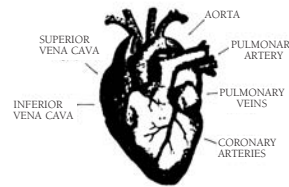
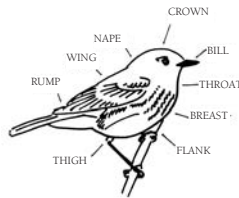


Leaving aside questions of belief, how do religious practices transform lives?

MORMONISM AS PRACTIS

By Phyllis Barber, H. Parker Blount,
John Dewey Remy, Jana K. Riess, Holly Welker



EDITOR'S NOTE: *The short essays in this section were given as part of a panel discussion, "Doing Things that Change Us: Mormonism as Praxis," conceived and organized by Holly Welker and presented in a slightly different format at the 2004 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium. The session was a wonderful success, with several seasoned symposium attendees telling Sunstone staff members that it was among the best sessions they'd ever attended. As fate would have it, however, our taping equipment for this session failed. We're very excited to offer the full symposium session here with only minor editing.*

INTRODUCTION

by Holly Welker

IN *THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE*, KAREN ARMSTRONG, A former Roman Catholic nun, acclaimed author of *A History of God* and *The Battle for God*, and noted biographer of both Muhammad and the Buddha, recounts the research she began in the 1980s after being hired to write and present a six-part documentary on Saint Paul. Early on she realizes she doesn't know enough about Judaism, so she meets with Jewish scholar Hyam Maccoby. Arguing against the New Testament depiction of the Pharisees, Maccoby "[points] out that in all likelihood Jesus had been a Pharisee himself" and "could well have belonged to the school of Rabbi Hillel," a prominent Pharisee who had lived half a century or so before Jesus. As evidence, Maccoby notes that "Jesus had, after all, taught a version of Hillel's Golden Rule" and relates this anecdote:

Some pagans came to Hillel and told him that they would convert to his faith if he could recite the whole of Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg. So Hillel obligingly stood on one leg like a stork and said, "Do not do unto others as you would not have done unto you. That is the Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it."

Armstrong is troubled by the story and wants to know where faith and belief come into play—how on earth could all of Jewish theology and doctrine be reduced to one sentence? Maccoby replies that "Theology just is not that important in Judaism. . . . There's no orthodoxy as you have it in the Catholic Church. No complicated creeds to which everybody must subscribe. No infallible pronouncement by a pope. Nobody can tell Jews what to believe."¹

Armstrong then focuses on her own astonishment:

I could not imagine religion without belief. Ever since I had grown up and started to think, my Christian life had been a continuous struggle to accept the official doctrines. Without true belief you could not be a member of the church, you could not be saved. Faith was the starting point, the *sine qua non*, the indispensable requirement, and for me it had been a major stumbling block.

"No official theology?" I repeatedly stupidly. "None at all? How can you *be* religious without a set of ideas—about God, salvation and so on—as a basis?"

"We have orthopraxy instead of orthodoxy," Hyam replied calmly. . . . "Right practice" rather than 'right belief.' That's all. You Christians make such a fuss about theology, but it's just not important in the way you think. It's just poetry, really, ways of talking about the inexpressible. We Jews don't bother much about

what we believe. We just *do* it instead.”²

Armstrong later details insights that eventually evolved from that discussion. She writes:

Religion is not about accepting twenty impossible propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you. It’s a moral aesthetic, an ethical alchemy. If you behave a certain way, you will be transformed. The myths and laws of religion are not true because they conform to some metaphysical, scientific, or historical reality, but because they are life enhancing. They tell you how human nature functions, but you will not discover their truth unless you apply these myths and doctrines to your own life and put them into practice. The myths of the hero, for example, are not meant to give us historical information about Prometheus or Achilles—or for that matter, about Jesus or the Buddha. Their purpose is to compel us to act in such a way that we bring out our own heroic potential.³

Or, to paraphrase using a more familiar statement: “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works” (James 2:17–18).

THE SELECTIONS BELOW, presented in alphabetical order by the author’s last name, explore how Mormonism’s “moral aesthetic” and “ethical alchemy” can help transform us into beings more closely allied with the divine. The authors leave aside questions of testimony and belief, and consider the special benefits offered by cultivating religious habits and behaviors either unique to Mormonism or approached in a uniquely Mormon way.

NOTES

1. Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 235.
2. *Ibid.*, 236.
3. *Ibid.*, 270.

THE PRACTICE OF SIMPLE FAITH

by Phyllis Barber

TWO UTTERANCES OF my faith, sung in the voice of my childhood:

In whatever corner we may chance to grow,
Whether cold or warm the wind may ever blow.
Dark the day or sunny, we must try, try, try.
Just one spot to gladden, you and I.

—“Little Purple Pansies”

Out in the desert they wander,
Hungry and helpless and cold. . . .
Off to the rescue He hastens
Bringing them back to the fold
—“Dear to the Heart of the Shepherd”

I consider myself well-introduced to faith, a child of the faith, a child of faith, a person who believes deeply in a God who wants us to share, a person who desires to brighten one spot in this earthly garden wherever that might be.

As I thought about faith for this essay, a precept mentioned often in my formative years, I realized that much of my introduction to faith came through music. It came through those songs we sang time and time again until they were worn into our synapses and into our minds and pulses like grooves in an old phonograph record.

After being totally active in the LDS Church for thirty-eight years of my life and being a never-miss-a-meeting, accept-every-call-you’re-given kind of Mormon, my life changed dramatically. All of a sudden, there was a one-hundred-foot waterfall in the river’s course. Too high to keep my boat on the river. Time to jump raft and portage.

In an effort to save my marriage to a man whom I’d married in the St. George temple and who had many surprising-to-me doubts, angers, and frustrations with the LDS way of life, at the age of thirty-eight, I stopped attending church. I thought it wise to maintain a more neutral ground, to step out of the war zone, the never-ending loop. Together, we looked at other possibilities of worshiping God. On my part, I believed in God and had faith in what I’d learned as a child and in the songs that I’d sung. God’s love shone over the rich and the poor, the wise men and the sinners. God didn’t have to reside solely in an LDS meetinghouse.

But, as fate would have it, the end of our marriage was imminent and a three-year separation, then divorce, would follow. Still, I didn’t want to believe that could happen. I’d always felt we were committed to each other forever, that we could work through any problem, that my faith in my ability to do anything I set out to do (with God’s help, of course), would hold us in good stead. One of my greatest stumbling blocks in the marriage was my inability to face, literally, the truth of my situation. I held onto the ideal as if it were a life boat and couldn’t see that we’d been stuck for years, locked in a grid and unable to shift from our positions. Something needed to change.

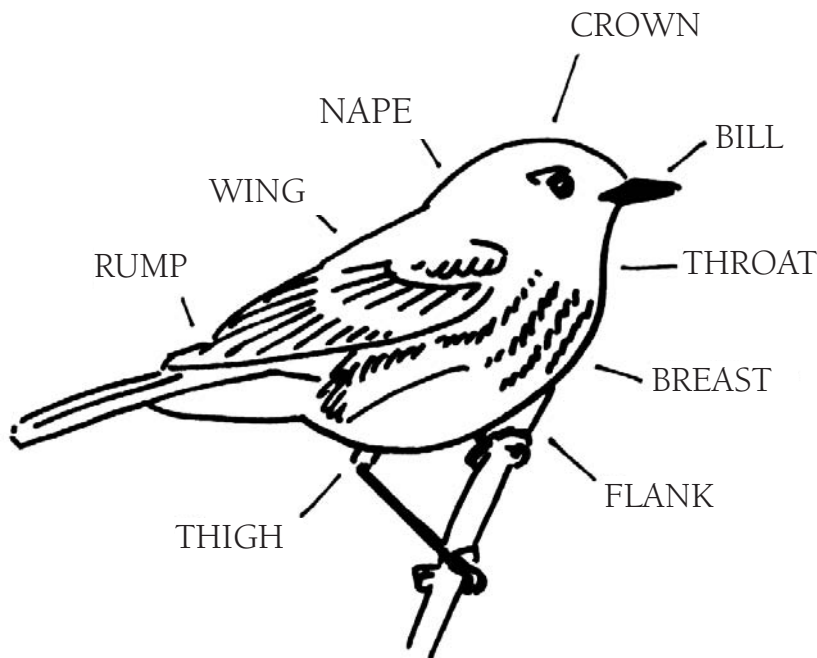
Over a period of ten years, the waterfall which we didn’t get out of the river in time to avoid, was in front of us. We stopped going to church. I went into a long period of aberrant depression when I realized things were falling apart. My husband and I left Salt Lake City, where we’d lived for twenty years and where we’d raised our three children, and moved with our youngest teenaged son to the mountains of Colorado. We gave up a beautiful home and network of friends and moved into a dark, claustrophobic condo that was supposed to be temporary. After three years there, we separated and I moved to

Denver where I knew no one, where I was determined to make a new life, and where I had no intention of relying on my roots or my church for help.

TOTALLY UNAWARE, I entered into a dark labyrinth of a thousand-plus miles. From the fatted years of my life, I found myself in the proverbial lean years. Very lean years, where there were times I sank to the utter bottom of the bottom and didn't think I'd find my way back.

black churches—the Second Baptists, African Methodist Episcopal, charismatic Christians. One church had a sign out front that read, “Sinners Welcome Here,” and I turned into the parking lot eagerly, relieved to feel welcome in a church. I loved the heartbeat of the gospel music, the choir rocking down the aisle, the connection to people who were honest about their place as sinners. I loved being able to worship, to shout, “I love you, Jesus.”

In 1994, I taught at the University of Missouri in Columbia



FAITH

(ALMA 7:23-27)

I didn't call it pride at the time, but I convinced myself that the LDS Church wasn't a place for someone whose life had broken to pieces. The Church was something I'd left behind. It wasn't a place for a single person about to be divorced, nor for someone who was reckless and heedless and a sinner determined to find a new configuration in which to be whole again. I was in my own little rowboat, frantically rowing toward something—yes, I did believe in something. There had to be a place where I could worship God. Where I could feel communion with Him. Where I could exercise the faith I once had.

Sunday mornings were the hardest hours of the week, as I'd spent so much of my life getting up on Sunday mornings, ironing my dress, curling my hair, preparing to go to church. My loneliness trebled on those mornings, so I attended all kinds of churches in Denver. Most of them felt cold or too contrived or too soul-less.

Something about the way the African-Americans had suffered made me feel simpatico with them, so I searched out the

for a semester and attended black churches there by myself, sometimes the only Caucasian, and I loved sitting shoulder to shoulder with impeccably groomed women, some of them old and bent with pillbox hats, some of them fancy in broad-brimmed hats and sequined dresses.

When I moved to Minnesota for a brief time, Sunday mornings still found me yearning for a religious community. Even though I lived with a man to whom I wasn't married, I needed a brief touch with my own church again. When one of the bishop's counselors called to welcome me to the ward, I told him I wasn't active but that I'd like to drop into church once in a while, just so I could feel a sense of community and sing the songs I loved again. I wouldn't take the sacrament, I told him, because I wasn't a worthy member, but I did want to come.

“That's strange,” he said, “but,” he paused, “okay. That's possible.”

As if a person needs to be granted the privilege of walking through church doors to commune with our Lord and Savior,

I thought when I hung up the phone, angry all over again at how I perceived some people in the church having such tunnel vision.

At my first of a total of four sacrament meetings during my year-and-a-half in Minnesota, I couldn't sing the hymns. Emotion would well up inside me. I choked on the words. My voice cracked. I tried to hide the tears streaming down my face. The flood. I was embarrassed. I couldn't hide.

Singing this music was like negotiating a one-inch passageway through the balled root of a gigantic tree with thousands of strands and fibers all attached to the trunk of the tree called me. I knew I was enmeshed by the large and small roots, and yet this felt fragile, feeble, tenuous, and even dangerous. I still believed I was Dear to the Heart of the Shepherd even though I was the one who was "hungry and helpless and cold" this time around, not some fictional stranger in the hymn book. I believed He was out in the wilderness looking for me, even if I felt an unfit gift for God.

I'M GRATEFUL THAT faith was planted so deeply into my heart, my bones, my blood, my breath. I'm grateful that I believed and still do believe in the Shepherd. I'm grateful that I finally understand that it takes a crack in the armor for God to move through pride and hurt. I've been proud, even arrogant in my quiet way. I've been stubborn.

But whatever the stories of our lives—the betrayals, hurts, disappointments, and losses—the great gift of faith in a God who waits for us to open the door, for us to comprehend How Great Thou Art, is there for each of us. Whatever any of us chooses to do about attendance at the ward house, faith helps us know that God understands our suffering. Furthermore, it gives us an inkling that we can understand God and His ways only when we walk some of the same paths as Jesus Christ who suffered for the sins of the world. ☞

WHY I READ THE SCRIPTURES

by H. Parker Blount

IN ONE OF our LDS Primary hymns, we sing, "Teach me all the things I must do. . . ." One of the things I do, among the many things I do not, is read the scriptures. It is a practice I acquired from my membership in the Church, although my earliest exposure to the scriptures had come from my Baptist grandfather, who, each evening, would read a chapter from the Bible as we sat around the table following dinner. It was not then an entirely enjoyable experience for a little boy who would rather be outside exploring the farm. But now I enjoy exploring the scriptures just as I then enjoyed my tramping about outside.

I come from that part of the country where the Bible is considered inerrant. Many of my fellow Southerners believe God dictated it and ultimately it was printed precisely as God wanted it. The Testaments, they believe, say what they say clearly and without danger of being misread, misunderstood, or misinterpreted.

My LDS background, however, teaches me that the Bible, though the word of God, has errors due to mistranslations. In addition, "plain and precious things" have been deleted. The problem is I don't know which parts have been mistranslated. In fact, I don't even know if anything is ever correctly translated.

Frankly I think a claim to an inerrant and infallible Bible (not to mention popes and prophets) is bizarre—but even so, it is an idea I sympathize with. I like the idea of a father—earthly or heavenly—who makes clear to his children what the rules and expectations are. He doesn't deliver mixed messages, and everyone who reads his proclamations arrives at the same understanding.

That is what I would like from the ruler of heaven and earth. That isn't what I get. I agree with Carolyn Myss who says that the language of the spirit is the language of paradox. The same can be said of the scriptures. For example, think about "If you are prepared, ye shall not fear" alongside "Take no thought for your life. . . ."

SOME HALF-DOZEN years ago, our bishop asked me to speak in sacrament meeting. At the time, I attended meetings a bit more frequently than I do now. He said he knew I read the scriptures regularly, and he wanted me to speak on why I read the scriptures. Well my wife and I were going away that weekend, so I was, so to speak, off the hook.

But I wasn't. I was hooked. I couldn't get the topic out of my mind. Why *do* I read the scriptures? What do I get out of them? Why do I feel my day is incomplete if I don't spend at least a few minutes with the scriptures? It wasn't that I hadn't considered those questions. I had, at least to some extent; but I hadn't considered them deeply. As I did, what I discovered surprised me. For one thing, I discovered that over time, the lenses through which I read the scriptures changed. Furthermore, I changed lenses according to which of the standard works I was reading.

I acquired my first set of scriptures when I was thirteen or fourteen, purchasing them with the money I had earned working on our neighbor's farm during the summer. This was long before we Church members became a scripture-toting and daily-scripture-reading people. I read them sporadically until I went on a mission. I have read them regularly since.

Initially, I read the scriptures, particularly the Bible, to buttress the claim that the Church was the only true church with the only true doctrine. Later I tried to read the scriptures as a guide for life. The scriptures, I was told, held all the answers to life's problems. So I would read and search for the best way to handle various problems. I was also told that as I read the scriptures, I should liken them unto myself.

I TEND TO read verse-by-verse, chapter-by-chapter. How I engage the scriptures as I read is varied, though. Often I read them as metaphors. I can't help but think, for example, when I read of Lot's wife looking back and being turned into a pillar of salt, that one just can't spend too much time in the past. I also read them wondering what the author was trying to achieve, or why Israel wanted to tell that particular story. I read them, too, as though they were written by men who have gone deep into their souls and who wrote, like most of us who write, to discover what we know and believe. Occasionally I read them as if literal, but I am mostly on the side of the person who said only fools read the Bible literally.

This issue of biblical inerrancy brings to mind the begats, which I usually skip but sometime not long ago chose to read. As I made my way through Matthew's begats, I discovered an interesting thing. In this patriarchal lineage, Matthew includes five women: Tamar, Rachab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. "Why," I asked myself? What did the Lord want us to know? What did Matthew want us to know? Why did Matthew include, for example, Tamar, who played the harlot to conceive a child by her father-in-law? Are we being warned that we can choke on the ideal—the voice that says, "If only people would live the gospel we wouldn't have these problems?" Are we being reminded of the paradox of having to stray the path to stay the path? Or are we being subtly told something of the profundity and the mystery of the workings of the Spirit? Or was something lost in translation? I don't know for sure, but Jesus seems to have had some grandmothers who definitely would not be the Relief Society sister of the month, and that intrigued me.

One night my wife and I were lying in bed (don't worry, I am finished with the begat stuff), and she said she was memorizing the Twenty-third Psalm and wanted to practice it. She began:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Then she said, "Amen." I said, "It doesn't have an 'Amen.'" She said, "It should have."

In that single instance, the Twenty-third Psalm was transformed and illuminated in ways I had not seen before. I had never thought of it as a prayer, but it is, both an invocation and a benediction. Later, at the Sunstone Symposium, D. Michael Quinn, in his address during the "Spiritual Paths after September 1993" session, said he would like to conclude his

remarks with his testimony. He then read the Twenty-third Psalm. It was transformed again as I thought, "Yes, of course, it is a testimony." It wasn't just the Twenty-third Psalm that was transformed. I was transformed.

The outcome from the bishop's asking me to speak was that I realized I read and value the scriptures because they take me to another place. I realized that having scriptural proof of LDS doctrine and teachings isn't that important to me. In fact, I have come to believe that the scriptures don't prove anything. I also realized the scriptures seldom have an immediate answer for my immediate problems. Furthermore, it is tedious to try to apply every scripture to my life.

To show you how sideways I have become, I feel as though I know as much about the plan of salvation as I want to know. Having finer details about the degrees of glory really makes little difference to me. Heaven is whatever heaven is. The resurrection—morning of the first day, afternoon of the second day—is whatever it is, and knowing more doesn't make me more of a spiritual person. What I want are the intimacies of salvation, not a blueprint. To use church language, my desire is to walk in the Spirit.

The scriptures, as I experience them, serve not as a daily guide, but as a daily (if I am fortunate) transformation. What I want from the scriptures is not the surface meaning but their soul. I see the scriptures as the steward of the mysteries of a godly consciousness and the passageway into those mysteries. There is a distinct difference between knowing Church doctrine and being obedient to rules and commandments, on the one hand, and being taught and transformed by the Spirit on the other.

It isn't as important to comprehend the surface meaning as to apprehend the soul of the scriptures. As Karen Armstrong says in her book on Islam, "Reading or listening to the Qu'ran is not a cerebral experience to get information or to receive a clear directive, but a spiritual discipline." Or, as a rabbi observed, "Whoever busies himself in the Torah for its own sake, his Torah becomes for him an elixir of life."

ONE SATURDAY THIS past August, I intended to go first thing to the store and purchase seeds and fertilizer for my garden. It had been the first year in more years than I can remember that I hadn't had a garden. In our part of the country, we can easily have a spring and a fall garden. Since I hadn't planted in the spring, I thought I should do it now. Somehow, however, I couldn't get in the spirit of the thing, and it troubled me. Intending to tell my wife I was going to the seed store, I walked outside onto the deck where she was sitting. Ordinarily August is very hot in Georgia, but somehow nature had given us an October day. I sat down on the edge of the deck, enjoying the cool morning and the warmth of the early morning sun just clearing the Georgia pines. This was more enjoyable than going to the store. I went back inside looking for something to read, picked up a book of poetry I had just checked out of the library, and returned to my spot on the deck and began to read. I would pause between poems, enjoying the pleasant morning but fretting over the garden. "I re-

ally should go to the store and get what I need and plant the garden,” I would tell myself, “it is the right thing to do.” On the other hand, I really didn’t want to face the Saturday morning bustle and then spend the morning preparing and planting, and then later weeding, hoeing, and tending. I was puzzled, for I had always enjoyed my garden and considered it a spiritual component of my life. I felt as though I was rejecting something basic to who I am. As I turned from my thoughts to read another poem, I remembered Robert Frost’s comment that poetry is what gets lost in translation.

Poetry, the language of allusions, enchantments, rhythms, incantations, and symbols, is the life force of words as well as gardens. I realized I had lost, at least for this season, the poetry of gardening. When we take the scriptures too literally, the poetry is lost there as well. Even if the words have been incorrectly translated, as long as the poetry is there, the words have the keys to take us beyond ourselves and transform us—not an intellectual change but a felt change.

That is why I read the scriptures. 

A SKEPTIC’S PRACTICE OF PRAYER

by John Dewey Remy

I DIDN’T ALWAYS pray. I began my spiritual life as a pre-teen skeptic but converted to Mormonism about the time my voice stopped cracking. Now I’m way past puberty, and I’m a doubter once again but with one key difference: I still pray a lot. I’m a rational mystic, a praying Mormon atheist, a peculiarity among an already-peculiar people. Prayer is a hard habit to break. And I think this is a good thing.

I became a prayeraholic on my mission to Japan. I was nicknamed, I hope with affection, “*Inori Chôrô*,” or “The Praying Elder.” I loved the rich honorific language we used to address *Tenpu no Chichi naru Kamisama*, explicitly exalting God and belittling ourselves with each carefully chosen pronoun, modifier, or verb ending. Japanese is still the language of my spirit. I made my companions fold their arms and bow their heads on the street before we began knocking on doors or cold contacting. And it wasn’t just a benediction—I would really try to feel for the wispy touch of the Spirit both after the “ahmen” and while we moved up the street, scanning homes or faces for instant golden converts (at the beginning of the day) or even just someone to take a freakin’ Book of Mormon (at the end of the day).

When I married Jana five months after my mission, it was only natural that I continue my good missionary habits with my new eternal, non-transferable companion. We’ve missed few prayers through almost thirteen years of marriage. Even when one of us is traveling, we still try to get our daily prayer in. One example from my online journal:

I introduced Jana to the wonders of instant messaging a little over a week ago [August 2001]. I thought that it would keep the phone bills down while she is in Utah, but it’s just made us more accessible to each other—we just spend more time chatting with each other, on the phone or online (the perils of putting two very verbal people in one relationship). We’ve already made both sacred and profane use of this technology.

Here’s an example of the former, excerpts from a prayer via MSN Messenger:

Jana says: Whose turn to pray?

John says: Your turn!

Jana says: Me???

John says: I prayed on the phone last.

Jana says: I did it last time on the phone!

John says: I think.

Jana says: Nope

Jana says: It was me in the hotel room with mom

John says: No prob.

John says: I’ll pray.

...

John says: Dear Heavenly Father

...

John says: Please bless Aunt Madge for her hospitality, bless her with companionship in her loneliness.

John says: Please bless Tom and his family during this new trial,

John says: And please help us to serve him by building a good site for him.

...

John says: We thank thee for people who create works which inspire and lift and help us to think.

John says: We’re grateful for the examples of hard work, dedication and sacrifice and service which surround us.

...

John says: We’re grateful that thou hast blessed our lives with such wonderful little ones.

John says: I’m grateful that thou hast blessed my life with my wonderful, radiant, talented, compassionate Jana.

John says: Please help us to have the energy to use our talents, our time, our resources to serve others.

John says: Please continue to bless our family with safety and peace of mind.

John says: In the name of Jesus Christ,

John says: Amen

Jana says: That was beautiful

Jana says: Thank you

Jana says: Just what I needed tonite

John says: Say “amen”

Jana says: Really

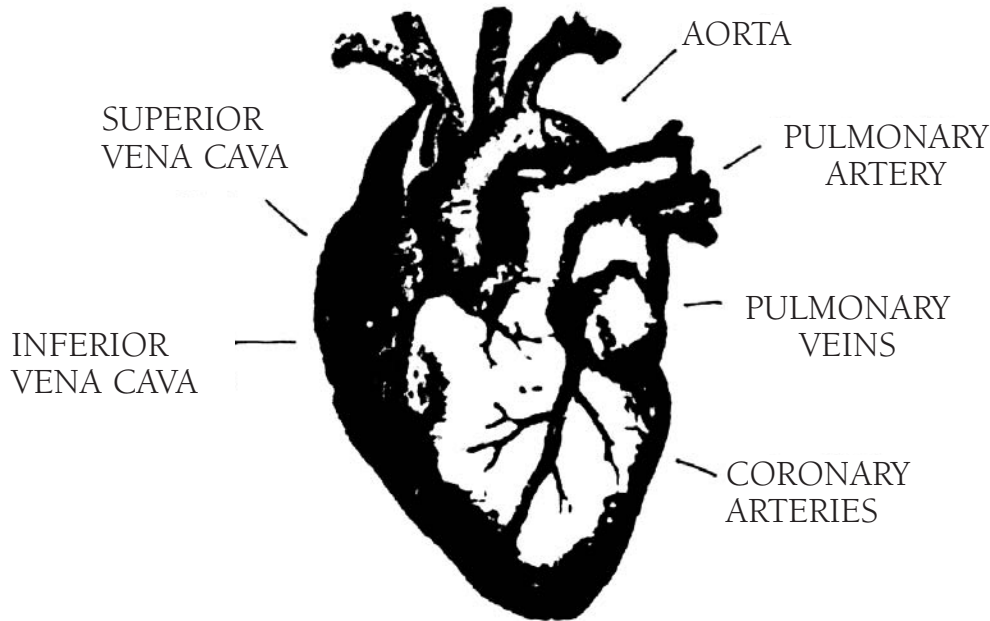
Jana says: Oh, amen. I forgot

Jana says: God bless you John
John says: Thanks.

OUR FAMILY HAS a system. The adults pray on even days, the kids on odd days. We have to come up with some new thing to be thankful for each time we pray. This was really easy the first couple of weeks, but now, after long silences, I find that my children are extremely grateful for shoelaces, carpet, string, cat toys, and other things I suspect are visible through downcast eyes on the living room floor.

all of the Bad Stuff I had done throughout the day. (The list was especially long when I was in the middle of *Miracle of Forgiveness*.) Prayer became my period of mental self-flagellation, my psychic hairshirt.

Over the years, as God became more distant to me, my attempts to reach out to him diversified. My weekly sacrament experience is inspired by the Quaker practice of community meditation. I sit in silence, seeking the divine light within me and feeling it not only there, but also becoming aware that there are hundreds of little flames burning brightly in the



PRAYER

(D & C 8:2-3)

Has the practice of regular family prayer transformed our family? I believe it has. It is a centering mechanism. No matter how irritated we might be with each other before prayer, soon we are reminded that we are grateful for one another, that we want each other to be happy, and to succeed. Prayer is also a form of communication with each other, even a teaching tool. The children know that we want peace in the Middle East and that we are grateful for our student apartment. Jana and I gain insights into Emma's love for our cats and Christian's desire for safety. And it is one of the primary ways that their skeptic dad can teach them about faith.

While the Remy practice of family prayer might pass Church correlation, my personal practice is perhaps more problematic. Though I am a practicing Mormon, my methods of supplicating God are a syncretistic, schizo mix of methods.

In the old days, my communication with God, especially in the evenings (when I had the most time), was pretty straightforward. I used to kneel down and make a mental checklist of

hearts of all of who are sitting around me. I practice various Buddhist meditations, sometimes chanting mantras with prayer beads in hand the way I watched my Japanese grandmother do while growing up.

I also have set prayers that I recite. This Tibetan prayer fits nicely in our tradition:

May I become at all times, both now and forever
A protector for those without protection
A guide for those who have lost their way
A ship for those with oceans to cross
A bridge for those with rivers to cross
A sanctuary for those in danger
A lamp for those without light
A place of refuge for those who lack shelter
And a servant to all in need.

I have others from St. Francis of Assisi, from the Dalai Lama, from Emily Dickinson and Yeats, and ones I've created from the lyrics of rock groups such as Rush and the Beastie

Boys. I may repeat these over and over, but I've selected those which are the most meaningful to me, those words which ignite the spark of the divine within me and which expand my awareness of and my compassion for the teeming human divinity (or divine humanity) all about me. They have more meaning to me, and at this stage of my life, more power to transform me than does the sacramental prayer.

SOME YEARS AGO in Salt Lake County, five little girls trapped themselves in the trunk of a car on a hot summer day. As soon as the mother watching the children realized that they were missing, she drove around the neighborhood in a frantic search, without realizing they were dying in the trunk.

As a parent, I know that mother was praying hard to find them. Why didn't God answer her prayers and prompt her to open that trunk and find the children while there was still a chance to save them? If God wouldn't heed her prayers, then why would he respond to my trivial requests? Father and I had had a troubled relationship before that, but this marked a falling out between us.

I have tried in this presentation to separate belief and discipline, to focus on the benefits of prayer as praxis. The irony is that this is the greatest alchemy that the act of prayer works upon me—that, in spite of my doubts and unbelief, I still pray. Most of the time, while my heart struggles with the pain that fills this world, and my rational mind analyzes and synthesizes, I live in a random, indifferent world, a vast universe with a distant or non-existent God. My prayers are my tentative phone calls home, where I suspend disbelief, and hesitatingly dial out, hoping that someone, *someone* will pick up. ☺

“MORE FULLY UNSPOTTED FROM THE WORLD”: THOUGHTS ON SABBATH KEEPING

By Jana Riess

I AM A late convert to the spiritual practice of Sabbath-keeping. I was raised by goodly atheist parents for whom Sundays represented an opportunity to catch up on gardening, shopping, work, or household chores. No one went to church, although when I was nine, my mother started taking my brother and me to Quaker meetings a couple of Sundays a month. She was wary of organized religion, and Quaker meeting was just about the closest she could get to giving us some education in religion and the Bible. Because, as she put it to me later, if she didn't expose us to some kind of religion in childhood, what would we have to rebel against when we became teenagers?

It's no surprise then, that when I joined the LDS Church in 1993, I was mystified by the strict sabbatarianism I observed around me. I was startled to see Church members get so uptight about what to do—or, as seemed more emphasized, *not do*—on Sundays. I remember one sacrament meeting speaker fretting aloud about whether it was okay to tape a football game televised on Sunday to watch on a later day. He wasn't watching it on Sunday, but was it kosher to tape it if all these godless heathen football players were actually *playing* the game on a Sunday? Because, as Eric Liddell's character admonishes in *Chariots of Fire*, “The Sabbath's no' a day for playin' football.” Though I disagreed in spirit with the fear and anxiety that lay behind some people's strict interpretations of the Sabbath, I began to realize I'd never given much thought to what, if anything, the Sabbath was supposed to mean in my life.

Spiritual practices have the potential to be a soul-nurturing constant, but their importance will wax and wane in different periods of our lives. When my husband, Phil, and I lived in New Jersey, for example, we practiced the spiritual discipline of hospitality, of welcoming the stranger as well as the friend. We hosted open Thanksgiving meals and invited many people to stay, sometimes for months at a time. Now we live in Kentucky, and—ironically enough for a region of the country most known for its hospitality—no one ever comes to see us. In five years of living here, a scant handful of our friends have made the trek down south to visit. It's not that we don't have other opportunities for practicing the discipline of hospitality—as the Rule of St. Benedict puts it, of welcoming every person who crosses our threshold as if she were Christ himself—but there has been a discernible inward shift. Since we had a child and moved to Kentucky, our approach has been much more attuned to the quiet demarcation of time spent only with each other. Our lives are more self-contained, introverted, introspective. And in this context, we have started keeping the Sabbath holy.

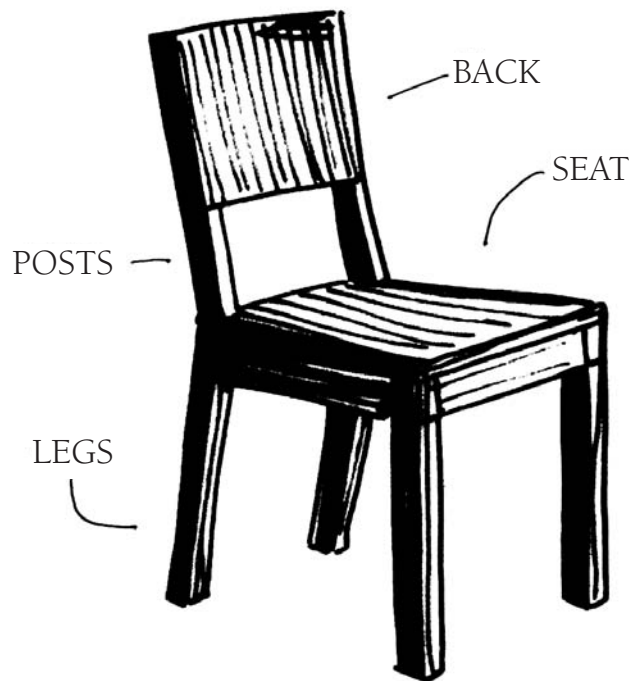
As Esther de Waal might say, the Sabbath is an inherent borderland, a site of exchange and openness, a time when we relinquish control in order to see beyond the mists of the everyday into something liminal, something undefined.¹ Sunday is the day where, on the surface, it seems that I am most restricted. It's a day that could easily be characterized by all of the things I've gradually decided not to do on the Sabbath: I (generally) don't shop, don't open my email or even turn on my computer, don't work, don't pay bills, don't talk about business, don't think about money or future purchases. It's a long list of don'ts that I've come to take pretty seriously for the perfectly selfish reason that I know the rhythm of my life has been improved immensely by keeping the Sabbath.

IN SPITE OF the fact that it's a day of apparent restrictions, I have come to see Sunday as the day when I am the most free. The Sabbath becomes a day when, if I am very lucky, *kairos* time steals into *chronos* time and affords me a glimpse of something eternal. My usual life, dictated fully by *chronos* time, by lists and demands and missed deadlines, allows no possibility for those stolen insights. Sunday is the only day of the week

when every hour of my day is not scheduled. It is the only day of my week where spontaneous phone calls and dinner plans and visits to friends are even possible. It's one of only two days of the week, Saturday being the other, where my cooking has the potential to become a lavish gift of love rather than a mere hustle to get something nutritious on the table. It's also the only day when, as a writer, I routinely find unexpected and unsought insights suddenly crowding my mind, which is usually too cluttered to receive such astonishing gifts of discernment.

New York Times at the kitchen table. *That* was a Sunday of renewal.

When I emerged from my year-long cocoon, it was with a refreshed sense of eagerness and joy. The first few weeks of church activity after my return were a bit tentative. Members of the ward who thought I'd merely backslidden—and didn't know that I may be the only Mormon ever to live up to the remarkably active term we have for backsliders, those who intentionally "go inactive"—didn't know quite what to make of



REST

(D&C 59:9-13)

The resonance of the Sabbath is not just for Sundays. Right now, I am in a tremendously lush period in my spiritual life. Not to sound Pollyannish, but it feels like springtime, in fact. I am renewed by the insights of gospel study and prayer. I feel closer to God than I have felt in a long time, perhaps since my conversion eleven years ago. But one of the major reasons for this sense of renewal, I know, is that I recently took a year-long sabbatical from church activity. From September 2000 to August 2001, I didn't go to meetings, participate in ward life or take the LDS sacrament. I realized that after seven years of church activity, I was burned out, and it was time for a break. (Traditionally, a sabbatical year is supposed to come after six years of labor, not seven, but what can I say? I was on Mormon Standard Time.) My sabbatical year was a time of dormancy and calm, when I continued reading but stopped running. I remember one perfect Sunday morning when I sent Phil and Jerusha off to his Methodist church and read back issues of the

me. I mostly kept silent about my sabbatical, but people noticed that when I returned to church, it was with a fresh sense of what I could accomplish as a member and why I wanted to be a Mormon in the first place.

Just a few weeks after I came back to full activity, September 11th happened. I found myself dreading the notion that the following Sunday the ward might entirely ignore the most devastating tragedy that had occurred in our nation's recent history in favor of such pressing topics as organizing food storage or subscribing to the *Ensign*. But instead of simply tuning out or sleeping in, which would have been my pre-sabbatical defense mechanism, I picked up the phone and called the counselor in the bishopric who was responsible for planning the meeting. I gave it to him straight: "If we're going to spend Sunday ignoring this event instead of helping people to process it, I'm not coming," I told him. "I'll go to a service where people are paying attention to more than their little slice

RECOMMENDED READING

Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting by Marva Dawn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989). In this modern classic, Dawn explores the potential for the Sabbath to be a spiritual resource for Christians, who can find rest and spiritual solace from its weekly observance.

The Fourth Commandment: Remember the Sabbath Day by Francine Klagsbrun (New York: Harmony/Crown, 2002). Klagsbrun looks at the Sabbath in Jewish texts and traditions, drawing from Torah, Talmud, and midrash as she investigates Sabbath observance in the modern world.

Mudhouse Sabbath: Eleven Spiritual Practices I Learned from Judaism by Lauren Winner (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2003). The first chapter of my friend Lauren Winner's lovely collection of autobiographical vignettes deals with Shabbat, or the Sabbath—one of the spiritual practices she carried with her when she converted from Orthodox Judaism to Anglican Christianity.

Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest by Lynne M. Baab (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005). Baab draws on her experience of having lived for a year and a half in Israel, where everything shuts down on Friday afternoon, and discusses how her participation in these Jewish Sabbaths informed and transformed her Christian journey.

of the world.” He readily agreed, which was very gratifying, and immediately enlisted me to give a talk, which was not. But it needed to be done, so why not me? Giving the talk was a very difficult experience, as I felt deeply affected by September 11th even before I learned that one of my former students at Columbia had been killed in the twin towers. But I was able to give what I felt was one of the most honest homilies of my life precisely because my sabbatical had stripped away any platitudes and easy thinking that I might have been prone to a year before. When we are tired, when we are burned out, there is a danger that we will gravitate toward easy answers. We stop thinking deeply because we are simply too tired to think.

For me, Sundays represent a chance to live that sabbatical year again in microcosm, to devote myself to reading and to shift downward for at least a day. Some weeks I also do a half-day enclosure on Wednesday, following an ancient Benedictine practice of devoting Wednesday afternoon to reading. But even when this is not possible, I always have Sunday to look forward to. In a nutshell, the Sabbath has become a life-giving time of renewal for me, a day I guard jealously.

ONE FINAL THOUGHT. I'm concerned about the tenor of the discussion about Sabbath-keeping in Mormon culture. Conservative, self-described “orthodox” Mormons give talks and discourses, both officially and unofficially, in which they focus on the laundry list of things to do and to avoid doing on the Sabbath. I always find myself wincing at these talks, because invariably, the way that I interpret the Sabbath and the way they do differs, and their dogmatism about what is right and what is wrong makes me feel lonely and judged.

One would think that the counterpart of this would be that liberal Mormons focus on the peace of the Sabbath without sweating the small stuff; that Liahonas could talk about obtaining Sabbath rest and other-ness without being judgmental about the details of what is acceptable and what is not. However, I don't hear liberal Mormons talking much about the Sabbath at all. They're not writing about it; they're not publishing articles on it that I have seen. I'd love to be wrong about this, so by all means, if they exist, please point me to appropriate sources.

This is such a missed opportunity for a dialogue about the Sabbath, because those who rigidly fixate on the nuts and bolts of Sabbath observance risk missing the whole point of why we do what we do, and clinging to a dead legalism. Liberal Mormons, however, either by not talking about the Sabbath at all or not engaging the kinds of specific questions that seem to attract more conservative Saints, also fail to appreciate a fact that Orthodox Jews know so well: God is in the details. The God we believe in *does* care about whether we should drive a car or turn on a light switch or use a Crock-Pot on the Sabbath. So let's talk about it. ☺

NOTE

1. Esther de Waal, *To Pause at the Threshold: Meditations for Living on the Border* (Morehouse, 2004).

A JOURNAL WORTH KEEPING (WHETHER THE ANGELS QUOTE FROM IT OR NOT)

by Holly Welker

ALTHOUGH I AM no longer an active or believing Mormon, I still live a lot like one. OK, I drink an occasional beer, though I have never been able to cultivate any interest in substance abuse. I don't worry about the ratings of the movies I watch, though I have enough sense to avoid films that are obviously crap. I don't go to church on Sunday, though I have tried to find a congregation where I feel at home, but I can't help noticing other meetings' shortcomings when compared to a Mormon service: I hate having to stand, then sit, then kneel, then stand again; or I hate that other worshipers sing stupid hymns accompanied by guitars or recordings, like it's some group karaoke thing; or I hate that people show up in T-shirts and shorts, like it's the grocery store.

But I still write down goals. I still strive to be scrupulously honest in my business dealings and to give a good portion of my earnings to charity. I still buy groceries in bulk. I still can't throw away anything, from a scrap of fabric to a cardboard box, without asking myself, “Is there some possible use left in this thing?” I still keep a journal.

For many years, I kept a journal for the same reason I flossed, made good grades, and exercised: because somebody told me that when I was seventy, I'd be glad I'd done such things in my youth. In general, the journal has given me more pleasure than the flossing. I was eleven when President Kimball issued his encouragement to

get a notebook . . . a journal that will last through all

time, and maybe the angels will quote from it for eternity. Begin today and write in it your goings and comings, your deepest thoughts, your achievements and your failures, your associations and your triumphs, your impressions and your testimonies.

I'm now on volume thirteen, and I still look at old volumes from time to time. For instance, volume five, my mission journal, is almost 100,000 words long and quite hefty. I wrote in it my goings and comings, my deepest thoughts, and things such as this, from 14 June 1986: "I have decided that the angels will not even flip the pages of this journal, though imperfect beings might find something of interest here."

Many people consider a journal the most private and intimate of texts. In certain ways, my journal is intensely intimate, in that it contains personal details and deep yearnings and struggles. Nonetheless, I was affected very early and very thoroughly by the Mormon view that journals are documents providing personal accounts of shared experiences—an example being the diaries or journals kept by those who crossed the plains—and are in some ways intended to be shared, just like the experiences they record. I took to heart the admonition that someday, when I am dead, someone, somewhere, might come upon my journals and use them—as faith-promoting stories, as cautionary tales, or simply as historical documents. Thus I have long been acutely aware of audience—it's a concept I understood instantly when teachers tried to explain it in composition courses. And even though I began to suspect early on that the angels would not quote from my journal, filled as it was with doubt and dissent, still, I couldn't help wanting, at the very least, to entertain and edify those other potential readers, the human ones—to give them an occasional good laugh, or pose from time to time a difficult question worth pondering.

In short, I wanted to give them reasons to keep reading, and give myself reasons to keep writing. I felt an obligation to make the record of my life relevant and compelling, both for myself and for that future audience, and I don't think that sense of obligation hurt either my journal in particular or my writing in general—or my cognitive skills, for that matter. I've learned that to be a good journaler, one must develop an eye for what is interesting and meaningful in one's daily life, as well as some skill and insight into analyzing one's own behaviors, utterances, and relationships. I believe that a journal should accurately capture not merely what happened, but the mood it left you in, the effect. Anyone who has kept a journal for very long knows that a journal that does nothing but record events makes for singularly dull reading—and yes, I have resorted to that minimalist strategy from time to time when I'm feeling lazy or overwhelmed; I do it primarily to maintain my habit, not because I imagine that such entries are particularly valuable in and of themselves.

I no longer attend much to a future audience (if someone really wants to read through all those thousands of pages once I'm gone, s/he is welcome to, but I'm not planning on it); these days I write my journal mainly for myself, but I haven't lost my sense that my journal needs to be, on the whole, worth not

only writing in the first place, but reading again later—even if I'm the only one ever to read it. Which raises the question: what makes my journal, for me, worth the writing and reading of it? I won't deny that I find keeping a journal a pleasant and entertaining use of my time, and that I do it in part simply because I enjoy it. But I believe that a journal can indeed perform a spiritual function, and I find that aspect extremely valuable. A journal can be written with a specifically spiritual bent, as an inventory of our efforts to live morally and behave appropriately, what Catholics call "an examination of conscience." It can be a meditation upon issues that interest us, topics that trouble us. It can be a way to pose important questions and seek answers for them—as well as a place to record those answers when they come, so that years later, we can look back and be amazed by a youthful wisdom we somehow managed to forget.

As a writing teacher, I also believe that spiritual discipline can be built into the endeavor of writing well: although my students don't always believe me, I remain convinced that good writing is carefully crafted and coherent, and makes use of things such as 1) transitions, 2) support for ideas in the form of specific and apt examples, 3) musical, rhythmic prose, and 4) syntax that is lively and varied. Any account of your life will, of necessity, be molded and shaped, whether poorly or ill, and the transitions you use, the examples you select, even the vocabulary you employ, can help you see a pattern to your life you might otherwise miss. I can't imagine how I would make sense of my life without the profound and useful insights that come upon me as I wrestle to bring inchoate sensations and unconnected experiences, ranging from the devastating to the delightful, under the greater order of organized prose. Sometimes these insights arrive years after I've written a journal entry, when I'm thinking about a new situation that bears some similarity to an old experience. I'll haul out an old volume, read through it, and some mental flash will suddenly illuminate both situations in remarkable and useful ways—an event I often then record in the new volume, also quoting the old passage that sparked the insight.

IN HER ESSAY, "On Keeping a Notebook," Joan Didion writes, "The point of my keeping a notebook has never been, nor is it now, to have an accurate factual record of what I have been doing and thinking." Instead, she says the point is to remember

How it felt to be me: that is getting closer to the truth about a notebook. . . . I think we are well-advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends.

While I agree with Didion that it's wise to remain familiar with the people we used to be, I am, unlike her, interested in having "an accurate factual record of what I have been doing and thinking"—as the descendent of Mormon pioneers and

genealogers, how could I be otherwise? In *Faithful Transgressions in the American West: Six Twentieth-Century Mormon Women's Autobiographical Acts*, Laura L. Bush points out that

Mormon autobiographers pay close attention to “truth” and to “accurate” history. They often begin their narratives with recitals of their precise ancestry and exact place of birth, carefully researching and marking the progression of the story of their lives until ending the story with a formal testament of faith in God. . . . Mormon autobiographers’ meticulous attention to testifying of God and to producing accurate historical details . . . follows biblical and Book of Mormon writing traditions.

I confess: I’ve written an autobiography of sorts, a memoir of my mission, and I was not the least bit surprised to discover that my book adheres to the formula Bush describes, since I was very aware at the time of following a tradition. I wanted my book to be as accurate as I could possibly make it, especially since when I wrote it, I imagined it as the defense I would muster in my behalf at the final judgment, and God would be well aware of any conscious lie I might tell. I was trying to produce a work of art, but it was also a deadly serious moral enterprise. My first act in writing my book was to transcribe every word of my mission journal—in which I had meticulously recorded entire conversations, detailed impressions, and the dates, places, and times of significant events; I had even included supporting documents such as letters, zone conference programs, and those yellow planners on which we scheduled our work.

At a writing conference in June 2004, I met a woman who, like me, is a scholar and writer of literary nonfiction, and who, like me, had her heart well and truly broken by a man she was ready to marry, and who, like me, suffers from insomnia. She told me that to help herself unwind, clear her mind and prepare to sleep each night, before bed she would write in a spiral notebook, usually about how upset she was with Michael, her ex, and how devastated she was that as soon as the engagement ring was on her finger, he turned into someone else, someone she couldn’t marry. She wrote pages and pages, she said, about how she hated him, loved him, resented him, could never forget him although she wanted nothing more than to erase him from her memory. I sympathized, with the difficulty in falling asleep, with the heartbreak, with the confused writing. But then she mentioned that when she got to the end of each notebook, she threw it away. “You threw it away?” I repeated, dazed.

“Yeah,” she said. “It was just my ranting about Michael. It’s not like the world needs any of that.”

“But what if there was . . . an insight? Or a good line? And you threw it away?” I asked slowly, attempting to resist the horror of it all.

“There wasn’t,” she said. And since I was having difficulty breathing, having just heard someone be so cavalier about an action absolutely inimical to my worldview, I made no reply and the conversation moved on to other topics.

I tell this story to call attention to one part of keeping a journal: the *keeping* part. As I mentioned, my journal does contain boring, uninspired passages; I haven’t deleted them and I don’t intend to. For one thing, when I’m overwrought, it’s kind of nice to remember times when nothing much happened; it’s also good to remind myself how flat even the most exciting events can seem later if I don’t render them fully. Furthermore, preserving what you produce is built into the activity: keeping a journal means you not merely write but hang on to the journal. And that keeping is also a spiritual practice: finding the discipline to make writing a habit, to live with a growing and ongoing document that demonstrates who you were, who you thought you’d become, and who you actually ended up being. If you’re lucky, it might also help you figure out who you want to be next and how to achieve it.

I’LL END WITH Job, who, if he lived at all, lived before paper was readily available: “Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book! That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!” (Job 19:23–24)

We don’t have to be so desperate. If we want something written, we can write it. We have plenty of paper, plenty of ink, and really fast computers. All of which make keeping a journal so easy that it’s something of a luxury, a way of acknowledging how blessed—and I use that word advisedly—we are.

In conclusion, I bear testimony of the power of a journal to help us live with more awareness of who we are and who we want to be. I will always be grateful that I followed President Kimball’s advice to keep a journal. It has enriched my life immeasurably. ☺



PHYLLIS BARBER likes Irish Oatmeal, bicycles, her rock-and-roll sons, great storytellers, and the exquisitely wrought sentence.



H. PARKER BLOUNT was eighteen before he learned “oil” was not pronounced “awl.” He still prefers “ya’ll” to “you guys.” Grits and chocolate are foods of choice.



JOHN DEWEY REMY’S greatest aspiration in life is to be a mystic Mormon hippie. He is a struggling vegetarian, a part-time Quaker, a lapsed Republican, and a compulsive book junkie. He can be found, virtually, at www.mindonfire.com (web) or john@mindonfire.com (email).



JANA RIESS’S New Year’s resolution is to do more yoga and eat more yogurt, though not necessarily at the same time.



HOLLY WELKER’S favorite song is “I Feel Loved” by Depeche Mode, a catchy dance tune about the dark night of the soul.