

## Born Square: On Being Mormon,

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I grew up in a mountain valley on the border of the Great Basin, Western and Mormon in my beliefs and values. From ages five to twelve, when the foundations of identity are laid and our bodies are most sensuously attached to the landscape, I lived in wheatfields and gardens that were claimed only a generation before from sagebrush and that still bordered on quite primitive wilderness. Marsh Valley in Southern Idaho was formed fourteen thousand years ago, when the ancient Lake Bonneville that filled the Great Basin, including most of Utah, broke through a natural dam at Red Rock Pass, ten miles south of where our village of Downey now stands. The surface of the lake, which was about a thousand feet above where we are now gathered, gradually dropped four hundred feet as three hundred million gallons a second flowed north through Red Rock toward the Snake River and the Pacific. That gigantic flood scoured out our valley and left a mile-wide, two-hundred-foot-deep scar at the bottom that we could still see clearly. Mountain erosion gradually formed fertile benches above that scar, good for dryland wheat, and in the late nineteenth century the valley was home-

steaded by Mormons like my mother's father, who moved north from Utah's Cache Valley in 1898.

### I. A WESTERN DILEMMA

My father, who with his father had homesteaded Bannock Valley, just to the west, in 1912, went on an LDS proselyting mission to the southern states, came back to graduate from Utah State Agricultural College in Cache Valley with my mother, and then worked on shares on her father's farm in Marsh Valley. Eventually my father bought and extended that farm to 1100 acres, developing large, efficient fields from the original 160-acre homesteader plots, and using what he had learned at college to become an early conservationist and green revolutionist. He worked with government agencies like Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps to build dams against run-off, and he put me to work by the time I was eight getting the rocks out of his fields. He left the wheat stubble to rot slowly rather than burning it off each year like the other farmers. This made the fields hard to work and what he called, with perverse pride, "trashy-looking," but it held the spring run-off much better and built long-term fertility. He brought in new strains of disease-resistant wheat that were being developed at Utah State. He learned by study and experiment when best to plant his crops and how to minimize soil disturbance in the fallow ground. Gradually his yields doubled, and as the erosion stopped, the deep gullies that had always taken away our topsoil disappeared.

I grew up feeling that because I was Mormon I was different from other humans. I was special, even "peculiar," separate, better than they: I sang, "I might be envied by a king, for I am a Mormon boy" (Stephens 91). And history began in 1820 with Joseph Smith's First Vision. One June morning when I was about eight, my father took me out into the young wheat on our lower 320-acre field and knelt and asked God to bless and protect the crop. I stood looking into my father's fiercely intent face as he knelt there. He grasped the wheat stalks in both hands and pledged again, as I had heard him in family prayers, to give all the crop, beyond our bare needs, to the Lord to use

as he would, and he claimed protection from drought and hail and wind. Beside and in me I felt something more real than the wheat or the ground or the sun, something warm like the sun but warm inside my head and chest and bones, something like us but strange, thrilling, fearful, but safe. I first knew that experience as a frightening but awe-inspiring encounter with pure Being, but over time I have interpreted it in Mormon Christian terms. I have come to understand it as an assurance of Christ's approval of my father's consecration and thus a call to unconditional, universal mercy and generosity on my part, a feeling of responsibility that has never left me. It has become the sure ground of my beliefs and the touchstone by which I test all values.

We moved to Salt Lake City when I was twelve, and I entered a new world. As I studied literature and art and history and science at East High and the University of Utah, I found many humans whose minds and hearts seemed very much like my own. Forty-six years ago this week, just a few months after our marriage, my wife Charlotte and I were called on an LDS Church mission to Samoa and encountered an entirely new culture. There and later at MIT in Boston and Stanford in California, we became united in friendship with people who were not Mormons, merely human—and we crossed a spiritual frontier. As we came to know those others as kindred spirits, loved and admired them, we became convinced that some were much better than we were in every way, including faith and righteousness.

As I began to do some writing, I also experienced the anxieties and insecurities, the crisis of identity that Wallace Stegner describes in his essay, "Born a Square," which I read in 1964 at Stanford, where I had gone to study with him. I felt a deep shock of recognition but wanted more resolution than Stegner was able to provide in that rather melancholy work. In it Stegner describes the dilemmas facing the young writer, like me and many of his other students, "who has spent his formative years in the West." This "Western" writer, because of an "inadequate artistic and intellectual tradition" of his own, has difficulty discovering what he wants to say and, because of the dominance of alien fashions of belief and value in the publishing and critical estab-

ishments, has difficulty, when he does discover what to say, getting it published. Through an implied contrast with what is being rejected in the work of the young Westerner, Stegner betrays an uncharacteristic bitterness as he describes what is fashionable:

His novel had a hero, or at least respect for the heroic virtues. . . . Where it was angry, it was angry at things like incubus bankers and octopus railroads, things remote or irrelevant from the point of view of the contemporary malaise; . . . his characters were incredibly blind to the paralyzing loneliness that both psychiatry and literature say is incurable, and they ignorantly escaped the lovelessness that the same authorities insist is standard. . . . He . . . had filled his book with a lot of naive belief and health and effort, had made callow assumptions about the perfectibility of the social order and the fact of individual responsibility; . . . he had kept a stiff upper lip; he had been so concerned with a simple but difficult Becoming that he had taken no thought of Being. (172-73)

I was certainly much like this prototypical Western writer. However, I was also seduced by new voices appearing even in the early 1960s that were anguished to the point of malaise about the world and skeptical about the ability of language to connect at all with the world. One of those voices was John Hawkes, *avant garde* author of *The Lime Twig* (1961), who in 1965 was invited by Stegner to Stanford to speak to the Writing Fellows. Stegner introduced Hawkes sympathetically, but then Hawkes proceeded to deliver a brilliant riff on contemporary literature and values that seemed clearly intended to undercut Stegner and the old-fashioned beliefs he stood for: the perfectibility of the social order and individual responsibility and stiff upper lips and working hard to connect language to the real world. I am afraid I joined somewhat in the awe we felt at Hawkes's daring and skill, even as we shared Stegner's embarrassment. But Stegner stayed true to his old-fashioned, Western civility, said nothing, and continued, though I could tell he was fuming, to be the gracious host. However, I gradually came to feel ashamed that I

had been momentarily taken in, and I confess that I later felt a little extra and unholy satisfaction when Stegner went on to win the Pulitzer and the National Book Award.

In Richard Etulain's very intelligent and valuable *Conversations* (published in 1983 and revised in 1990), Stegner still seems somewhat bitter about the kind of literature that had gained popularity in the 60s and 70s as well as about the continuing challenges facing Western writers. But though I continued to agree with him about the internal limits and external obstacles of Western writers, my Mormonism made me somewhat different from the young writers Stegner describes in "Born a Square" and in the conversations with Etulain. That early experience with my father in the wheat field had led me to think very much about Being as well as Becoming. And when Stegner reviews why the young Western writers, born too "square," have not been able either to write like the prevailing icons or to find their own different voices, he faults them (and himself) for their response to a condition I did not share: "We cannot find, apparently, a present and living society that is truly ours and that contains the materials of a deep commitment. . . . Instead we must live in exile and write of anguishes not our own" (178). The present and living Mormon society then contained and still contains for me, and also for an increasing number of good writers, "the materials of a deep commitment" to specific beliefs and values. And Mormon history and culture produce anguishes and conflicts enough to fuel a good literature.

At the time I read Stegner's essay I was helping to found, at Stanford, an independent publication called *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, both to give literary expression to the varieties of commitment to the Mormon community, its history, and its values, and (as we said in our mission statement) "to bring [our] faith into dialogue with the larger stream of Judeo-Christian thought and with human experience as a whole." That pioneering journal was able to publish, at first, only a few Mormon writers who could counter Stegner's pessimism. In "Born a Square," the list of writers whom "anyone who wishes to understand what the West has amounted to in a literary way will have to study" included only one (very marginally) Mormon

writer, Bernard DeVoto (177). There is no mention of Virginia Sorensen, Maurine Whipple, or even Juanita Brooks, though Mormon writers and historians were beginning then to learn valuable lessons from all three. Nor is there mention in the Etulain conversations with Stegner of the first-rate Mormon writers who developed in the 70s and 80s, such as Clinton Larson, Douglas Thayer, Emma Lou Thayne, Levi Peterson, Orson Scott Card, and Terry Tempest Williams. These writers would provide uniquely Mormon answers to Stegner's hope for a Western literature that was grounded in "deep commitment" to a specific society, that built on a "usable past," and that reached out to define what he called a "common conscience, a common guilt, a shared sense of wrong" with other humans (178).

In 1970, our family moved from the Bay Area, where I had been teaching at Stanford and at Hayward State College, to Northfield, Minnesota, where I had been appointed Dean of Academic Affairs at St. Olaf College and taught in the experimental "Paracollege." I was called as president of the local LDS branch, and my religious life changed quite dramatically. I found myself newly acquainted with traditional Christian grace, which I learned partly from my Lutheran friends and colleagues. I also learned first-hand the redemptive value of lay service in the Mormon Church, as I called people to positions in the branch and saw them slowly develop ability and self-confidence enough to explore some daunting spiritual frontiers of their own. In the meantime, I was changing my notions about literature, spurred partly by Stegner's rejection of much of modern alienation, partly through reading Wayne Booth and Yvor Winters and Robert Scholes, and partly by becoming convinced of the power of literature to express as well as critique important and difficult ideas and complex ethical values. As editor of *Dialogue*, I studied early Mormon letters and diaries and journals and published personal essays and sermons. I became increasingly uneasy about the adequacy of formalist criteria (that is, those mainly concerned with aesthetic qualities—structure, style, texture, etc.) to account for the experiences of my students and myself with literature that powerfully affected us despite its obvious lack of traditional types of formal aesthetic perfection. Such literature seemed clearly to

derive a good part of its quality from the quality of the religious beliefs and moral values it explored and even the quality of the author's own mind and character. I realized that much of my admiration of Stegner's writing was connected to the "square" virtues he embodied, both in person and in all his work—and that my discomfort with some of his criticisms of Utah and of Mormons was complicated by that admiration.

In his introduction to *The Sound of Mountain Water*, the 1969 collection of essays that includes "Born a Square," Stegner defines the real West by the isohyetal line, at about the 100th meridian, where rainfall drops below twenty inches annually—to where the kind of dry farming my father practiced becomes, in Stegner's word, "dubious." Stegner bluntly insists that the West's limited water and soil resources have been "mismanaged," with consequences that have been "immediate and catastrophic" and lasting. Western history has been mainly "a history of the importation of humid-land habits (and carelessness) into a dry land that will not tolerate them; and of the indulgence of an unprecedented personal liberty, an atomic individualism, in a country that experience says can only be successfully tamed and lived in by a high degree of cooperation" (19). In later work, Stegner openly voiced much affection for his adopted hometown, Salt Lake City, and the Mormon people who nurtured him, as well as much admiration for the group cooperation that made Mormon village communities so socially and even economically successful. However, he was increasingly blunt about Mormon carelessness with the Western environment, especially in recent times.

## II. MORMON RESPONSES

We Mormons have produced our own severe critics—most notably the polymath defender of the faith and cultural critic Hugh Nibley—of our failure to heed our scriptures and early prophets, like Brigham Young, concerning our religious stewardship, our responsibility to preserve and beautify God's creation. But in my view the most powerful and effective Mormon cultural critics have been our storytellers, our

writers of fiction and creative nonfiction. Tory Anderson argues persuasively in “Just the Fiction, Ma’am,” in the first collection of Mormon literary criticism, *Tending the Garden* (1995), that fiction is actually a much better teacher of moral values than sermons or didactic writings. Because it is based in the complexity of real experience, fiction can take us imaginatively, vicariously, into the perspectives of those who make mistakes, commit sin, suffer, and recover—or not. We thus drop our natural resistance to being hectored, told what to do and be, and open up to new and possibly better constructs and possibilities. We see the world through new eyes, feeling with the protagonists the reality of their choices and consequences, so that we can resist the sin and still identify with, even love, the sinner (72–77).

To serve that end, the chief formal tool of an ethical storyteller, I believe, is the skillful use of point of view, especially first-person or limited, roving consciousness. Since the brilliant achievements of Robert Browning with dramatic monologue and of Henry James with roving central consciousness, there have been marvelous developments in both technique and skill as writers have learned to use variations in point of view both to delight us aesthetically and to move and instruct us ethically. We see the world through the eyes and inner consciousness of a narrator or a character and feel intense sympathy for that narrator or character and other characters, even in their sins, while the author, working with a variety of such unreliable viewpoints and their imagined changes over time, provides means to evaluate their moral journeys. Robert Langbaum, in *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), and Wayne Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), gave us the first major critical examinations and evaluations of these tools, especially focusing on the power of first-person narration to gain our nonjudgmental sympathy for the main character and yet communicate the subtleties by which the ethical naïvetés and immaturities of that always unreliable narrator could be signaled and assessed.

The best Mormon storytellers, I believe, have used these tools well, for profoundly ethical purposes. How sad, then, that Stegner’s view of Mormon literature and its contribution to the kind of Western literature he longed for was limited by lack of knowledge

of the fiction and personal essay writers who have best used the aesthetic and ethical powers of skillful point of view, such as Sorensen, Peterson, and Thayer. In his conversations with Etulain, Stegner praised Whipple and Sorensen for “having produced [a] usable past and having explained Mormon society,” but he was still awaiting work like Hawthorne’s that would make that usable Mormon past relevant to present human concerns (116). He specifically mentions Sorensen’s early historical novels but apparently had not read Sorensen’s title story in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood*, a collection of fictionalized personal essays published by HarperCollins in 1963.

I discovered that story, originally published in the *New Yorker*, when I left St. Olaf College and began teaching at BYU in 1977. There I continued the Mormon literature class begun by Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert a few years earlier and used their ground-breaking anthology, *A Believing People* (1979). I heard my colleague Edward Geary tell of discovering Sorensen’s collection on the library shelves as an undergraduate and being overwhelmed by the first fiction that spoke directly to his Mormon Western experience (Geary grew up, twenty years later than she did, just over a mountain range from Sorensen’s Manti in central Utah). He subsequently looked on down the shelves and discovered dozens of well-written Mormon regional novels, published nationally during the 1940s and 1950s. About the time I joined the BYU faculty Geary published two fine essays about that group of mainly forgotten novelists, which he dubbed “Mormondom’s Lost Generation,” and these essays helped me see how Sorensen and Whipple provided a particularly Mormon response to the West. Sorensen’s autobiographical title story powerfully reveals some flaws in Mormon culture but does not belittle that culture nor its people—and it uses a complex first-person point of view to show the author learning ethical maturity and how to draw us subtly into that same process.

As in all her work, Sorensen’s subject is sinners, and here these include herself. The implied author is a mature woman looking back on her childhood self but also re-imagining her childhood as if from the point of view of that younger self. The story’s title refers to a poem

which begins “Here in America nothing is long ago” (Ferril 22), and Sorensen reminds us that Utah Mormon culture is such a place, one where all the history, including the initial struggle to survive and create a civilization, is recent. The narrative, in Sorensen’s mature voice, begins with her telling of a letter from her mother about the death of “Brother Tolsen” and its reminder that the good Saint had killed a water-thief many years ago by hitting him in the head with his shovel. The voice and point of view soon shift to the summer Sorensen was nine, when the killing took place. The child’s voice reflects on her morbid interest in the affair, especially her awareness that she was “absolutely certain for years afterward that two piles of bloody rabbits’ ears I saw on the courthouse lawn at the time of Brother Tolsen’s trial had something to do with the killing he was being tried for. They hadn’t. They were merely tokens of the fact that the annual county rabbit hunt had gone off according to schedule” (3–4). But, of course, this is the mature author giving us a crucial hint that there is a connection between the rabbit ears and the killing, but it was only felt, not understood, by the child she was. Sorensen then adds her mature reflection on how close we still are in the West to the time “when important things were settled violently,” how “we remember the wide dry wastes before the mountain water was captured and put to use. Even now, the dry spaces, where the jack rabbits hop through the brush as thick as mites on a hen, are always there, waiting to take over” (4). In other words, we still retain in the Mormon West, beyond any possible need, a sympathy with, even a tendency toward, casual violence—whether in the mass rabbit hunts that in Virginia Sorensen’s childhood had become mere rituals and no longer necessary to protect the crops, or in deer hunts today no longer necessary for survival, or in our more serious acquiescence in vigilante justice, both local and international. Sorensen reminds us of all this, subtly, not didactically, with her skillful use of complex point of view, leaving us to make newly informed choices for ourselves about our beliefs and values.

In “Born a Square,” Stegner wonders, when turning his hopes toward the future,

Why haven't Westerners ever managed to get beyond the celebration of the heroic and mythic frontier? . . . Why . . . do we find in them . . . little of the iron sense of enduring evil and pain that in Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, even Twain, counterbalances the complacent innocence of the New World? . . . If only we could discover some way in which western society and the western individual were entangled, we could even benefit from the study and transplantation of the hermetic grotesques of . . . Flannery O'Connor. (176-77; 179)

In the 1980s Peterson and Thayer fulfilled these hopes precisely, going far beyond mere "celebration of the heroic and mythic frontier," beyond complacent innocence, even to the use of O'Connor-like grotesques. They have thus created, I believe, new spiritual frontiers for Mormons and Westerners. The human experience of the American West long ago produced a literary soil as rich in tragedy and guilt as Faulkner's and O'Connor's South, and the American encounter with wilderness and the primitive was central to that tragedy. That American "errand into the wilderness," as the Puritans called it, was energized and interpreted both through the Greek arcadian hope for a return to Paradise in the wilderness and the biblical narratives which make the desert wilderness a sanctuary to flee to for salvation and a place where people are punished or tempted. Western American literature, influenced much by Emerson and Whitman, has been dominated by the Hellenistic view rather than the Hebraic, but some, from Cooper, Hawthorne, and Dickinson to Rolvaag, Guthrie, and William H. Gass, as well as modern critics like Yvor Winters, have sensed the dark side of westering.

Levi S. Peterson grew up in a Mormon pioneer village on the Arizona frontier with a passionate love of wilderness. Under the direction of Western literature scholar Don Walker, he wrote his Ph.D dissertation in which he made the distinction Stegner often talked about between Westerns and good novels about the West. Later in "The Primitive and the Civilized in Western Fiction," Peterson praised most fully novels like Guthrie's *The Big Sky* (1947), which "recognize that man is inevitably a creature of civilization and conscience and that civi-

lized values are therefore valid,” but also that “primitive freedom, violence and lawlessness have an enduring appeal and continuing validity” (204). Drawing, then, on both his personal experience of wilderness and his careful thinking about it, Peterson went on to write fiction that was among the first to explore for the American West the ancient myth of wilderness as context for explicitly religious trial and decision. He focused particularly on the legacy in the present of the traumatic frontier experience of Mormonism, which left many Mormons with a concept of God as all-powerful, controlling, and punishing. Peterson’s success, which has included winning the 1980 Illinois Short Fiction Award for his first collection, *The Canyons of Grace* (1982), and writing what many consider the finest Mormon novel yet, *The Backslider* (1986), seems partly due to his being the first to accomplish as a Mormon what O’Connor did as a Catholic: write imaginative and skillful American visions of the possibilities and paradoxes of a theology of grace. He fulfilled Stegner’s hope that Western writers could learn from Southern writers the literary power of “grotesques”—the physically or spiritually wounded and marginalized humans who paradoxically can touch the very center of religious and ethical experience—and he has moved, in his mature work, beyond mere revelation of sin and pain to exploration of the specific, healing actions and visions, products of both divine and human grace, that can effect change, even complicated forms of redemption.

For example, his early story “The Confessions of Augustine” explores both the illusion of wilderness as an escape from God and the experience of wilderness as the place of an overwhelming encounter with divine grace that “saves” the protagonist but leaves him beaten down, destroyed in will—and still yearning for his lost freedom. The narrator, Fremont Durham, is led by continuing guilt and uncertainty to read St. Augustine and in turn reflect on an experience from his teenage years, when he had worked as a logger, had fallen in love and slept with a non-Mormon woman, and then felt suddenly alienated from her, as if God had interfered. The no-longer-naive but still not entirely reliable narrator, haunted by the memory of helping to devastate the forest that he loved, insists on the terror just under the sur-

face of his present desperate, heretical theologizing and his life of Mormon orthodoxy. This story, like Sorensen's, seems to me a devastating and compassionate critique of Mormon and Western culture as well as a critique of much human experience with a God imagined as all-powerful. Peterson well knows that much of the tragic in American experience comes from what we and the wilderness have done to each other, and he conveys that tragedy as well as any contemporary Western writer. His work gives us a remarkable range of insight into the particular history of our destructive relationship with wilderness in the West, from the arrogant, self-defeating mountain men of the 1830s, intruding into lands and cultures they could not comprehend, to modern men and boys who try, at great cost to themselves and others, to recapture the primitive and merge with wilderness.

Like Peterson and Sorensen, Douglas Thayer uses a complex point of view for ethical insight. He often employs a mature narrator telling in first person a story from a younger, more naïve point of view that leads the reader to share in the ethical growth the narrator has experienced—or failed to experience—since the time of that story. In “The Red-tailed Hawk,” the narrator tells of a day-long hunt just before Christmas, over ten years before, when he was fifteen. But the plot is carefully interspersed with present versions of his earlier meditations on the seductive freedom and solitude of his life in nature, which he had constantly attempted to fix and preserve through killing and mounting birds, particularly a hawk that hangs over his bed. The hunt ends with him killing a Canada goose, swimming out to retrieve it, and then nearly dying of exposure. He loses parts of three fingers but comes to a full awareness of the cost of merging with nature; and that insight brings him back into acceptance of his family and thus himself as part of the human community. This discovery, presented as if in the young boy's consciousness, is actually, we are sufficiently reminded, in the words and understanding of the future man: Thayer includes images of death in the boy's paradise that were, in his earlier, fallen state, incomprehensible to him, and he relies on the language of the mature person thinking back to his moment of grace and resurrection at the point of near-death from freezing:

Snow filled the wrinkles of my coat; I was turning white. All summer the [dead] cows had been vanishing, the wire-hung birds [I had killed] too, the carp, the little buck. And I had no name for it, only vanishing, knew only that it was not swimming, not running naked in the moonlight, not embracing trees, not soaring. It was not feeling. I grew whiter, saw myself vanishing into the snow. I watched, and then slowly, like beginning pain, the terror seeped into me, the knowing. I struggled up, fled. (16)

The power of the discovery is felt in the convincing sensual detail and yearning emotional directness of earlier temptations to merge with that world which he has now rejected. The story is excellent fiction at its best, and its influence on Mormon writing has been considerable.

Stegner ended his somewhat downbeat conversation with Etulain about “The American Literary West” by recognizing that “many eastern critics, historians of literature, the people who make the textbooks and create the curricula of classes, have ignored many good things in Western literature,” but also that “some of the students of Western literature” had been equally guilty of neglecting the best work. He concluded, “We’ll have a solid western tradition sooner if we pay attention to its major achievements and bring them to general notice” (143). I certainly agree and am mainly concerned here with doing just that. I congratulate Richard Cracroft for leading the way in his editing of three volumes on Western writers for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. He has included Peterson, Thayer, and Sorensen, as well as Terry Tempest Williams. I recommend the entries on these authors in the *DLB* as a way of drawing attention to some major contributions in the Western tradition.

I also offer a plea for genuine, affirmative tolerance as we attempt to study beliefs and values and their place in literature. This tolerance must be based, not by default, on the assumption that we are a tolerant nation and a tolerant academic profession, but on serious attempts to understand each others’ beliefs and values, by studying and engaging them and the literature that expresses them. In the modern academy,

scholars have been seriously remiss about looking attentively and sympathetically at the religious basis of various cultures and literatures. As my friend and folklorist Bert [William A.] Wilson has demonstrated, this willful ignorance of the more evangelical religions that undergird much American folklore has significantly limited the range and quality of folklore studies. I believe this kind of ignorance has also played into the development of various strategies of anti-Catholicism and anti-Mormonism in literary studies. Terryl Givens in *Viper on the Hearth* (1997), has explored in depth how these strategies effectively marginalized Catholics and Mormons and their culture and literature in the nineteenth century.

Even Wallace Stegner, one of the most remarkable, beloved, and effectively sympathetic friends of Mormonism, failed to know the work of the best Mormon writers and thus missed a chance to find fulfillment of some of his highest hopes for Western literature. Nor did he take time to read carefully the Mormon scriptures or to understand the theology that undergirds this literature. I have heard Stegner dismiss Mormon theology as absurd, and he confessed to Richard Etulain that in writing his books about Mormonism, "I didn't ask very analytical questions about Mormon theology. It really doesn't interest me that much" (117). Etulain immediately made the obvious parallel to the work on the Puritans by Perry Miller, who, he points out, "was probably an agnostic . . . and yet he dealt with the most religious of people . . . in a very balanced fashion" (117). Stegner certainly achieved that kind of balance, probably better than anyone, but I can't help wishing that, for the deeper insights they provide, Stegner had studied not just Mormon sociology and history, but Mormon theology and literature, as Perry Miller did Puritan.

Take advantage of this opportunity to do better than Stegner. Examine Mormon literature and explore some of the beliefs and values that give that literature shape and quality. Read Sorensen's *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* (just republished by Signature Books), Peterson's story collection *The Canyons of Grace* and his novel *The Backslider*, and Thayer's collection *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone* (1989), which includes "The Red-tailed Hawk." These are all fine contributions to Mormon and

Western—and thus human—literature.

Read some of the others I cannot explore here: for instance, Terry Tempest Williams, who writes regularly about her Mormon, human, feminist response to Western landscape. Most notable of her books is *Refuge* (1991), her very personal meditation on her mother's death from cancer and the flooding in the mid-eighties of the Bear River Bird Refuge on the Great Salt Lake. This prize-winning book both affirms some basic Mormon beliefs and challenges contemporary Mormon cultural values from a Western and human perspective. I also recommend four Mormon winners of Associated Writing Programs Awards in recent years: Phyllis Barber, who won the creative non-fiction award in 1992 for *How I Got Cultured*, about growing up as a Mormon in the bizarre spiritual frontier of Las Vegas, and three recipients of the Flannery O'Connor Award given by the AWP each year for the best short story collection—Paul Rawlins, in 1996, for *No Lie Like Love*; Mary Clyde, in 1998, for *Survival Rates*, and Darrell Spencer, in 1999, for *Caution: Men in Trees*. All of these books contain skilled, challenging, moving, Western, Mormon, *human* literature.

### III. A LARGER PERSPECTIVE

I issue a challenge to my Mormon colleagues to study not merely the spiritual frontiers others have crossed but to cross some personally. Look carefully at beliefs and values and literary understandings that may seem alien but can effectively correct and expand your own. In my own religious and intellectual experience, I have wondered if my fundamental loyalty is to the lovely, unified truths and values that I believe have been given by God to Mormon prophets or to the diverse new ones I am learning from the full range of human exploration and invention. Mormon theology has helped me come to some peace with the great mystery of evil, which has been terribly destructive of faith, even basic human hope, in the twentieth century. The Mormon understanding that matter and energy and the laws by which they operate—and even our essential, individual selves—have existed forever, have not been created out of nothing, means that the evils of hurricanes and

holocausts are not ultimately God's fault but rather flaws in the imperfect reality that we all find ourselves in with God, whom we can trust fully to help us combat. Mormon ideas about married couples continuing in eternal life, even unto joint godhood, have helped me exult in the fruitful, exasperating, equal opposition of male and female, the never-ending struggle of creating an eternal relationship. I have been able to find joy and growth, even transcendent spiritual experiences, in my Mormon church service, where there is no separation between lay and clergy, ministers and congregation, but all are engaged as equals in struggling together, trying to learn to love each other as we share our spiritual journeys. But I have often wondered if my identity is or should be centered in these greatly satisfying but peculiar ideas and practices, shared by only about one tenth of one percent of God's children, or in the greater human congregation of *all* those God has created and blessed with his saving and ongoing mercy—a God who, even as the Book of Mormon testifies, has already revealed and is still revealing other scriptures and many important ideas “unto all nations” (2 Nephi 29:12).

This perplexity came into sharp and disturbing focus in 1981 when Charlotte and I served as two of the leaders of the BYU Study Abroad Program in London. I quickly began to feel deeply both the division and the connection between being Mormon and being human. Along with my students, I was surprised by the artistic beauty and spiritual devotion produced by the ancient and contemporary human cultures that we were for the first time so intensely studying and experiencing. In our humanities and history classes, we learned the details of Christian history and architecture and art and then visited the sites and museums throughout England and the Continent and Israel. We stood under the steeple of Salisbury Cathedral and thought of the faith and aspiration that could sustain artisans and tithe-payers through whole lifetimes to lift those tons of stone 400 feet into the sky. We found a small Orthodox Church on a back street in Moscow and worshiped with a few old women and one young couple as they kept the faith alive, sometimes at great cost, under Communism. And we stood in the grotto under the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and looked at the silver star on

the floor marking the spot where Jesus was born—according to a tradition going back beyond the Crusades. I soon learned, in the Holy Land, that there is little certainty about *where* the great events actually occurred, but before long, I began to realize that the exactness of the sites was not important. What mattered is that devout Jews and Muslims and Christians (and now Mormons) come by the hundreds of thousands to those sites to express and renew their faith—to kneel and weep by that silver star, as I saw a Catholic priest doing; or to leave a candle burning in the grotto at Gethsemane, as a young Mormon girl with us did; or to stand on the stairs looking down into the torture pit in the Palace of Caiaphas, where Christ may have been hung by his feet during that last night, and suddenly begin singing with a group of Baptists an old hymn about following Christ whatever the cost. Those were miracles too.

Wallace Stegner was an example of that kind of miracle. Stegner crossed the spiritual frontier of the imagination from a nonbelieving humanist to one who could appreciate the heroism and endurance and simple goodness of the Mormon pioneers and their descendants: he could somewhat infuriatingly dismiss Joseph Smith as a bad novelist and Brigham Young as a ruthless colonizer, showing he didn't know either of them very well. But then in the next breath he could admit that he liked Mormons as much as any people and that if he knocked on any Mormon door, he'd be welcomed and fed: "They'd probably sit me down and let me join a home evening hour and we'd end with prayer. I'd be singing with the children before the evening was over" (117-18). We all might well follow Stegner's example in the latter response, where the better angels of his nature asserted themselves.

At the end of our term in London, I was able to talk with the students about an enriching paradox—that our experiences in England and Europe and Israel could make us more committed to our specific, peculiar, and somewhat exclusive Mormon faith and also, without contradiction, make us more grateful to be part of the great human experience with God that produced the art and buildings and pilgrimages we had witnessed and participated in. Yes, we would continue to feel the tension, would move back and forth, sometimes with anguish,

but we now understood with our eyes and hearts as well as minds that history, even our own religious history, began long before 1820 and that we were part of it. We could share the universal impulses and yearnings of the traditions we had studied and give particular creative expression to them through our own heritage—and we could also value the unique movement toward God that came to unique maturity in the Western United States. We did not need to wander as strangers and foreigners among the struggling, generous people we met in London and Bethlehem and Moscow. We were fellow citizens with them, fellow saints in the human household of faith.

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