

LETTERS OF BELIEF: An Exchange of Thoughts and Feelings About the Mormon Faith



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The following manuscript, submitted to Dialogue anonymously, is an exchange of letters between two friends, one of whom has left the Church and one of whom remains active in it. We print them here in the belief that they constitute an open and honest exchange about what it means to be Mormon from widely divergent viewpoints.

Dear S——,

You might think it funny that I can't remember for the life of me what I had to eat the other day with you at Chez Françoise. As soon as we got on the subject of what I believe and what I don't, it took all my concentration to find the right words for a defense against your attack on my new feelings. The conversation tasted good from that point on, I think, but I couldn't tell you if the food did.

It's not that I was afraid of being found out to have moved substantially away from what I think you thought I have believed: I am not a hypocrite. What concerned me more at the time—and still does—is that we would discover that our mutual feelings for each other lay *only* in common religious commitments, and not in any other common bonds outside the Church. Whether I show it or not, I prize my few friends so highly that I worry what my heterodoxy might do to scare them away. Perhaps it is a foolish fear. It may simply be a risk I have to take, putting friendships like ours to a test this way.

I hope you realize that it is something brave for me to move away from Church orthodoxy. I grew up in the Church, surrounded by the Church, saturated by the Church, was caught up enthusiastically in the work and ideals of the Church for years, and, what's more important, have accomplished what I have in large measure *because* of the Church. It determined most of my directions. It still is the whole life of my folks; my wife and kids hold to it both joyfully and somewhat desperately; my friends are, for the most part, identified closely with it or see *me* identified with it. So the "No in Thunder!" that I have been saying to all of it the past few years has baffled them, I sense, but has given me, I hope they realize, better feelings toward many things than I have had in a good long time, even when I don't know how to describe those feelings or know how to account for them. I welcome my new liberation, I hope *you* realize, even when the object of opprobrium for it.

I simply do not find what people around me have been calling "religion" all my life very important any more. Certainly not very interesting any more. As Huck Finn says when he is pressed to go back to "sivilization": "I been there before." There now seems a whole new world ahead of me. I find I am not afraid of it.

Naturally enough, such an announcement to such a pleasant friend as you over dinner—and the resulting debate—is enough to cause a person to forget his dinner in the interest of his soul—or rather, soullessness. I am only afraid that I did not find a good enough way for telling my gratitude for your taking the day off so that we could eat and talk.

I was sorry, however, that you tried to lay the old liberal bit on me about change of scene making change of heart possible. I used to believe that, too: the strength of one's faith is dependent on the strength of faith in the religious lives of people around you. But I've gone well beyond that one. I used to think that people made a difference. But they don't. I've lived in quite a number of places in the country, in the world, and found most members of the Church about equally disappointing. Which led to my illusion—and it's still *your* illusion, I fear—that if it were only possible to witness just the right examples of intelligent and kindly church living, surely a person could believe forever. But the "by their fruits" argument is about as rotten as most.

Disaffection begins not at the point of other people's lives (who, after all, can presume to know anyone else's motives or needs or hopes?) but on the issue of the social dynamics of the Church. It has become fairly evident to me that, in the main,

religion is a rather easy thing to concoct; that the Church was, in the main, a rather easy thing to construct; that it is maintained and held to largely for the sake of ease. Anybody can do it; there is little to it. It is simply no challenge: *it requires so little!* The standards of the Church turn out, upon reflection, to be really quite low—little quality of mind, little quality of talent, little quality to a person's busy-ness. It really requires very little. Commitment, involvement, and activity have become substitutes for quality. Blind faith, sincerity, and loyalty are really very easy virtues; anyone can manage them as soon as he has a minimum of safe conviction in something, in *anything*. Mormonism is the easy way to travel. The more difficult virtues of intellectuality, creativity, skill, knowledge, and substantiality are scoffed at.

I know you would rather argue with me the historical and scriptural claims of the Church. But I think I have heard most of them (and even *made* most of them myself when a missionary and bishop and at many other times) and find them to be self-serving rationalizations, for the most part, rather than arguable claims to truth and reality. As you should know, faith cannot be argued—and neither can loss of faith in faith. The Church turns out to be embarrassingly derivative; its uniqueness lies only in its pompous claim to uniqueness. Over dinner—hang you!—you wanted to sell me the evidence behind it all, but I had already looked at those bits and pieces and found them cold and insubstantial. And as I tried to say, there is no warmth at that level of things. What interests me more is the social dynamics of the Church: the society it makes is indeed a clean, safe, pleasant, hope-filled place, as you were eager to get me to admit, but it is also mindless, artless, anti-humanistic, simplistically nationalistic, crudely authoritarian, uninteresting. So I demur.

If I am unclear in all this, I assume you will write to tell me so. A bridge between us has fallen down and I am simply trying to put in some pilings up the river a little ways further on. Mind you, I am by no means asking you to come over to my side of the river. I am only hoping to indicate that I'm over here on this side waving, *not* drowning.

Best wishes,
L——

Dear L——,

My apologies for having obscured the delectableness of your meal at Chez François by probing into your beliefs perhaps a little too vigorously. I don't remember what you had either, but my frog's legs were delicious, although they may have accounted for my jumping from point to point so quickly all evening and keeping you on the defensive. Actually, I love a good discussion, although I am perhaps a bit too zealous when it comes to religious discussions. I am afraid I still have too much of that missionary enthusiasm that wants to convert the world and defend the Word against all comers.

But it is also a reflection of my *concern* for you that I am interested in what you believe and in convincing you of what I believe. Not that my feelings for you hinge on these things; of course not. They rest on the respect I have for you as a person: a scholar, a poet, a teacher, a father, a friend. It is *because* of my friendship that I press you to defend your unorthodox ideas, your new-found heresy.

I would be less than honest if I didn't tell you that I am saddened by your estrangement from the Church. I do realize that it is brave of you to move away from Church orthodoxy, but I fear that you do not realize that it's just as brave for me to continue embracing it. Why? Because I see the same things wrong that you do, receive the same kinds of hurts, experience the same frustrations. I understand your "No! in Thunder," and I believe it is sincere, but there is also something to saying "yes." Remember that Stevens says that under every no lies a passion for yes, and I am interested in that yes, that "Yes! in Thunder" if you will, and I think therein lies the difference between us: you deny the Church and the life of the Church because you see things that are wrong, things that are contrary to the Spirit, to the Gospel, to our deepest feelings, and your "No!" to these things becomes a "No!" to the Church. I say "No!" to these same things but "Yes!" to the Church, not because I also see those things that are in accord with the Spirit, with the Gospel, and with my deepest feelings, which I do, but because I can't escape the revelations of the Spirit. Remember, L—, if the Church isn't perfect neither are we. The Church tolerates our imperfections (most of them) and we should tolerate the Church's (most of them). But it takes a certain amount of humility to do that, and humility is not the carpet bag the Sayers of Nay usually carry.

You argue with my contention that me in the Church is easier if there are people in it with whom one feels compatible. You say that people don't make a difference, but if they don't, what does? You say that you have lived in many places in the country and the world and found Mormons equally disappointing. Isn't this just another way of saying you have found *people* equally disappointing? People, including you and me, are at times disappointing and I confess that I am often not intellectually, socially or culturally compatible with many Mormons, but then I am not with many people. The difference is that in the Church I do feel spiritually compatible with more of them than I imagine I'm going to. In priesthood meeting the other morning, for example, I was deeply touched by a brother who is as unlike me as you can imagine. He has alternately bored and frustrated me for months, but on this occasion he touched me deeply by telling about his childhood in an orphanage in which he felt estranged from the world, and how his conversion to the Church gave him a sense of belonging and brotherhood. His testimony of Christ was simple and eloquent and as he bore it all of us in that room felt as Ishmael feels with his hands in the jar of spermacetti—united in brotherhood, purged of our differences, even if only for a few moments. Granted, such experiences don't happen often, but they do happen, and the Church helps make them possible.

It is partly a faith in such possibilities that keeps me going back to Church. I am not often touched, and some of that may be my fault, but I am touched often enough to be willing to endure the problems for that possibility. Where else can one go for such joys?

You say that your disaffection hangs on the issue of the social dynamics of the Church and that it would be fairly easy to concoct a religion and construct the Church. Although I suspect you are baiting me here, I'll take the bait, just in case you aren't. It might be fairly easy to concoct a religion, but you know nothing of Joseph Smith's life if you say that Mormonism was easy to concoct and the Church easy to construct. In an era when, as Lowell said, "Every possible form of intellectual and physical dyspepsia brought forth its gospel," when religious experiments and new churches were as ephemeral as May flies, he fashioned something substantial. And I contend that it has lasted for over a hundred and forty years not because it

was easy, but because it was *hard*. And when you say that the Church really requires very little, I wonder what Church you're talking about.

You unfairly stack the cards against the Church in your argument: "Blind faith, sincerity, and loyalty are really very easy virtues; anyone can manage them . . ." Perhaps, but these are not the main virtues of the Church. Try faith, humility, sacrifice, love. Not only are they the real virtues of the Church, but they are damned hard virtues to cultivate. More difficult than your virtues of "intellectuality, creativity, skill (whatever that is), knowledge, and substantiality (whatever that is)." The discipline of the Gospel has never been an easy thing for me; and life in the Church has not been easy either.

If the Church is, as you say, a "clean, safe, pleasant, hope-filled" place, that's more than one can say for other places. You say it is also "mindless, artless, anti-humanistic, simplistically nationalistic, crudely authoritarian, uninteresting." Let's say, for the sake of argument, that all of that is true. What if it is also true that Peter, James and John really did lay their hands on Joseph's head? What if John the Baptist did stand on the banks of the Susquehanna? What if Joseph really did see Christ in the temple at Kirtland?

I guess what I am saying is that the Church can be imperfect and even wrong at times and still be the True Church. Christ doesn't like its imperfections any more than you or I do, but if He can tolerate them until He helps us to improve the Church, can't we? It has, after all, brought us out of darkness. And that is no small task.

I think it is important to keep a distinction between the Gospel and the Church and your letter obscures that difference. The Gospel *is* true: as a philosophy, a way of life, it offers us more than anything else. As Peter said to Jesus, "Master, if thou hast not the words of eternal life, where shall we go?" The Church, on the other hand, is imperfect. It is the best instrument the Lord has, given our agency, to effect His purposes. If it is at times inefficient, backward, repressive, it is also at times instructive, progressive and liberating. The Church is like *us*: sometimes the Gospel works through us and sometimes it doesn't. I'll go one step further: the Church *is* us; it is no better or no worse than we are (and that includes *you* and me), for the Church is what we make it. That's why I think it takes as much courage to stay *in* the Church as to leave it. I have said to far too many friends I'm afraid that if they leave the Church they diminish the chances of the Church changing, becoming better. If everyone who sees what's wrong with the Church deserts it, where will the Church's conscience be? Perhaps part of the problem is that we forget that the Church exists not only that we might be touched, but that we might touch. And when we touch others through the Church and its programs we see more clearly what the Church's function is and how its potential can be realized.

If this is starting to sound vaguely like a testimony, forgive me. On second thought, let it be a testimony, for I truly believe in the Church. I would convince you anew (for you felt this at one time) that there is in the Church life, meaning, joy. Not always, but sometimes. But one has to look for it with more than one's mind; it takes more than brightness to see the goodness of the Church.

You say you are trying to build a bridge between us. Let me help you build the bridge; perhaps if we do it together we can at least meet in the middle for a more intimate dialogue and won't have to do as much shouting as we have done in these first letters.

Affectionately,
S---

Dear S——,

Though I didn't intend that we should end up having a debate between us by letter, I was glad you wrote that what I said has some impact. We seem to want each other on the defensive in our widely diverging positions of belief yet recognize the conviction (even the security) that lies behind the direction of each other. Our bridges are definitely on different sides of the river, maybe even on different rivers.

I hope you recognize, however, what your letter reveals: like a good Mormon, you give an easy answer to the problems I raised; you take the easy way out; you use religion to make it easy for yourself to exist intellectually and emotionally. Your answers to the questions I raised in my letter to you seem neither out far nor in deep. No criticism of you personally; religion does that to a person.

To call your convictions "revelations of the Spirit," for example, is to do no more than what anyone does who has got something he wants to believe in. He works up gooseflesh, lymph flow, and cheery eyes over it, and then christens it The Truth. Anyone can come up with "revelations of the Spirit." Ask around and you find that practically everybody has got some kind of "revelation of the Spirit" for some fool thing he wants to believe in. It is very easy. It proves nothing.

To cite the imperfections of the Church and the distinction between Church and gospel as sufficient support to keep one's chin up in the face of certain embarrassments and reservations about what goes on from time to time in the Church is also an easy rationalization. I've gone through that phase, too, and it doesn't satisfy for very long. As with a bum car, you soon learn that the imperfections are gross and permanent fixtures on the model. The Church-gospel distinction is an especially phony way of separating off those things you disapprove of from those that please you. Beware of the whitewash on a malignant whale, Melville warned. I certainly don't look for perfection in anything, much less in religion, but I find it humorous when someone can't see how the blighted flower on a plant might come from rot at the root.

To tell examples of how the Church has touched individual lives is also neither here nor there, for hundreds of causes have touched hundreds of lives in hundreds of ways, and one more excited person proves nothing. If lives are touched, it proves nothing; it happens every day somewhere. Curiously the argument simply gives license to those untouched to do without. I could very easily declare to you that I have been "touched" to do very nicely without the Church. Such sentimentality is curiously weak and sounds strange coming from someone like you holding to the Church as an institution having backbone and authority. If the Church touches you then it is good, and if it doesn't then it is not: this position may justify your clinging to the Church (you are touched) and it just as easily justifies my divergence from it (I am not touched). When I wrote you earlier that people do not make a difference in the color of my faith but the theology does, I wasn't saying I am indifferent to people (I find I now care a great deal *more* than ever before, though in different ways) but the relations in the Church (what you call "being touched") cannot ultimately decide truth for you. Hard thinking about basic ideas might do it, perhaps, but not raising examples of the little thrills of this or that experience or contact.

What I am saying—and saying poorly, I guess—is that though I know you are sincere in what you say in your letter, it is pretty trite stuff. It has been said for centuries and doesn't hold water any more. At least not for me. Sacrifice for a concocted cause is an *easy* virtue; there is no risk, adventure, or renewal in it, nothing

to create: KuKluxers and Nazis do it as easily as Mormons. Faith in miracles and visions and authority is not fulfilling either, but decapitating; anyone can do it with his eyes—or his mind!—closed; there is no daring, manhood, or even effort in it; there is really nothing to do. Nor is the issue of the touched life very convincing: my observation is that those who chase enthusiastically after each thing that thrills them have lives that are in a hell of a mess—some pinched and narrow beyond belief and others chaotic beyond tolerance. How easy it is to forget to think before jumping!

My argument is, I guess, that the Church is an easy life for a lot of people and so attractive to them—an easy place for racists to go on being racists, an easy place for nonthinkers to go on being nonthinkers, an easy place for the fearful to go on fearing such imponderables as death and life and selfhood all their lives; in other words, an easy place for *not* doing much of anything for or about oneself—its claims to the contrary.

When you give me such easy, derivative answers as those in your letter, genial as they are, you simply remind me of the impression I have gotten over the last twenty years—that the Church is blatantly derivative itself. It is an easy and odd-fitting copy of other things. Not much original went into its making. Not much thought goes into sustaining it. It's a misnomer to ever refer to a Restoration. Take a big slice of 1830 America, add a dash of about 1907, put a little makeup over the scandals which started it off, put it in a business suit in the suburbs, and you have got Mormonism. It doesn't take much searching to find almost all of the principles and practices of the gospel/Church in other places. Joseph Smith—and most of the Church's leaders since him—was not original but a thief. Brought together, the stolen fragments almost do make a coherence, but it is a piece of arrogance to think that nobody ever thought of these things before that are now called Mormonism. By this I don't mean that I admit the Church derives from the Bible, but I am arguing that it is a cooptation. I can't admire that—even when a great deal of piety, devotion, and joyful energy goes into its maintenance and promotion. I do not like being manipulated by bad thinking, trite logic, stolen goods.

But my tone here may suggest that I think you—and millions of others—have been duped. I have no enthusiasm for such a charge. I only wish to try to find a way of declaring forcefully that I have discovered what I once held to blindly as the truth to be pretty much illusion and have discovered in another kind of life something more organic to my own nature, my own interests, my own needs, my own desires, my own fulfillment. That, for me, is a breakthrough. If I do not yet know what the light *is*, I am at least out of the darkness.

I would be delighted if you wrote again soon, even if religion is again the motivation and the subject. Best wishes,

L---

Dear L---

I've let your last letter sit on my desk for number of months now trying to decide whether to answer it or not. At first its tone distressed me—still does in fact—and I

was both too hurt and too angry to write. I felt that if what your letter reflected was all you saw in my attempt to communicate my deepest self to you then perhaps meaningful communication between us was impossible.

Your attempt to reduce the joy and beauty of my experiences of the spirit to “gooseflesh, lymph flow, and cheery eyes” reminds me of a prose summary of *Paradise Lost*—you catch the external signs but none of the grandeur or inner essence.

I have been thinking since receiving your letter as to how I could answer you. Seeing a performance of *King Lear* last night gave me courage to try. I found myself at times weeping for Lear, for mankind’s treacherous and tenuous hold on a world cracking open from within and without. Lear communicates a truth so stark and powerful that I am changed—not alone in gooseflesh, which subsides, or lymph flow, which stops, or cheery eyes, which clear up, but inside (as our friend Emily Dickinson would say, “internal differences/Where the meanings are”), in the *heart*, in the *spirit*. The sad thing is that I know you feel that same way about *Lear* but no longer do about Nephi or Alma or Enoch.

The analogy to *Lear* breaks down, of course, as all analogies do: there is a difference between what I experience at seeing *Lear* and what I experience in reading the fifth chapter of Alma or seventh of Moses. The difference, if I am correct, is that Shakespeare reveals a general truth about the nature of tragedy and the human condition, while the Holy Ghost reveals that which is most meaningful to the human soul—the specific truth of salvation, by which alone we may understand tragedy. That difference is emphasized by Yeats’ lines from “Lapis Lazuli”:

Though Hamlet rambles and Lear rages
And all the drop-scenes drop at once
Upon a hundred thousand stages,
It [i.e., tragedy] cannot change by an inch or an ounce.

But in the context of the Christian gospel it *can* change. Not that we escape tragedy ultimately (the burden of that remains even with God), but that it does not necessarily have ultimate effect on our souls.

You call my answers to the problems you raise “easy” and shallow and accuse me of using religion to make it easy for myself to exist intellectually and emotionally. It shows how far you have strayed that you can make such a charge so *easily*. To begin with, it isn’t easy, as I stressed in my first letter. In fact, there is nothing easy about it unless one blindly accepts (or rejects!) everything and escapes to the cloister of one’s mind (or mindlessness as you say). To stay in the Church or out of it mindlessly or spiritlessly is easy, but to stay in and be on the cutting edge where faith and reason contend is damned hard. Enoch didn’t find it easy, Alma found it a harrowing experience and Joseph Smith describes it as exhausting. My own experience confirms this. It is *you* who have taken the easy way out, for by discarding faith and relying solely on intellectualism (you keep asking for “proof” and say that “hard thinking” may “ultimately decide truth”) you have removed yourself from the real conflicts. When you discard and disregard the life of the Spirit as easily as you do you’re no better than those Mormons you criticize for being mindless. Taking such a stand allows you to dismiss the real heart of the gospel experience as “little thrills.” It may be clever, but it is not fair and, I suspect, not really honest.

Nor is it fair to say that the Church is “an easy place for racists to go on being racists, etc.” So is the university, the government, the social club—any place is easy if you choose it to be. But if one attempts to live by gospel precepts and to grow “from light to light,” one cannot escape the responsibility of changing one’s life, of eliminating racism, or fear or lust or what it is that keeps us from a perfect union with Christ.

It amazes me that a scholar of your fairness and objectivity can be so unfair and unobjective when it comes to the Church. When you call the doctrines of the Church trite and the Church itself derivative (“it is an easy and odd-fitting copy of other things”), you reveal that you don’t even *know* the Church or its doctrines. It is an easy thing for such writers as Fawn Brodie to make such charges because they see some similarities and see things in Mormonism that were a product of Joseph Smith’s time, but to call the profound body of truths and concepts he revealed derivative or trite is to admit to almost total ignorance of their character. Where does one find all of those things in the Book of Mormon in American society in 1820? As Marcus Bach said a number of years ago, “No Vermont schoolboy wrote this book, and no Presbyterian preacher tinkered with these pages.”

That one can find elements of Mormonism elsewhere is nothing to the point. What Joseph Smith did with the restoration of truth in framing it into a coherent body of doctrine and a philosophy of life was remarkable. What other religious philosophy fashioned in the cauldron of religious fires in Western New York has endured into the twentieth century with such vitality? Why? Because it is trite? derivative? incoherent?—no, because it is *true!*

The problem, as I see it, is that you want the Church to be in your image (how telling is your last paragraph with the total focus on yourself—“*my own nature, my own interests, my own needs, my own desires, my own fulfillment*”)—to have your values and reflect your visions. And I confess that I find that idea attractive myself, but the Church cannot be that and remain the place where disparate disciples come together for communion. The world has too many churches created in the image of one person and one indication of Joseph Smith’s faithfulness is that he didn’t create the Church of Joseph Smith.

I suspect that what you see in the Church is a reflection of yourself. Like Ahab’s dubloon it mirrors our true selves. Starbuck, Pip, Queequeg, Ahab—all see themselves in it, but the dubloon is always the same—round, pure gold and full of symbols. Whose reality of the white whale do we accept—Ahab’s or Ishmaels? Whose reality of the Church—yours or mine?

While I can understand some of your quarrels with the Church, I can’t accept your total vision of it. Remember, L——, I have never attempted to whitewash the Church. Like you, I also see its weaknesses and limitations (and in fact am a part of them), but unlike you I see its genius, its divinity, its truth—not only see, but experience these things. For example, just this past week I had a marvelous experience with a young woman to whom I have been teaching the gospel for the past several months. She is a very bright and perceptive person, completing a Ph.D. in psychology. Unlike you, she was convinced by the *logic* of Mormonism, but didn’t want to be baptized without having the inner conviction. On this particular night my companion and I both bore our testimonies to her. Suddenly she began to weep; after finally gaining control of herself she testified that she too had received that witness and wished to be baptized. I can’t really express the joy we all felt as we embraced one another and wept together.

It would be easy to explain all this away, I am sure, or to put it down as “little thrills,” but in the center of my being I know that after resisting and doubting and offering all the reasons that psychologists offer to explain away these things, the revelation of the Holy Ghost convinced her that the message of the Restoration was true. Such experiences have happened frequently during the past year since I have been a stake missionary. I have seen countless lives not merely touched but changed, renewed with a new sense of meaning and joy.

But I see the Church working in numerous other ways as well. I see the genius of the Church almost every day—as _____ comes home from MIA with an understanding of faith beyond what I have been able to teach her, as _____ fasts for the first time and learns something about sacrifice, as _____ conducts a family home evening and develops leadership, as I am finally able to activate a family I have been home teaching for months.

You say that “if lives are touched, it proves nothing”; what it does prove is that lives are touched. No one has ever claimed that the Church is the only place that this happens, but you must admit that it does happen here and, I suspect, with a greater frequency and to a greater degree than anywhere else. I am aware that this cannot, as you say, ultimately decide truth for me, but it certainly confirms the truth that I already have. And touched lives prove a lot more than hard thinking about basic ideas.

The fact is, I value hard thinking about basic ideas, and at no point could be accused of coping out intellectually. I still ask the hard questions (of myself, the Church and God) and challenge and examine. I still have doubts and am proud of it, because they are honest doubts. And I still see and speak out against the narrowness, dogmatism, fear, hate and hurt that I see in the Church—because I feel the gospel gives me a moral imperative to do so. And all this makes my life in the Church at times uncomfortable.

Why do I do this? Because I am held umbilically by that skien of revelation that threads itself through my mind and heart. I cannot escape that revelation. It is there and my integrity will not allow me to explain it away or cover it with my sins. I sometimes have wished that I didn't know, for there is at times an anguish and burden in such knowledge. (As Gerontion says, “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?”) But there is also joy and peace beyond the telling of it.

Such knowledge does not make me feel superior to you; it does make me feel sad that you have lost it. For to partake of the fruit of tree which Father Lehi saw in his vision, that fruit which is most joyous to the soul, is to immediately wish everyone to share in the partaking. That is the consummate experience of our lives, I am convinced, for it is the revelation of God's love to us.

You might feel insulted that I would want to fast and pray for you, but it is a sincere manifestation of my caring that I wish to do so. I know you have been hurt by the Church, but those wounds can only ultimately be healed in the Church, not out of it. There is a balm in Gilead, L——, and it will help heal those hurts. Please come back and try again.

Your brother,

S——

P.S. I may not be completely out of the darkness, but I *know* what the light is.

Dear S——,

My life is happier now than it has ever been before, and so I don't like having to fight with you any more over the issue of whether I should be in or out of the Church. My new life may look tragic to you (you say you have the Holy Ghost to help you see it that way), but it sure as hell doesn't *feel* tragic. It feels good.

You were always one of my brighter, tougher, happier friends, and so I feel bad if what I have written stings. It was not so intended, and simply proves I don't write with the tone I would like to. I do not wish to be negative about something that is precious to *you*, but only wish to try to assure you that my direction is, *for me*, a good one. I only wish you could *accept* my difference!

There is no use quarreling over who has the tougher life — you, fighting to keep your faith strong, or me, happily lost in a world where nothing is very sure but everything is possible. We both obviously take great pride in working hard at whatever will get us through the night (no doubt the Puritan in us) and thinking hard about whatever might satisfy our minds and hearts (no doubt the academic in us). Religion I find divisive (Jesus: "I come to bring the sword") and so in spite of our mutual sympathies we quarrel.

If I find the Gospel intellectually unsatisfying, it does not mean (as you charge) that I don't know its "profundities" very well. You forget that I have been there for over thirty years and that for a good long stretch of those thirty years read little besides the theology of the Church. And I tell you again: it's thin, man, it's really thin! To be sure, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and many others worked hard to fashion a coherent religion out of thousands of fragments of religion coming down to them from the Christian (and especially the New England) centuries before them, but there is just one flaw in their whole scheme: *they forgot to make it interesting!* That Mormonism survived into the twentieth century does not mean it is true, but only that it was *pushed*. I am surprised that you would try to sell me that tired spiel again when you know yourself it won't work.

You make a good point when you say that the Church is a good place "where disparate disciples [can] come together for communion" — except for that word "disparate." You would be more accurate, it seems to me, if you said it was a place where *sames* commune, where types work hard at becoming stereotypes, where everybody is *everybody*. But I say unto you: *viva la difference!* I refuse to be God's rubber stamp. I have to be free to dance my own dance.

You are wrong to say I want the Church to be in my own image. I only want my own image to be in my own image. The Church has no room for *me!* Your story about moving the young woman to weep over the Gospel seems to me a little sick; why couldn't you have tried to move her to laugh? Maybe manipulation is really what religion is all about anyway. Dancing is a different kind of life. At least you get to move around a little!

Your pity for a life like mine now lived outside the purview of what you call Revelation is unnecessary. The gesture is grand but really not very satisfying to either of us ultimately. You know me to be a truther very much like yourself and so I would hope for your friendly appreciation rather than your perplexity and condescension. I cannot be converted by mellow arrogance. So you have had a Revelation Of What Is True: a testimony of a testimony of a testimony doesn't say anything. Really anybody can do that!

If you already "*know* what the light is," as you claim, then you eliminate the

need for our friendship: I apparently can't enlighten you on anything unless I agree with you first: our friendship apparently could only diminish the light you have: we apparently have nowhere to go together. Revelation thus kills.

I've gotten too serious on these pages — though not hurt or angry at all, and certainly not self-satisfied. What I really wanted to tell you — and this will have to take the place of a testimony — is that for the first time in my life I feel really alive. Can you beat that?

Best,

L---

Dear L---

From your last letter it is evident (as I guess it has been all along) that you and I are talking past each other. Our separate world views give us such differing perspectives that it is hard for us to appreciate where the other is. I see you as having abandoned (for whatever reasons I don't really know) the faith of your fathers, as denying the validity of experiences you had as a missionary and later as a bishop, of having thrown over the sacred for the secular. I'm afraid that the river between us is still unbridged — and perhaps unbridgeable. The reason for that as I see it is essentially epistemological — I accept spiritual revelation as a valid way of knowing and you do not. You seem in no frame of mind to consider that the Holy Ghost might reveal truth to us, and, as I said before, I cannot honestly escape the fact that He does. Therefore, I am willing to accept the Church's imperfections and you are not.

I find the Church vital and exciting; you find it uninspired and uninteresting. (Again, Ahab's doubloon.) You find religion divisive; I find it unifying — it is that which compells me to reach toward you in spite of the widening gap between us. Contrary to your assertion, my knowledge of the light does not eliminate the need for our friendship, nor does it mean that you cannot enlighten me. I said I knew what the light was, I didn't say I had all the light. Nor do I feel you diminish my light. Since Christ is the source of that light, only I can diminish it. And withdrawing from those who differ from me would surely do so.

You say that you are alive for the first time and happier than you have ever been before. That may be true, but your letters reveal an anger and bitterness about the Church that seem to belie such happiness. You seem to have an intense need at the present moment to *disbelieve*, to strike out against the Church, to put down those who believe. I am truly sorry for whatever hurt you may have felt that makes you respond so.

It is true that you are free to dance your own dance — that is God's gift to you, although you don't seem to recognize it as such. I too dance my own *danse russe* (and "who shall say I am not/the happy genius of my own household?"), but I also dance before the Lord and clap my hands and make a joyful noise unto Him, because Christ is truly the Lord of the Dance.

I follow Christ and dance with Him because, in Alma's words, I have "felt to sing the song of redeeming love." It is because of that song in my heart that I remain concerned about you. That concern is rooted, not as you suggest in feelings of condescension or arrogance, but in the deepest feelings of brotherhood.

When you are ready to talk again, I'll be listening.

S---