strange there. The humility of the presentation, no Mormon missionaries leading tours, no pomp aside from a small information center on the grounds. Because the mainstream Mormon church is so concerned with preserving historical sites, I was surprised to think that they hadn't bought this temple from the Community of Christ—though maybe they'd tried.

I was confounded, too, to stand still in a quiet place where, like the grove in Palmyra, Joseph Smith claimed to have seen and spoken with Deity. Pacing around the pews and pulpits of that upper chapel, the dark-stained hardwood, the whitewashed walls, the imperfect glass of tall windows back-lit by sun filtered through dense trees, I tried to imagine a heavenly visitation, Jesus Christ, angelic messengers, bowed supplicants eager for revelation.

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Someone gave me the following analogy, though I can't remember who. I won't take credit for it. Organized religion is the scaffolding we utilize as we build the temple of our faith in our hearts and in our minds. The scaffolding is not the end goal. Like the Zen Buddhist finger pointing at the moon, the scaffolding is a means unto an end. It should not be the focus of our spiritual lives. Certainly, a scaffold with no in-progress temple behind would be ridiculous; but a temple with no scaffolding, well, that wouldn't be so odd.

We stopped again on the banks of the Mississippi River, in Nauvoo, Illinois, where Joseph and the saints built a second temple and a city that rivaled Chicago for size and population at the time. The saints were forced out of this city, too, after Joseph was murdered, and it became a run-down backwater slum for several years. An arsonist burned the temple's interior; the white stone structure was damaged by a tornado and torn down; the stone blocks were used for other projects. Eventually the Mormon Church bought the entire area, so it seems, and turned it into a museum-like example of a mid-nineteenth-century town. The church rebuilt the temple, a replica of the original. The rites and rituals first revealed to Joseph are performed there to this day.

We were in Nauvoo on a Sunday, so we attended Sunday services at the Mormon chapel. Because so many members visit Nauvoo each summer, special sacrament meetings are held to accommodate all the visitors. In the same fashion as every other ward or branch in North America, the church in Nauvoo is built with a large chapel that opens at the back end, through folding doors, into a cultural hall and gymnasium that serves as overflow seating.

Growing up Mormon in northern Utah, and serving as a missionary in Ontario, I visited dozens of chapels built on the same plan. I sat through countless hours of worship meetings in

these chapels. I attended ward dinners, Christmas parties, pancake-breakfast fundraisers, youth dances, and basketball games in these gymnasiums. It was in churches like this, in worship services and Sunday school, through Mormon scripture and Mormon lore that I was taught of Jesus Christ and Joseph Smith. Clear back to Nursery, Primary, and Sunday School, back when everything was simple and easy to stomach.

Even then, it made sense that tourists, our people, would drive to Nauvoo in their passenger vans and their RVs and their rental cars to see the city the saints built, to see where Joseph and Emma Smith lived and raised a city of God. Of course we would all gather on Sunday to partake of the sacrament, to sing soul-stirring hymns, to listen to lay ministers speak about Jesus Christ and Joseph Smith and the persecuted saints and the Bible and *The Book of Mormon*. It made sense that, after seeing where Joseph lived, my parents and sister and I would drive to Carthage to see where he died.

*. . . I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it rested upon me . . . when the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air . . .*

When we got to the jailhouse, which is now, of course, a Church-owned visitors' center, we were met by sister missionaries who took us on a tour and explained to us the events of Joseph's murder as related by John Taylor.

“In *Doctrine and Covenants* Section 135,” one missionary commented, “we read that Joseph and his brother Hyrum ‘were shot in Carthage Jail, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June, 1844, about five o'clock p.m., by an armed mob—painted black—of from 150 to 200 persons.’ We know the

exact time because Willard Richards' watch stopped a bullet and saved his life, and marked the time of the attack.”

“Yes,” the other chimed in, continuing the recitation: ““Hyrum was shot first and fell calmly, exclaiming: *I am a dead man!* Joseph leapt from the window, and was shot dead in the attempt, exclaiming: *O Lord my God!* They were both shot after they were dead, in a brutal manner, and both received four balls’.”

We viewed the room in which Joseph and Hyrum Smith, the prophet and patriarch, and John Taylor and Willard Richards, two elders in the church, were held until the shooting began. Afterward, we stood in the courtyard below, staring up at the window from which Joseph fell. Joseph was alive when he hit the ground. The mob watched as he pulled himself into a slumped position against a curbstone before he died. Then, someone yelled that the Mormons were coming to retaliate—they were not, actually—and the mob disbanded.

*O Lord, my God!* I thought. *Joseph died here—a prophet of God died RIGHT here.*

I stood there, near the well where Joseph died. I choked up and fought off tears. In that moment, I felt sure that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God and that he gave his life for the cause he had espoused. The Holy Spirit moved me. I felt in my heart that it was true and I translated that feeling into Truth.

*. . . I saw two personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air . . . one of these spake unto me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*

I knew. *Thought.* Thought I knew. At times truth seems so simple, and I wish it was simple. In

this moment, I can't say with any level of conviction that I ever knew it was true. It's dizzying to face the notion that I, in reality, knew nothing and know nothing still.

People ask me where I went astray, at which point I broke from Mormonism. They ask if there was one particular moment, some monumental event when the artifice crumbled, when the bottom went out. No, no, there was no moment, only process, a process of growing in the mind.

*Can't you tell by the jaded look in my eyes?*

But when were the seeds of doubt sown? At what point did the skepticism, the cynicism set in? Did it have something to do with spending too many hours as a child in the hallway, under the swamp cooler on summer afternoons, scanning *Reader's Digest* and *National Geographic*? Was it a matter of watching too much Bill Nye during elementary school? Too many Friday nights in the basement watching re-run episodes of *The X-Files* in junior high? Too much punk rock? Perhaps I can place some blame on my young reading of *Walden*?

One truthful response I have: reading led me away from faith.

My parents encouraged me always to read as much as possible. Not just spiritual books. Many memories of my mother involve her sitting on the floor between her bed and her bookcase, space heater at her feet, reading and re-reading *Les Mis*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and so on. I'd flop down on the bed, stare at the ceiling.

"Mom, I need a good book to read."

"Read this."

"*The Grapes of Wrath*? What's it about?"

"It's about a very poor family that leaves their home looking for work in California during the Great Depression—they have all sorts of problems on the way. It's really sad, but you'll like it."

I wonder, though: did authors like Thoreau and Steinbeck implant beliefs and views, or did reading merely foster beliefs and views that already existed? Tough questions from within and from without. How does a tender plant rooted in Mormondom grow away from the faith?

When we left Carthage, Illinois, and its rustic jail, we drove to Hannibal, Missouri, to see the childhood home of Samuel Clemens—Mark Twain, a man who once traveled to Salt Lake City, Utah, and met Brigham Young—a proficient author who mocked Joseph Smith’s *Book of Mormon*. In his home, now a museum, we browsed through his books and other items that were being sold to support the museum.

“Thought any more about becoming an English teacher?” my dad asked.

“Yes.” Having always been passionate about reading and having enjoyed teaching as a missionary, I figured I’d do well to earn a PhD, to try for a professorship.

Before we left, I convinced him to buy an audiobook version of C.S. Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*. I read *Mere Christianity* when I was serving in Stratford, Shakespeare Capital of North America. It wasn’t approved missionary material; Christian contraband at its finest. I’d like to believe that he converted to Mormonism in the afterlife. The four of us listened to *Screwtape*’s diabolic view of Christianity as we continued westward.

*My Dear Wormwood . . .*

Joseph’s portion of the Mormon Exodus was over. We were on Brigham’s turf then, following the route and covering the miles that divided the Brighamites from the Josephites, the mainstream Mormons under Young’s direction from the reorganized Mormons under Joseph Smith III’s direction.

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Our last major stop was Martin's Cove, a mountain defile where a group of Mormon pioneers camped one winter while trying to make their way to Salt Lake City. They started too late in the year; they were not prepared; many of them died. When we rolled out of the car, it was hot and dusty, hard to imagine people freezing to death there. My sister and I sat on a wooden bench in the visitors' center, in the air conditioning, watching yet another informational video. The man beside me, a fellow Mormon tourist, smelled like stale sweat.

Whispering, I joked to Cami: "This guy's taking things a little bit too far. Probably walked here and hasn't showered for weeks. Where are mom and dad?"

"They're talking with someone outside."

"I'm ready to be home. All these tours are starting to run together." I loosened my tie and tugged at my collar. "I don't know why I agreed to stay in mission garb. Should've asked President Ashton to release me before we left."

*People died for this, I thought, lots of people. Died trying to get to Utah, for religious freedom, for the ideals of Mormonism.*

Leaving the hotel the following morning, in Cheyenne, Wyoming, Dad and I chatted in the hall.

It was the last morning of our pilgrimage.

"You know, if you feel good about things with Hannah when you get home, you shouldn't wait to get married."

"Hmm."

"Marriage will bring you a lot of happiness."

"I want to focus on school. I want to travel before I settle down."

“Get married first and your wife can join you for all of that.”

“Doesn’t work that way, Dad.” Most of my married friends said that, but ended up in dead-end jobs, trying to make ends meet. Settled for degrees that got them out of university and into a career as soon as possible. *That’s what Andy did when he got home from Alabama, I thought. You did the same thing. Everyone does the same thing. I’m not doing the same thing.*

We were all tired from the trip, from experiencing too much church history in a two-week period. We drove without talking much, pulled up to our house in North Ogden later that evening as the sun was setting over Great Salt Lake. The rest of my siblings were there to greet us, along with their spouses and children. They had strung a banner across the garage: *Welcome Home, Elder Uncle Lee*. We laughed and we cried and we hugged, and I made plans to meet Hannah.

#### IV.

Summer storms along the Wasatch Front, the wind, the earthy aroma, the meager rain is home. Billowing thermals in the west, over Oquirrh, Pilot, and Newfoundland Ranges, anvil-headed behemoths, always late afternoon after arid land opposite Great Salt Lake absorbs to a breaking point. The snap of thunder smells of ozone and scant rain on dust and sage. Virga hangs like an antependium, an altar cloth, draped gently over the desert’s striated gray hardness. The wind passes eastward, following the final stage—cumulus, mature, dissipating—passes along smells of desert, of briny inland sea. “The lake effect,” people identify incorrectly when the scent, sometimes pungent, meets mountain and settles over the cities and towns: Ogden, Layton, Bountiful, Salt Lake City. Smells of marshes, mud flats, salt farms, shorebirds, seagulls, pelicans nesting on Antelope, Fremont, Stansbury, Black Rock Islands. The rarity of storms in summer



breaks the tedium of hot stillness, stillness which eventually eases into fall. The desert is home. The storms, the smells are home, too, those fleeting, transitory elements inseparably connected to the relative permanence of the land. Weather in the desert, life of the lifeless.

Two months later—two months of building custom homes for a friend’s company in the hot Utah dryness—I was back at university, completing general study courses at Weber State, preparing to declare English as my major. Working construction after class put quick cash in my pocket. I bought a vintage Toyota LandCruiser and spent weekends with friends camping in the mountains and the desert, where we’d swap mission stories around Dutch ovens and pallet fires. We were just kids when we left on our missions; we’d been asked by the church, by the culture, to do its bidding, and we had. Even then—post-mission, official manhood—we were still so, so young, and I think, in part, we wanted to be innocent kids again. We told funny stories, scary stories, crazy stories.

“In one Hmong branch in Stockton, we couldn’t get them to stop sacrificing animals, even those who joined the church fresh off the boat back in the ‘70s. They’d invite us over after sacrament meeting, and we’d show up while they were preparing the animals. We couldn’t stop them; it was too much a part of their culture . . .”

“We once taught this guy in Boca Ratone who smoked like a chimney. We had to do laundry every time we visited cuz we came away smelling like death. He read the entire *Book of Mormon* in three days and filled it with notes. But he was crazy, full of conspiracy theories. Couldn’t stop talking about ‘Nam, how he’d had his junk blown off while flying a Huey . . .”

“We taught one guy while helping him build a house in Samara on land he didn’t own. Squatter’s rights. He was always running around shirtless in a speedo and work boots. He was baptized after I left the area . . . I wonder what happened to that guy . . .”

“We were visiting an investigator once in the projects. On the way out, we ran into a couple hood-rat teenagers we’d gotten into an altercation with weeks before. Well, this second time we saw them, they started shouting, ‘that’s them, that’s them!’ They ran inside the complex, and one of them came out with a four-foot sword, with it raised over his shoulder, like this, like it was the Crusades or something, asking if we still wanted to mess with them! We laughed till they got embarrassed and went back inside.” That was me; I told that story.

We never told spiritual stories, no stories about lessons we taught, talks we delivered, baptisms we performed, blessings we pronounced. Never stories about the mission politics or the stress or the depression that went with missionary life. I could tell, though, from the halted conversations, the look in the eyes of my friends when these subjects were broached obliquely, that they’d suffered, too. We’d all taken the pain with the pleasure. Still, for years, I was convinced I was the only one who deeply questioned.

*. . . can’t you tell by the jaded look in my eyes . . . ?*

I was kept in my home congregation by the bishop that sent me off on my mission; he called me as a ward missionary and a Sunday school teacher for seventeen and eighteen-year-olds. Once per week I joined the full-time missionaries on teaching appointments in our town, and once per week I taught high school juniors and seniors in Sunday school. Some of them were preparing to serve missions themselves. An old feeling weighed heavy in the back of my mind, crept into my

lungs: a sneaking suspicion that I was an imposter, a hypocrite, a stranger to all this. Who was I to school these young souls on the finer points of a religion I, myself, didn't feel converted? Returned missionaries are held in high regard in Mormon culture. Returned missionaries are honored. I found it impossible to accept that honor.

Hannah and I were dating, still, but my feet were getting cold. Cold feet in the form of an ineffable anxiety deep in my chest. Part of me said it was too soon, that I hadn't dated enough, that I wasn't sure she was *the one*. Part of me said the timing was fine, that she was indeed *the one*, that I wasn't good enough for her. More precisely, that I wasn't committed to the notion of Mormon marriage. The pressure of it, the imagined pressure, seemed unbearable as a sense of doubt pervaded my life. I tried to articulate my doubts about the religion, about my inability to connect on any other than a superficial level. Hannah and I had our first post-mission break-up.

Living at the foot of a west-facing mountain means morning comes late. In North Ogden, you see it approaching from the west as the sun rises over the Wasatch Range. The position also means evenings are long, as the sun sets over Great Salt Lake, the Oquirrh, Pilots, Newfoundlands. Wake slowly as light eases eastward, replacing shadows in the valley; bid a slow goodbye to the day as the process reverses itself and dusk edges out the last of the daylight. Despite the light pollution of Ogden and Salt Lake City, night skies in this mountainous desert are expansive, decidedly dark, dense with stars.

One year after I returned from Ontario, I moved from my hometown, North Ogden, to attend Utah State University. At twenty-one, I was finally detached, living with friends, no parents, no formal affiliation with the church. I attended young single adult congregations. Meat markets, as

they're sometimes called facetiously in Mormon culture, as so many marriages spawn there (decidedly a plan on the part of the church hierarchy). I typically stayed for sacrament meeting only. The rote lessons and the banal, milquetoast conversations of Sunday School, paired with seemingly blind professions of spiritual knowledge, I couldn't handle. I was restless, unsatisfied.

Soon I was working Sundays, skipping church altogether, studying Mormon history more than Mormon theology in my free time. I began to see a broad picture of Mormon history, doctrine, and culture as I learned, here and there, the historical truths that never emerge in Sunday school or worship services. Polygamy, violence, Mountain Meadows Massacre, abuse of ecclesiastical power, inconsistent stories and testimonies, revelations proven false, Salamander Letters. Mormonism was no longer a nicely packaged, all-encompassing religion like I was taught to believe. There are loose ends, black eyes, dust swept under the carpet, holes in the argument. Where many saw a beautiful and complete picture, I came to realize, I saw a fascinating sketch in progress.

In a number of ways, however, I began to appreciate Joseph—and his church—more as I learned of his human side, when I took him off the pedestal. He was human; I am human. As I now understand it, Joseph was born poor and never lived a comfortable life, practically speaking. He lived under the burdens of poverty and debt throughout his entire life. He looked for money wherever it could be found, going as far as digging for gold, which he searched out using magical peep stones.

He believed that heaven on earth could be established only when the saints became entirely selfless, willing to consecrate all their property and all their labors to building up God's kingdom. He built numerous Mormon communities that functioned on a United Order, a theocratic and communal institution designed to eliminate social inequity.

As with gold, he looked for truth wherever it could be found. He questioned everything. He spoke to God and God spoke to him. He testified of Jesus. He was a polygamist, a drinker, a brawler. He was a bold and charismatic man of the people, but he hated to be crossed and often exhibited a harsh temper.

Joseph watched again and again as fellow citizens harassed, forced out, and murdered his followers, as they took over the communities of which he had overseen the building. He was imprisoned and sentenced to execution for leading an armed revolt against the state of Missouri, and later escaped with the help of the jailer, even as Governor Boggs was upholding an extermination order against the Mormons.

Later, Joseph was imprisoned again and murdered for his involvement in polygamy and politics and for the destruction of an anti-Mormon press, which he ordered. He and his people were oppressed not so much for their religious beliefs—they were a strange and a peculiar people—as I had once been taught, but because as a religious minority in America of the 1830s and '40s they presented a sort of political and social threat to the majority. Joseph was murdered because he broke from tradition, went his own way, and plenty of people followed him.

*. . . When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air . . .*

Hannah and I continued to see each other, here and there, but ended our relationship finally after hours, days, weeks of discussing religion, our church, and our future together, after two years of on-again, off-again. We drove up Green Canyon, a local hotspot for camping and partying, on a

Sunday afternoon. Late spring, after a mid-day rain shower. Earlier in the day, when she called, I wasn't anticipating another break-down, until—

“Lee, we need to talk . . .”

I parked in a large clearing, a group campsite, and we walked into the trees where a footpath skirts a stream and heads up the canyon. She told me she had recently rejected a marriage proposal, during a three-month period when we'd been silent. I put my arms around her, and she pressed her cheek against my chest. She was just tall enough for me to rest my chin on the crown of her head. Her hair smelled sweet, the same familiar fragrance she'd worn since high school. I missed her, every romantic notion of her, even as I held her there.

“Is there any chance we'll end up together?” she asked. “I can't wait around forever.”

“I know. But, I can't commit to the Mormon life and I know that's what you want. It's what you've wanted your whole life. It's what you expect, someone to take you to the temple.”

“Because I know it'll make me happy! Why are you so unhappy with the church?”

“I can't articulate it,” I said, releasing her. We walked several steps further away from the clearing before pausing again. I crossed my arms, rocked onto my heels and back onto the balls of my feet. “Religion. It doesn't mean going to church every Sunday, going to the temple once every month or two, getting married and having kids, abstaining from alcohol and drugs, and all else that Mormonism is made out to be. It's become a big ball of fluff and stuff, hardly a religion anymore. It's a cultural movement struggling to enter mainstream Christianity.”

“But it can be so much more than that, too!”

“Sure. But it's not, not right now. We don't embrace our history, we don't embrace our theology. Everything the church does is a big PR move to get people to like us and think that

we're normal. It's nothing like it was in the time of Joseph Smith. And, truthfully, I'm tired of the pressure to conform."

"Why? Don't you believe?"

"I believe certain parts. I believe *The Church* is inherently good and it can be a blessing in the lives of a lot people. I believe Joseph Smith was a prophet, but I don't see him in the same way I once did. Maybe—" I was careening toward a rant; I felt it swelling up, an unnamable discontent, a feeling of being at odds with a nebulous entity that has shadowed my entire life. "—I see him more or less in the same way that I see Moses and Ruth and Isaiah and the Buddha and Mohamed and St. Teresa of Avila and Rumi. They're prophets, inspired intelligent people who worked to lead others to spiritual or worldly liberty—"

I could see she didn't agree, not exactly. She was getting upset; I was getting upset.

"—I don't know about the divinity of Joseph and his church. I still believe in Jesus. I find it hard, anymore, to buy into the idea of One Truth, One Way."

"I can understand that, but we can make this work." She was hurting, scared of losing a shared past, and I knew it. A passenger car headed past us, toward Logan, and we paused to let it pass before we continued. "If we're honest with each other, we can make it work."

"Honestly, I think we should end this, for good." I said. "We're not on the same path anymore. Right now it may seem fine for our courses to vary by a degree or two, but five or ten years from now, that could put us really far apart. It's not fair to you."

*She wants the perfect Mormon life. She wants to stay at home and raise kids while I work. I can't be a conventional Mormon husband. Can't be a conventional Mormon. Doesn't feel right.*

She was crying.

“Let’s head back,” I said. I was past feeling, exhausted by years of being at odds with myself, my culture, even the woman I loved, exhausted by years of living my life through a filter of Mormonism.

We drove down the canyon, back to my apartment. We walked across the lawn to her car, hugged briefly, and she drove away. We dated for five years—nearly a quarter of my life—but it was over. The sun was low over the mountains, nestled behind dissipating rain clouds, but the evening was still young. I went upstairs to my desk, made a passive attempt at some coursework. Unable to focus, I turned in, began reading from a collection of short stories. “Now I Lay Me.”

*Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. I tried to sleep; my thoughts spun. God, I’m going to miss Hannah . . . but . . . this will pass.*

## V.

Tell me about your dreams. I’ll tell you about mine.

I imagine we discuss dreams in part because they are inexplicable. There’s a challenge inherent in trying to portray a dream, just as there is challenge inherent in trying to reconstruct the past through faulty, fragmented memories. The challenge of a historiographer or a memoirist or a friend sitting at a dinner table ten, twenty, thirty years down the road. And there’s this phenomenon with dreams, how they appear, like stories, more clearly through telling and re-telling. They may even become variant remembered realities based on unreal events.

For whatever reason, a stigma has arisen around the trope of the dream. A close friend jokes about an English instructor who threatened to fail any student who wrote a dream into a creative writing assignment:



“If you’re story ends with ‘and it was all a dream,’ that’s a definite ‘F’.”

It’s an understandable approach: don’t let the speaker take an easy way out via the trope of the dream. But, so easily the after effect of six, seven, eight hours of repose is discounted, largely because our perception of it, of the dream, is not apparently grounded in reality. Too, nobody else can see our dreams, so they’re easy to disbelieve and disregard. I can reflect on a particularly stirring dream, paint it in the most vivid of terms, analyze it, offer explanations for my brain’s creation of such madness. Still, you wouldn’t quite grasp what I’m trying to depict, nor why it feels so important for me to do the depicting. And vice versa.

Tell me about your dreams and you’ll engage me for about as long as it takes for you to finish your explanation, then your words vaporize, back into the ethereal; I’ll tell you one of my dreams, and we’ll witness the same effect; perhaps we’ll talk about something more real, better grounded in the here and now.

In a sense, dreams are like vacations: I’m initially intrigued to hear about your trip to such-and-such place; my eyebrows dance, I smile as you tell me, “yeah, it was great! As soon as we got there . . . and then . . . but the best part was . . .”

*OK, please stop talking. Not to be rude, but, truthfully, I can’t exactly relate and I don’t care about the details.*

Joseph Smith tapped into an age-old tradition of spiritual visions and dreams; his family was made up of dreamers; he was surrounded by religious fanatics; his experience was not extraordinary in any exact sense of the word. Now, the most commonly-known vision he claimed is that of God the Father and his son Jesus Christ, though some may be more familiar with his

claims regarding the visits of an angel named Moroni, an ancient prophet-historian who revealed the location of the gold plates from which Joseph translated The Book of Mormon.

As a young missionary, I taught the godly vision, popularly called The First Vision, as it appears in Joseph's now-canonized account. I memorized, paraphrased his words as follows: "I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. . . . When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*"

In this account, young Joseph kneels alone in a grove of trees near his family's home; he prays vocally to know which of all the churches is true; he is overcome by some demonic force, though the vision delivers him from its power; he sees the Father and the Son and asks them which church is true; Christ tells him none are perfectly true and calls him to restore the one true church. To anyone who'd listen, I'd tell the story. For as long as they'd listen, I'd expound, explain, exhort.

*. . . I saw a pillar of light . . . exactly over my head . . .*

From what I've heard and experienced, I know Fawn Brodie—a former Mormon, disillusioned like myself, searching for truth, like myself—with her biography of Smith, *No Man Knows My History*—has singlehandedly unraveled scores of Mormon testimonies. Her approach? Working meticulously to provide some objective truth, some historical alternative to Smith's autobiographical truth claims. From a writerly perspective, let's consider the act of writing such a fabulous account.

“When Joseph began his autobiography, in 1838,” Brodie posits, “he was writing not of his own life but of one who had already become the most celebrated prophet of the nineteenth century. And he was writing for his own people.” And here’s the nonfiction-writing kicker, the struggle all memoirists have engaged: “Memories are always distorted by the wishes, thoughts, and, above all, the obligations of the moment” (Brodie 275).

Writing years and years after the claimed date of the First Vision, what had Smith changed? What was at stake, and why would he tell anything other than “the truth”?

*. . . And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free . . .*

I’m thinking about especially lucid dreams I’ve experienced. I’m looking back, eight years, back to early 2006. I’m still a missionary, mind you, though the dream sequence projects me into the near future, post-mission: I’m home in North Ogden, Utah, after two years away, and I’m standing in suit and tie at the pulpit in the chapel I attended weekly for nineteen years, looking out over the audience, delivering my homecoming address, which, like most Mormon oration and instruction, airs on the side of formulaic faith-promoting sentimentality, but it gets the people going, as I open with a joke, praying for a positive reaction, cheap laughs, trust building, gathering in the audience with a subtle shift toward serious subject matter, The Gospel, no joking, no self-deprecating comments, no apologies for under-preparation, no weak-hearted commentary on how nervous I am, only confidence and boldness, letting the Holy Spirit guide my words, offering the most general recap possible, next focusing on a particular anecdote and expounding on the spiritual nature of that particular experience, augmenting the story with a verse or two of scripture, shifting the mood by telling an incredibly heart-wrenching story of

missionary life at its lowest point, plucking the heart strings, bringing them back with a scriptural verse on overcoming adversity, unofficially promising the blessings God pours out following well-withstood trials and, finally, as the oneiric camera pans around, circling, craning, I'm offering a grand summation of my mission experience coupled with moving testimony of personal conversion and personal conviction that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Joseph Smith is His Prophet, Seer, and Revelator in the Latter Days, the End Times, right now, indeed, Joseph restored God's True Church on the earth for I have felt the Spirit bear witness of This Truth, and as I try to conclude gracefully, as the ambient light fades and the spotlight rises, I'm choked up, not from tears, but from utter confusion and overwhelming loneliness, and the words aren't there and I'm going out of myself, circling, out and away, to the right, watching the scene from above, over the organ, zooming out, craning, circling, and I see my mission president sitting behind *my* poised body, just off the pulpit, and his eyes grow wide with disbelief and embarrassment, and *I'm there*, at a loss for words, hesitating, and telling the faceless crowd, "well . . . can't do *this* anymore," and they're gasping as I'm walking toward the door, but not before my mission president rises and tells the people to "disregard that last portion there and remember only the initial speech, the Gospel part, the Jesus part, the Joseph Smith part," but I'm already out the door, the exterior lighting is blinding, and I'm walking, cursing, unknitting my tie, wrenching it from my neck, throwing it into the gutter, along with my leather-bound silver-gilded scriptures, and the sequence is fading to black and I'm waking up feeling sick, perturbed, cancerous inside. I see it even then, during my most faithful days: as a black sheep, though a sheep nonetheless, I will eventually leave the fold.

Being born into Mormonism threw me into a binary opposition from the beginning. Us and them.

Sheep and goats. Believers and nonbelievers. Mormons and non-Mormons. (That last one gets me—defining the majority by what they’re not i.e. the minority, the Mormons.) I had no choice in the matter. A matter of fact that doesn’t sit well with my stubborn side, my wanderer side. All my life I’ve been counseled “to be in the world, but not of the world,” to distance myself from worldly corruption, to keep myself spotless, to look forward, toward eternal life. And now, now, with all this time I’ve spent reflecting on mortal life, looking back at my short journey through the world, my careful passage through Sodom and Gomorrah, one foot in Babylon, one foot in Zion—where do I stand?

When from your youth you’re told a “true” account of God speaking to man, a “true” account of the foundation of your faith, your religion, when you later come across a different “truth,” a varying historical explanation of events, the resulting feelings can be shattering. To know that preliminary “truths,” the very roots, Smith’s account of The First Vision, evolved over time—suddenly the ground is going out from under you—you’re swaying, wavering, as you read the following or something akin to it:

Joseph’s first published autobiographical sketch of 1834 . . . contained no whisper of an event that, if it had happened, would have been the most soul-shattering experience of his whole youth. But there are two manuscript versions of the vision between 1831 and the published account in Orson Pratt’s *Remarkable Visions* in 1840 which indicate that it underwent a remarkable evolution in detail. In the earlier, which Joseph dictated in 1831 or 1832, he stated that ‘in the 16th year of my age . . . the Lord opened the heavens unto me and I saw the Lord.’ By 1835 this had changed to a vision of two ‘personages’ in ‘a pillar of fire’ above his head, and ‘many angels.’ In the published version the personages

had become God the Father and His on Jesus Christ, and the angels had vanished.

Joseph's age had changed to fourteen . . . (275).

And you're reading, slowly, comparing the words against everything you've ever, and you're questioning.

*O hell . . . the whole system is breaking down . . . what else was an embellishment, a fabrication? What's the truth here?*

Shortly after it comes to me, I recount my perturbing faith-renouncement dream to President Ashton. I suggest to him that it was certainly a vision or an omen.

"No," he says, "no, I don't think so. Elder Olsen, we must take into account our dreams and premonitions, but they are not self-fulfilling prophecies, not by any means."

"But it was so real and so disturbing. I woke up feeling sick. And on top of all the doubts I have already . . ."

"Elder Olsen, I know you've struggled with your faith, but stay true to yourself and what you know is right and you won't go astray, I promise you that."

I leave the conversation with a renewed spiritual conviction, grinning, chest and mind expanding, holding the future in my hands, convinced I'll be alright.

I'm reading, questioning, asking, *What's more, Sister Brodie*. I want the truth, any truth. I demand it, I read on:

"The earliest published Mormon history, begun with Joseph's collaboration in 1834 by Oliver Cowdery, ignored [the "first vision"] altogether, stating that the religious excitement in the Palmyra area occurred when he was seventeen (not fourteen). Cowdery

described Joseph's visionary life as beginning in September 1823, with the vision of an angel called Moroni, who was said to have directed Joseph to the discovery of hidden golden plates" (24).

*Now, why would Joseph, if he'd really had a vision of the Father and Christ, fail to mention the experience? How could he gloss over it? Why would he lie about it?*

During the summer of 2009, my father and I drove to the Uinta Mountains and attempted to climb King's Peak, 13,528 feet above sea level, the highest point in Utah. We gave ourselves three days: one to walk in to a base camp, one to climb the peak, one to walk out. On the second day, dizzy with altitude, we hiked till we were, roughly, an hour from the summit, but turned back when dark clouds moved in and obscured the ridgeline above us. Afternoon storms are common in the Uintas, and backpackers caught unawares in exposed areas are often killed by lightning. My father and I wanted to say we'd reached the top, though we didn't want to make our trip into an unnecessary risk. Standing there in a light drizzle, we had to settle for seeing the summit from a distance, before it was enshrouded in nimbostratus clouds and virga. As we walked back to our camp in a light, steady rain, I thought back to my childhood, when I began reading books on mountaineers and other explorers. I thought of the famous climber George Mallory, how, when someone asked why he wanted to summit Mt. Everest, he said, "Because it's there." I laughed to think that a younger me was smitten by that response, but considered later that there is greater philosophical wisdom in his words than I realized. Back at camp, waiting out the storm in my tent, I consoled myself with clichéd thoughts of *finding joy in the journey*. King's Peak is up there in the clouds, I thought, and at least we'd tried. Now, in a moment of retrospection, I think again that perhaps mere knowledge of a peak paired with the

effort to stand atop it, that's what counts; perhaps it's the attempt that matters, not the attained goal. That night I woke to the least sound, stepped from my tent to see if the clouds had dispersed, the sky was clear. Because I was too tired to walk to the lake to filter water, I drank collected rain that had pooled among pine needles and grit on a boulder alongside our camp.

Where am I now, young believer, young doubter? I'm reading Brodie, reading all the historical information I can get, comparing it against the canonized record. Eyes opening, knowledge expanding, perceiving larger truths. Suddenly I'm faced with an autobiographical evolution of my own. I'm revisiting the mission journal in which I recorded a simple version of the perturbing dream; as it happens, my memory of the dream is largely fabrication influenced by experience, emotions, notions, distortions, desires. I know because I've recounted the dream numerous times and now I'm reading the account from the day after, when it was still fresh:

Tuesday 17 January '06 Last night I had this crazy dream that I was back home at some fireside or mission reunion, and President Ashton was speaking about the condemnation that would come upon us if we left the Church. So, the dream went on, and I got up and left, vowing that I would never come back. As I was leaving, President Ashton told everyone to pray really hard for me. In the dream I was walking back home from the Stake Center, and I was having overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame, resentment, etc. It was really quite disturbing. Perhaps it was a prediction, perhaps a sign. I don't know.

I seem to have, of my own accord, stretched the truth; I seem to have, while reading Brodie, drawn out a Joseph Smith analog in my own person.

Memory makes such a gawdawful display at times. A finicky haze, a gauzy screen paired with an



outdated filmstrip projector from fourth-grade home room. There's a cassette player, too, and a worn-out soundtrack that never quite syncs up with the images displayed. Some lucky student, some version of you, is selected to run the machine while the teacher sits in back and grades papers. The projector whirs. Washed-out images appear. The narrator speaks, pauses. An ambiguous tone: *Bee-oop*. You depress the clicker—*Click!*—and a new image slides into place before your eyes. The narrator speaks, pauses. *Bee-oop*. Midway through, a frame is melted through from sitting too long before an overheated bulb. Along with the class, you shriek and laugh at the distorted picture, until the tone prompts you onward. *Bee-oop. Click*. The narrator continues; the picture becomes clear once more. Except someone's been manipulating the reel, splicing images haphazardly; someone else has been playing with the timing of the transition signals on the tape; another is fiddling with the circuit breakers in some janitor's closet in the school's basement. The images and the soundtrack come and go at unpredictable moments. Nothing ever matches up; it makes no sense. But the students, they love it, can't get enough.

Innocence betrayed, foundation crumbling, every concept of truth and testimony becoming nebulous and vague. I read on from the words of Fawn Brodie:

A man's memory is bound to be a distortion of his past in accordance with his present interests, and the most faithful autobiography is likely to mirror less what a man was than what he has become [what have *you* become?!]. Joseph Smith always dictated his journal with an intense consciousness of his audience, and in the 1840s, when he began in earnest to write the official history of his church for the edification of posterity, he reconstructed his past as only a celebrated prophet of the nineteenth century would have lived it. It was all of one color, a succession of miracles and revelations, and in no sense an evolution. It

became, in fact, an almost impenetrable hiding-place, where he concealed himself behind a perpetual flow of words (275).

*My faith is shot, Sister Brodie; so much of what I thought I knew has shifted, faltered, petered out, vaporized. A perpetual flow of words. What more can you tell me? Give me details.*

I'm trying to read the Mormon experience, as a book, trying to see where, between the lines, I can write in my own story. I'm searching for the truth. But the margins are so full of scribbled notes, the text so clouded with underlining, arrows, and asterisks, I can't formulate my own interpretation or figure where I fit. So many readers have been here before, so many have left annotations, which they undoubtedly valued, undoubtedly assumed would be helpful to future readers. What a mess; it makes no sense. I erase and scribble in notes of my own. I set it aside, again and again, and return later hoping for fresh insight.

*. . . And ye shall know the truth . . . and the truth . . . the truth shall make you free . . .*

I recently re-read the story of Moses and Israel while studying *Moses: Man of the Mountain*, Zora Neale Hurston's re-appropriation of the account, in a graduate-level journey narrative seminar. I hadn't read the biblical account since I was a missionary, and I was deeply moved by a fresh reading of Moses and his ironic demise.

His story picks up in the second chapter of Exodus, a busy chapter: Israel in bondage, crying to God for deliverance from Pharaoh; Moses born to Levite parents, sent downriver in a bulrush basket, recovered and raised by Pharaoh's daughter; Moses murders an Egyptian in defense of an Israelite slave, flees to the deserts of Midian, marries Zipporah, daughter of Jethro.

Before Moses experiences, in the third chapter, the burning bush, before he receives his call as deliverer, he has a child with Zipporah, “and he called his name Gershom: for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land.” What a name; what a legacy. A stranger, translated also as sojourner or wanderer. Moses, the great prophet, the deliverer of The Law, purveyor of the wandering tradition. It’s a haunting thought: Moses and his people, Israel, as strangers, sojourners, wanderers in the desert. Homeless, searching for meaning, direction, deliverance.

Poor Moses, never made it, died before Israel entered the Promised Land.

## VI.

I drove out to the west desert to be alone. Fall 2010, shortly before graduating from Utah State University and moving to Thailand to teach English. I needed the time away, to live simply for a couple days. Time away from coursework, a menial job, a crumbling relationship. Time to be by myself, with my thoughts—or without them. People question the motivations of camping solo. I tell them it’s an “if you have to ask, I could never explain” type question.

Solo camping brings on a sort of survivalist mentality, a reversion to primal modes of thinking. I learned this in the Wind Rivers on a solo backpacking trip two years back. An opportunity to reflect, but also to live in the base of the skull, at the neck, fundamentally. I can hardly imagine how it was for John Muir, Everett Ruess, Edward Abbey.

Car camping, in this case. An in-between place, in the middle of civil and wild. I wanted to revisit a specific spot on the Utah-Nevada border, the demarcation line between Zion and Babylon. I filled the LandCruiser with food, water, fuel; drove west from Logan, through Tremonton, on to Snowville, southwest through Park Valley. A haunting landscape, volcanic

cliffs, alkali, dusty earth, sprawling sagebrush interspersed with ranches and other small settlements, shot-up highway signs, one gas station surrounded by pre-fab trailer homes just across the border in Nevada. I drove to the sight of virga, to the sound of Barry Lopez reading from *Crossing Open Ground*; passed slowly into lightest rain, late afternoon; wondered at trucks and tractors along the highway.

*Why in God's name are they building a pipeline through the desert?* I wondered.  
*Draining the Snake River away to Las Vegas? Piping natural gas from Wyoming to California?*  
*Sons of bitches*, I thought.

Turning off the highway in Nevada, turning eastward, crossing back into Utah as marked by a Bureau of Land Management sign on a jeep trail, I parked at a campsite I knew from years before. I wandered through sage and gnarled cedars, shouting into the stillness. I spent the evening sitting in the dirt, poking at a fire while cooking steak on a flat rock, drinking cheap high-gravity beer from Snowville's Flying J Truck Stop. Playing pioneer, vagabond in the desert.

The sun set slow that night, and the old primordial fear sifted into my brain like the darkness itself. Darkness, the unknown lurking at the edge of light. The fire glowing orange, low in the veiled night, flames becoming necessary. A burning necessity, in fact, a pillar of light in the surprisingly-cold desert. Huddled close to dry-pine flame, summoning images of coyotes and cougars prowling in the night—I never see them, but I know they're there—poking at a discarded, increasingly-distorted IBC soda bottle in the coals, mustering the courage to scurry into the Cruiser. Lock the doors, push into a sleeping bag, drift off to sleep as the windows above fog over with quickened breath. The last thing I remember—it's a stirring, dreamless repose—is turning off my headlamp so the batteries wouldn't die as I slept, in case I had to get up, in case I needed the light.

The morning sun woke me with its pent-up warmth, and I eased out of the vehicle toward unlimited visibility in the south and the west, the mountainside enshrouded still in shadow behind me, in the east. Yesterday afternoon's thunderstorm doused the sky, and the night winds blew it dry as I slept. A freight train rumbled southward, in the distance, Nevada-way, horn-less for lack of crossings.

I scrambled up the hillside after breakfast, inching up the hillside toward a band of cliffs contrasted darkly against surrounding junipers. There are remnants of long-passed people in those mountains: arrowheads dated 6000 years back and a recovered shelter, preserved somewhere to the north. I saw no sign, but I've been told. I searched as a younger me for chipped-obsidian blades, closer to Locomotive Springs and Kelton, Golden Spike country.

The only relic I knew is the mine below, perhaps 100 years old, a considerable, branched prospect that tapped into a large cave. Crystal Cave. The first time I visited the spot, eight years old, a tag-along, I was camping with my father, my older boy-scout brother, his troop. My patriarchal forbearers, all members of our congregation back in North Ogden. Dad didn't want to go into the cave, so brother and friends agreed to take me through.

In the darkness, the dankness of the cave, the oppressive confinement, I quickly decided I wanted to get back outside into the sunlight. Brother walked me to the entrance of the mine, told me to walk down the trail to meet Dad at the van; walked down, got to the van, Dad wasn't there, doors were locked. (He was up on the hillside hiking around, waiting for all of us to come out.) I panicked. No clue, in retrospect, what I was thinking. Panicked, pacing around, crying, running down the road toward the campsite.

Looking back, I believe this to be the first time I ever prayed, pleaded with God to deliver me, when, in reality, I wasn't even lost, merely wandering away from what I was praying for:

father, group, familiarity, safety. After a while, I came to my senses, stopped, tried to decide if I should return to the van or keep walking to the campsite. I hesitated there, embarrassed, and paced around.

Eventually, Dad and all the boys came driving down the hillside to meet me. They demanded, “Why did you leave the van? Where were you going?! We didn’t know what happened to you!” *What do you expect of me?* I think in retrospect. I was thrown into a sudden feeling of lost, O God, lost. I lost my senses in that moment. I panicked.

I returned to Crystal Cave later, when I was a boy scout myself, and again with friends, in junior high. The mine has since been gated by the BLM, following the death of an amateur spelunker in Utah Valley. Thanksgiving weekend, 2009, a young father got stuck upside down in Nutty Putty cave and died, wedged that way, as rescuers struggled to free him. His body left behind and the cave sealed permanently when extraction proved impossible. The bureau swept down and closed off many of the more popular mines and caves, to prevent such tragedies from recurring in the future.

I had no desire to enter the cave again, anyway. Not that time, not one year after witnessing the horrors of underground exploration gone awry. A younger me would have been incensed by a senseless death that ruined spelunking for the rest of us (for lack of a more empathetic view). I knew, anyway, the strenuous procedure of ducking and crawling, clawing and pulling through grime, over popcorn rock and polished limestone—activities left behind, better for the young. I wanted the freedom of wandering in the open air, under the sun.

Above the mine, along the cliff band I found the miniscule bleached white skull of a pack rat or some other desert rodent. Teeth still intact, firmly rooted in bone. I displayed it in my palm and imagined its demise. Hawk. Lynx. Coyote. Old age. Bacteria.

Continuing on the crest of the mountain, I traversed the rocky ridgeline to the north, dropped into a craggy outcropping below, into a wide cleft in the rock where soil has accumulated, sprouted grass, provided a level area large enough to hold a decent shelter (should I decide on a hermetic future, decades in the desert). I laid in the rough grass, staring at a boxed-in patch of blue sky above, pondering my childlike cry for deliverance years and years before. Clutching at tufts of grass to my sides, I closed my eyes and listened for the arid breeze, the formless movement, west, across the desert.

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